

[Transcript: InterAct Story Theatre's Community Interactions,
Episode 3: *Pandemic and Small Businesses*]

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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 Small Businesses in the Wheaton-Kensington area. 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 this pandemic time, and sharing them through the words and voices of the people who are living them, and who wanted to share their stories with us.

ALI: In the first episode, we laid our foundation by talking about where and who Wheaton is, and how it became the community it is today. In the second episode, we took a look at the way that food and housing insecurity took a toll on Wheaton during the pandemic, and the ways in which the county and the community responded. This time, we're going to shift our lens to another part of what makes Wheaton work: the local businesses of Wheaton, the people who make them run, and just how they've managed to make it work during the pandemic when Maryland was locked down.

EMILY: Lockdowns took place across the country, and immediately started to make an impact on the way people worked. One thing to know is that nationwide, more than half of all businesses - 52% - had to ask their employees to stop working for at least some period of time between January and September of 2020, according to a survey from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's a lot of lost income for a lot of people, and a lot of businesses trying to stay afloat. Many businesses and jobs, of course, made a switch over into teleworking and could keep going almost as normal even when offices themselves had to be closed, but in that same survey from the Bureau of Labor, the industry with the largest percentage of establishments that did *not* offer telework were accommodation and food services. 91 percent of businesses in these sectors didn't have teleworking options for employees.

ALI: Well, that makes sense. And across the nation, the accommodation and food services industries made up the second largest percentile of businesses that saw a decrease in demand during the pandemic. 71% of hotel and food service businesses reported a decrease in demand. The only industry to report greater decrease was the air transportation industry. Some businesses were able to grow during the pandemic because they were already designed to cater to folks at home--big online retailers and tech companies that make tools for teleworking were some of the businesses that saw their profits grow in 2020--but many smaller businesses were forced to close their doors, some for good. The federal government created the Paycheck Protection Program to give small businesses loans to cover employee paychecks, and although they could be a big help if you were lucky enough to receive one, many small businesses were left out in the cold when PPP funding ran out. Economic recovery has been slow and hard to manage as the dangers of the pandemic remained with us.

EMILY: Here in Wheaton, we may not have had any hotels or airports, but we do have a lot of small businesses that were directly impacted by the pandemic. A lot of those businesses center around food or events, and one example that combines those two areas is Green Plate Catering. We spoke with Kit Wood, the founder of the company, to understand their business.

Audioclip KIT: “Well, I’ve been in the catering business for over 37 years, and about 12 years ago, I changed our name to Green Plate Catering to reflect more what our philosophy is and our approach. And Green Plate’s approach and philosophy is pretty much to be as zero-waste as possible and to use the resources in our community and as close to us as possible. And we also like to concentrate on vegan and vegetarian food sourcing, regenerative, sustainable, local, preferably organic ingredients. And we compost, we use all green cleaning things, practices, we’re also a Green Restaurant Certified, Montgomery County Green Restaurant Certified Business, which we have been for numerous years now since they initiated the program. And we’re pleased to be here in Montgomery County and Wheaton where people know what we do and they want to walk the talk as well and so we’re very pleased to have the clients and customers that we do.”

ALI: We asked Kit what it looked like when suddenly, the pandemic meant that they couldn’t cater the big events that were the backbone of what Green Plate Catering had built its business on.

Audioclip KIT: “Everything just shut down. We did a big- we were - businesses shut down. I mean the whole country, you know, everything shut down, large gatherings shut down, and so we had many things on the books through May which were all postponed and then eventually canceled. Nobody - we had no idea that it was gonna go on this long, we thought, well, three weeks, we’ll be okay, three months, we can do it, and it’s a year later, and we’re still in business. (laughs) So, I feel very blessed and fortunate that we were able to stay in business and.... So we - a couple months after everything kind of got shut down in March, we tried to do a little bit of this and that and find customers for to-go meals but, really, as caterers we’re known for doing large events, and we were very fortunate because the county came to us and offered us a contract, and we didn’t know how long the contract would be, but it started in June of 2019 - in 2020, and we had the contract until December 31, 2020. So because of that contract with the county, even though it wasn’t a moneymaker, we were able to stay employed, meet our expenses, rehire back all of our vendor services and our employees and, you know, contribute our little bit to the economy and to also feed insecure, senior citizens that were food-insecure, you know, a lot of things. People weren’t able to go over to their senior parents’ home and bring food and, you know, a lot of - they weren’t able to go outside and go shopping, so there was a true need and we were able to meet that at three different facilities in the county through the Montgomery County Food Hub. So, we did do that, December, and that really did keep my business viable.”

