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ALI: You're listening to Community InterActions with InterAct Story Theatre. Our Wheaton community is full of stories to tell, and today, we're telling one of them. Today's story: Pandemic and food and housing insecurity. Hi, I'm Ali Oliver-Krueger.

EMILY: And I'm Emily Townsend. I'm the artistic administrator for InterAct Story Theatre here in Wheaton, and Ali is our Executive and Artistic Director. With this limited podcast series, we're collecting some of the stories of Wheaton during the pandemic time, and sharing them through the words and voices of the people who are living them.

ALI: In the first episode, we laid our foundation by talking about where and who Wheaton is, and how it came to be what it is today. Now, we want to take a look at what happened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Wheaton through the lens of two of the most basic needs people have: food and shelter.

EMILY: When Maryland began to shut down because of the pandemic, businesses closed and many people lost income. When those closures continued over weeks and months, lost income became lost jobs. And without enough money coming in, food and housing insecurity became a problem very quickly across the world and in Wheaton. And let's take a moment: what does it mean to be food insecure, or housing insecure? We spoke with Heather Bruskin, the Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council.

Audioclip HEATHER: So, food insecurity is not the same as the physiological state of being hungry. But rather, it is uncertainty or significant worry around consistent access to safe, sufficient, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. So there's a couple of measures that we use to determine a level of food insecurity and it's directly tied to how many times has a resident skipped a meal or worried about, or had uncertainty around where their next meal was coming from over a certain period of time.

ALI: And housing insecurity works much the same way. "Housing insecurity" is an umbrella term that includes several dimensions of housing problems people might have including affordability, safety, quality, insecurity, and loss of housing. With pandemic-related job losses, that affordability is a key issue, in that people have been increasingly at risk of becoming unhomed due to difficulty paying rent and possible eviction.

EMILY: So with that understanding, it's important to know that it's a widespread problem across the nation and across the world. Back in 2019, data from the nonprofit Feeding America shows that food insecurity was actually at its lowest rate in twenty years, but once the pandemic hit the country hard, the number of people in America facing food insecurity shot up. Feeding America estimates that 45 million people - 1 in 7 - including 15 million children - that's 1 in 5 - may have experienced food insecurity in 2020. Things are projected to improve in 2021, but are still at higher levels than before the pandemic. Feeding America projects 1 in 8 adults and 1 in 6 children will face food insecurity this year. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, or the

CDPP, also notes an important national disparity in who is risking hunger in America: “Black and Latino adults were more than twice as likely as white adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat: 16 percent each for Black and Latino adults, compared to 6 percent of white adults. Adults who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or as multiracial, taken together, were twice as likely as white adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat, at 12 percent.” We are more than a year out from those first lockdown orders, but we’re far from out of the woods, something that’s becoming increasingly clear with housing insecurity as well.

ALI: Federal and state governments have tried to create various so-called “eviction moratoriums,” which generally make it impossible to evict a tenant based on their inability to pay rent because of pandemic-related reasons. Normally, if you can’t pay rent, your landlord is able to file for your eviction, but with these emergency rules, if you can’t pay rent because you lost your job due to the pandemic, the landlord is not allowed to evict you for that reason. There are other ways that you can still be evicted, but that big, basic way is off the table - but only for now. Thanks to new data from the census in 2020, the CDPP reported that “An estimated 10.9 million adults living in rental housing — 15 percent of adult renters — were not caught up on rent, according to data collected April 28–May 10. Here, too, renters of color were more likely to report that their household was not caught up on rent.” By May 2021, the Washington Post reported that “more than 8 million rental properties across the country are behind on payments by an average of \$5,600, according to census data.” And those bills of back rent aren’t going away, so this nationwide crisis is going to hit hard as these moratoriums run out.