EMILY: That work with the Food Hub not only helped Green Plate Catering stay in business and keep employees on the payroll, but it meant that their work had a big impact in the community.

Audioclip KIT: “First we did 138 meals a day from June until October. Then the funds were running low so then we did 80 meals to just two of the senior housings. And we delivered them five days a week. We were very grateful and we really enjoyed doing it.”

ALI: One thing that has been so tricky for businesses like Green Plate is that their usual revenue streams- people holding big events- have dried up, so they’ve had to pivot several times during this last year to find new ways to keep going. Another Wheaton and Kensington area business, *asap graphics + interiors 360*, run by Laura-Leigh Palmer, is really a support business for other businesses. The company focuses on events marketing for small businesses, and Laura-Leigh struggled when the lockdowns canceled those events. We asked her about how the pandemic affected her business.

Audioclip LAURA-LEIGH: “It was devastating. It was absolutely devastating, because I’ve been primarily working with people to promote their events, there’ve been no events. And so it’s been really, really bad. Financially, emotionally, it’s been extremely traumatic. I have been able to get some new clients, I’ve done some promotions for people for their Zoom events, and so there’s been some work that comes in, but nothing, nothing compared to what a normal year is.”

EMILY: When her business couldn’t get work, Laura-Leigh herself pivoted.

Audioclip LAURA-LEIGH: “The world shut down, and I’m lucky, I mean I still have a roof over my head, I have food. I know that they’re people that have it worse. I actually got some employment delivering pizzas, which is something that I never really thought I’d be doing, ever. (laughs) But it’s cash, and it kept my phone on, so that’s a good thing.”

ALI: One thing that really helped Laura-Leigh was focusing on the community service work that she had been doing for years, and using her skills to help others, as she did with MUM, or Mid-County United Ministries, a nonprofit that helps people in crisis in the Wheaton-Kensington and Aspen Hill communities with food, medicine, eviction prevention, and utilities.

Audioclip LAURA-LEIGH: “Most Sundays I would go to where MUM was doing their food bank and I photographed their events for getting out food. I knew the executive director, Larry White, at that time, and it helped them with their promotion efforts to get money for mobile MUM. It wasn’t like they had money to pay me to do this, but you’ve got to do something. And I was able to help them get some funds. I started looking for other opportunities: what else can I do? What is out there that I can use my skills for, and not go crazy.”

EMILY: And that’s something that you see a lot in Wheaton - people using their skills to help others in the community. Los Chorros Restaurant is an institution in Wheaton since 1989, and has stayed a real family restaurant ever since. Omar Lazo, whose parents first founded Los Chorros, continues to run the restaurant today, and is also a founding member of the Montgomery County Latino Restaurant Association. Here’s how he described to us how that organization came to be:

Audioclip OMAR: “The Latino Restaurant Association is kind of, mostly started right now with a lot of issues that came up during the pandemic, and we realized that there was - even though the county was trying to do a pretty good job of communicating to the business owners, a lot of it got lost in translation, and there wasn't really a channel, like a direct channel, or a channel that was actually working to get information to new business owners. And with all the, you know, fast-changing pace of all the different regulations that were coming out because of COVID, everybody was lost. You know, so I think, you know, the association came out of that, where I was doing a lot of work trying to kind of give this information out to all of our different members, and eventually, you know, when we were trying to get the dining room reopened, we ended up forming the association, trying to, to try to petition County Council and County Executive to help out the Restaurant Association.”

Ali: We asked Omar about how the pandemic has affected Los Chorros.

Audioclip OMAR: “It affected us greatly, because you cannot live off of carryout and delivery. You know, so we were still able to open up with carryout and delivery, but we also had challenges with our staff. You know, my waiters, they were no longer earning tips because they weren't serving tables, and I had like seven waiters, and it was just trying, you know, I had a bartender, I had a busboy - the toughest thing was, you know, keeping my staff employed, and obviously keeping the business going because we weren't making enough money to make ends meet with just carryout and delivery. We've been around the community for thirty-two years, so we have a pretty good following, you know, and we've been pretty involved with the community, so I think the community kind of stepped up and, you know, looked out for us, as well. But there's a lot of restaurants, mostly like bar types, where most of their sales were based off of their alcohol sales - they were hit really hard. I mean, several of them just ended up closing, you know, as long as dine-in was closed, they just, there was no point for them to try to continue with delivery and carryout. And honestly for me, the only reason for it was really to keep the payroll going for my staff. I wasn't really making enough money, I wasn't making enough money to pay rent, but I was making enough money to just cover my payroll for my staff, and trying to make sure that we could put food on their tables.”