EMILY: And those troubles are happening for Wheaton residents, right alongside the rest of the nation. Speaking about food insecurity in Wheaton, Heather Bruskin of the Montgomery County Food Council says:

Audioclip HEATHER: “In March of 2020, the economic crisis really triggered a collapse in our food pipelines and triggered a food insecurity crisis as well. And so, since March of 2020, we’ve seen an estimated 50% increase in food insecurity in Montgomery County with now an estimated over 100,000 residents at risk for hunger. And so this has brought many residents who previously had not experienced food insecurity at risk for hunger for the first time. Many residents who had been previously food insecure found themselves again unsure of where their next meal was coming from. And for those residents who were already experiencing food insecurity, their challenges only increased.”

ALI: We also spoke with Matt Losak, the co-founder and executive director of the Montgomery County Renters’ Alliance, who has seen first-hand how housing insecurity is affecting Wheaton and Montgomery County as a whole:

Audioclip MATT: “We are seeing thousands upon thousands of renters, particularly low income, obviously disproportionately representing people of color, immigrants, who are working in areas most hard hit by the pandemic’s impact on the economy, so people who work in the service industry in restaurants, in retail, who have lost their jobs or lost hours, and then a whole world of

these sort of grey economy, people who would do child care, people who would do other things that were not possible during the pandemic when we are requiring people to stay home and not go to work and not go to places where you have to congregate with others. Those people who are already struggling to pay rent but making rent found themselves unable to pay rent. And in short order, and this pandemic's been going on for a year now, they find themselves months and months behind in rent."

ALI: Luisa Montero-Diaz, the director of the Mid-County Regional Services Center based here in Wheaton provided a view of the big picture:

Audioclip LUISA: "You know, COVID, the early days of COVID unearthed this real need. Food insecurity was like the tip of the iceberg, you know. And of course, then afterwards, you had, you know, the issues of just housing, and people being able to pay their rent, and then, you know, you have the programs that came in, the eviction moratoriums, and the rental assistance, and all that it kind of helped-- I really feel like there's going to be a lag reaction or a lag impact when all of this, you know, when the rental assistance money goes away, the federal FEMA money goes away, and then-- because it's been helping a lot of people, and the food distributions and all that have been helping people stay afloat a bit."

EMILY: There has been a real need in Wheaton for help to get through this pandemic, and as Luisa pointed out, there are relief programs happening now to help residents in all sorts of ways.

ALI: That's right. There have been attempts at aid at all levels, from the federal government down to the local Montgomery County government, and so we're also seeing it in Wheaton. The Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services has the COVID-19 Rental Relief Program to help combat housing insecurity. The program is designed to help residents who have fallen behind on rent due to the pandemic, and for residents who apply, they can receive up to \$12,000 to help pay back the rent that they owe, or to cover future rent bills. That's when those funds are available at the county level. As of February 5, 2021, there has also been a cap on the amount rent can increase- as long as Maryland is in a state of emergency because of the coronavirus, your rent in Montgomery County can't be increased by more than 1.4%. That cap stays in place until 90 days after the state of emergency is lifted, whenever that may be. So at the time we are recording this, that cap is still in place.

EMILY: And the county has also been stepping in for Wheaton residents who are facing food insecurity. In a lot of cases, this has been stepping up partnerships with local organizations for collaboration and resource sharing, and finding the best ways to get food aid directly to the people who need it. The Montgomery County Food Council brings together 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Their work is designed to build a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system. Heather Bruskin of the Food Council says:

Audioclip HEATHER: "Pre-COVID, we had about 75 organizations around the county, about half of which are faith-based organizations, providing emergency food distributions in our

community, and since then, that number has exploded, just like the levels of food insecurity in our community, so now we have about 120. And included among those are what we call hub organizations. So these are community partners, organizations with deep trusted networks within the neighborhoods in which they work, who can best connect with hard-to-reach populations and other residents who may be seeking services, and connect those residents to available resources like food. And so three of those are in the mid-county area recognizing that that's an area of concentration for hunger and other resources in demand by residents with lower incomes."

ALI: One thing that's been really striking to me is how people in Wheaton are rising up to take care of our community during this pandemic. One Wheaton-based organization that's working directly on food aid is Up 2 Us Foundation, founded by the mother-daughter team of Tazeen and Marium Ahmad in 2019 just before pandemic. I spoke to Marium one day while volunteers were at work assembling food bags, so you'll hear the work being done in the background.

Audioclip MARIUM: "The pandemic has changed a lot of things, of course. We started in 2019. We were just doing weekend food bags, that was our initial start, and once the pandemic hit, the need grew, people lost their jobs, people who would never have thought they would need food needed it, and were placed in these positions. So, our organization, as a result, grew very quickly since the pandemic, and part of what makes food insecurity so difficult is because of the underlying causes of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and food deserts in a lot of communities of color."

ALI: In 2020, UP 2 Us Foundation delivered 125,000 pounds of food to families in Montgomery County through their weekend bag program and home deliveries. Through partnerships with other organizations and Montgomery County, they are now distributing 700,000 pounds of food to families in our region.

Audioclip MARIUM: "So we have three main programs. Like I mentioned, we started with the weekend food bag program, and that's aimed at helping families who have children enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch program, so the weekend, there's a gap, right? There's no school, so they're not getting that extra meal. So we started with that. And then, we expanded to doing home deliveries once COVID started because there were so many people that were unemployed and also didn't have access to transportation. Because of that need, we decided to, "Okay, there's a huge need for people to get food to their home." And even people who have COVID, they needed food. So we have a delivery program. And then lastly, the main program we have is a food pickup program. It's called Groceries to Go, and families come to our food pantry located in Wheaton, MD, and they schedule an appointment, it's very simple, and we have a 30-pound box of food for them every other week, so it's biweekly food distribution."

EMILY: Marium had some really interesting things to say about the importance of culturally appropriate food as well.

Audioclip MARIUM: “Like, at the end of the day, culture is so important. Like, you can give somebody something and that’s not their culture, that’s not what they’re used to, and they’re not gonna eat it, most likely. We want to make it something that we collaborate with the people we’re actually serving, and we can hear what they want, and because of that, we learned, ‘Okay, these are the foods that people from this community eat - let’s figure out how to get it.’ Thankfully, though, thankfully, the Montgomery County has a - we’re partnered with them so they’re giving us a lot of produce. Most of it is free, thankfully, for right now, so we’re able to, you know, get that. But that was just feedback we heard - whenever I think about a food pantry, I think about canned goods. Growing up, that’s all I heard, it’s like, ‘Oh, donate to this food pantry, donate canned this, canned that,’ but that’s not what a lot of people want, and understandably, it’s not the healthiest at the end of the day. So we want to make sure people are happy, people are getting what they like to cook, and what culturally is appropriate for them.”

ALI: Up 2 Us Foundation is only one organization that has stepped up to meet the need for food distribution in Wheaton. One really inspiring story is that of Hughes United Methodist Church, who created a small food ministry that grew into an official mid-county consolidation hub within a matter of weeks, and which is still going strong today. I asked their Pastor, the Reverend Diana Wingeier-Rayon what inspired her church to step into this role, and how it all started.

Audioclip DIANA: “One day, we had - I was here by myself, you know the staff was working from home and I came to pray in the church in the morning. It was 7:30 in the morning when I hear somebody knocking at the door. There was a lady from Honduras with two little kids. She was crying and just said ‘I’ve been evicted because, this is March, and I don’t have a job for the last two months, and my kids are starving, we haven’t eaten breakfast yet, can you help us?’ So immediately I was like, ‘Oh my god, we don’t have food here.’ And I said, ‘Can you come inside, stay right here, I’ll be right back, I’m gonna get some food.’ But I went to the kitchen and there was nothing, so I run to the Safeway myself and I got two bags of food and I came back with milk and said, ‘Here, this is the name of the church.’ So immediately we found out, let’s say her name was Sofia, she was not the first one. Two days later we had another mama with two little kids again, knocking at the doors, asking for food. So the inspiration came from the need the community had, and they came and knocked on the doors. And I knew the moment, we need to be inspired by the need of these people, it’s real, they really need it, it’s a big necessity and we have to provide for them.”