EMILY: Whether they are closed or open during the pandemic, businesses have been facing bills that make it extra hard to stay open when they can't have customers in their spaces as usual.

Audioclip OMAR: “You know, I got PPP, there's a lot of folks that didn't, and that's really what's kept me afloat, but it was something where, without the PPP money I don't know where I'd be right now, to be honest with you. And a lot of restaurants are still - there's a lot of restaurants that are really behind on rent, you know. There's a couple restaurants that I know of that owe six figures right now in rent. We're not really sure what's gonna happen to them, you know. But they're doing everything they can, you know, their business is picking up again. But I mean, nothing really started up again until February 14, which is when the county decided to allow 25% capacity, and then eventually, they moved on, I think in March, to 50%. So now at the end

of this month, we're supposed to move to 100%. So, you know, I'm still optimistic, but there's still a lot of people that are very behind."

Ali: During this time, Omar and Los Chorros have been active in the community addressing the issue of food insecurity, donating food and cooking meals for nonprofits and county consolidated hubs.

Audioclip OMAR: "It's been really rewarding, you know, just to see, you know, who it goes to, you know? I was at an event, a Mother's Day event at Hughes Methodist Church here in Wheaton, and they invited me and I was there and they mentioned the restaurant name, and one of the pastors just stood up and said, "Oh my God! I love your food!," like, I didn't even know it was being delivered to their church. You know, sometimes you just - you give the food and you know it's going to someone who really needs it. You know, and they were so grateful and it was just good to get that feedback, because a lot of times, you don't - you just know you're doing something good, but you don't see the direct, you know, directly who it's going to. There were a lot of folks that were there who received that food, and they were just really really grateful for it."

EMILY: As Omar mentioned earlier, some restaurants in Wheaton have been able to get PPP, or apply to the Restaurant Revitalization Fund that's also organized by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Those are a couple of ways that help has come at the federal level, but there is also a lot of work being done at the local level that's been a big help for Wheaton restaurants. One great example has been the Wheaton Streeterly.

ALI: The Streeterly! That's right. The Streeterly is a model that's popped up in communities all across the country based on a simple idea- if people don't feel safe eating in restaurants, what about creating a central place outside for eating that is safer for everyone? Many restaurants with sidewalk space were already trying to expand those areas to be able to serve customers, but with a streeterly, even more restaurants could benefit. Here in Wheaton, parts of Price Street and Elkin Street have been closed to some traffic, and so now instead of cars, the space is filled with tables and chairs for diners. One thing that's special about the Wheaton Streeterly is that the restaurant owners themselves started the ball rolling themselves to create this open, outdoor communal space for eating. They did the initial scouting and planning, and brought it to the county for next steps.

EMILY: And after that amazing start, the county government took the ball and ran with it! It was a huge group effort, even after all the work the restaurants were undertaking. It took the Wheaton Urban District, the Mid-County Regional Service Office, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, the Department of Permitting Services, Department of General Services and Alcohol Beverage Services--all working together with the restaurants to find ways to make a Streeterly for Wheaton. A project like this is pretty complicated, and needs a lot of agencies and businesses to work together, but everyone was on board and ready to make it work. The county has lots of different Streeterlies for different communities, and the Wheaton Streeterly has been a great example of a partnership between the county and private

businesses, all working together for the same goal and doing a lot to help out local restaurants at a time when they really needed it.

ALI: There have been a lot of people really enthusiastic about the Wheaton Streeterly, myself included! It's a walkable, community-centered space that is a great place to visit and have a meal in Wheaton right now, and hopefully, there will be a way to keep it around for some time to come.

EMILY: One thing that seems clear to me is that so many Wheaton businesses truly feel a strong tie to this community, from the people they work with to the people they serve, and beyond. Kit Wood from Green Plate Catering had this to say about just how interconnected their business is with Wheaton and the surrounding community, at every level, from the food distribution chain to the folks who eat their food:

Audioclip KIT: "It's kind of amazing, the triple effect. You know, my farmers, all these vendors, and then you start to realize how much even my little small business here in Wheaton, how much it supports the community and how much spillover there is and how much affect on many angles, so I'm really grateful to be in Montgomery County, to be here in our little Wheaton community, and get the financial support and the moral support, just, you know, the 'hang in' and 'this is what we're doing,' or, you know, 'try this,' or, and the contract from the county, that was a win-win, I think for everyone, so I'm just very grateful."

ALI: The Wheaton community has done so much to support each other this year and to find a way through to the other side together, and we are so pleased to be able to share a few of those stories with you. In our final episode we'll share stories of the impact of pandemic on artists in Wheaton. Thanks for listening- we're glad you're here.

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