EMILY: And so obviously, we wondered, how did they grow from helping a handful of families into an official, county-sponsored hub?

Audioclip DIANA: “Another miracle! We - I was walking in the parking lot one day, and I saw a car going by with a sticker, Montgomery County, and apparently that person was lost, was trying to turn around in the parking lot, and I went and I said, ‘Hi can I help you?’ And that person was very kind, very nice, and she said, ‘Yes, I’m trying to get out, can I go back through there?’ And I said ‘Yes, oh you work for the county?’ ‘Yes, oh, do you give food here?’ she said. ‘Well, we’re feeding five people, five families because we don’t have more funds than that.’ ‘Oh, I can help you with that, how would you like to be a hub?’ And I said, ‘What is a hub?’ So she explained it

to me, I look at her, and I say, 'I think you were sent here by God, so let's start that right away.' And that's how we started, you know, and she got a meeting like, the next day, and we started filling out some contracts and paperwork which was not much, seriously, and we got the first truck delivering boxes of combo, we call combo because they have proteins and vegetables, same boxes, it was amazing. And that's how we started."

ALI: Thanks to those county resources, Hughes United Methodist Church has a weekly distribution day, that as of this recording is on Tuesdays. The hub is able to provide not just food, but a lot more: COVID-19 testing and vaccination, diaper distribution, support for kids struggling during virtual schooling, counseling and social workers, and prepared meals for seniors, single parents, and people sick with COVID-19. There are 100-150 walk-ins every week, and approximately 400 drive-ups that come through their parking lot supply chain. Emily and I took a drive through the neighborhood on a Tuesday about a half hour before they were scheduled to open up, and we could see the impact they are making directly. People were already lined up on foot outside the church, and cars were lined up for blocks around the church, in every direction.

EMILY: And the need in Wheaton has remained steady at the Hughes hub. The one time it seemed like fewer people were coming to them for help, they realized it was due to vaccine hesitancy from all of the misinformation that was buzzing around at the time. So they started a group that went directly into the community and nearby apartment complexes to speak to folks there and spread better information. Otherwise, it's been a steady flow of distribution throughout the pandemic, and they don't intend to stop the service any time soon, continuing to work with the mid-county service center to find the best ways to meet the needs of people in Wheaton.

ALI: It's an incredible story. So, Emily, if people are listening and want to take action, what can they do?

EMILY: There's always volunteering, and making a donation of funds. There's also a lot of work to be done to make big, systemic changes that people can help make possible. Heather Bruskin told us a bit about that.

Audioclip HEATHER: "You know, I think - I get questions so often about what can the average resident do to support food systems change. And I always encourage everybody that I talk to to be active and engaged in these issues on a daily basis, and to encourage your friends and neighbors and family members to do the same. And that could be anything from supporting local businesses, and - or if you shop at a farmer's market, or if you hopefully visit restaurants or shops that are locally owned, you ask questions and you find out about what it's like, or where this food came from or how it was grown or how it was produced, because the people who produce our food are incredibly passionate about it, and it's so meaningful to them and they have stories to tell, and that creates connections between people, it facilitates our learning about cultures other than our own, and also, it gives us information that we need to uplift the voices of our community members and advocate with them on need for food systems change. I

hope that everybody will focus on learning, on making new connections, and then also, in advocating and holding up community leadership and voice.”

ALI: You can also go to our web page for this broadcast, and find links to these organizations. The Wheaton community has done so much to support each other this year and to find a way through to the other side together. We're so pleased to be able to share a few of those stories with you. In our upcoming episode, we'll share stories of the impact of pandemic on small business in the Wheaton and Kensington community. Thanks for listening - we're glad you're here.

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