



Paula Murphy
Patterson and Murphy Public Relations

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Interviewer: Michelle Little

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Michelle Little: Today is May 26th of 2020, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Paula Murphy for the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project on the effects of COVID-19, and we are conducting this interview remotely via Zoom and Zencast, so this is a new experience for all of us.

Paula, would you mind introducing yourself to get us started?

[0:00:32.4]

Paula Murphy: This is Paula Murphy. I'm forty-eight years old. I am a publicist in Houston, Texas.

[0:00:51.4]

Michelle Little: All right. And, Paula, could you give a little bit of a brief background on your business? I know you've been doing this since the nineties, is that right? But just kind of an overview of some of the clients you work with and how you got started in this.

[0:01:15.0]

Paula Murphy: Sure. I was a journalism student at the University of Houston and I had many interests and many things that I like to do, and it was actually one of my aunts who obviously knows me, but we never lived close by to one another, that said to me, "Hey, you ought to try public relations." And at that time, this was 1990 and I had to go to the library to look up what public relations was, because there was no Internet to do research. There was no Google. I read a little bit about it. I thought it was interesting, but at that point, I was only a sophomore in college and the school would not help place you for

internships until you were a senior, so I pulled out another archaic thing called the *Yellow Pages* and started searching for PR firms here in Houston and called and got numerous turndowns, “We only hire seniors. We’ve already hired for the summer,” this and that, until I found someone who answered the phone. I did get two yeses from small agencies. I went to the first interview, and I’ve never had another job. [laughs]

[0:02:34.0]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[0:02:35.1]

Paula Murphy: So at the time, the company was called Patterson & Blanton Public Relations, and it was two women, and the agency had a specialty, a niche in doing food and hospitality public relations, so they mainly worked for independent restaurants, some hotel work, some food product work, but it was mainly restaurants. And so I was to work there just for the summer as a summer intern, and that was the summer of ’91. At the end of the summer, they asked me if I wanted to stay, and I’m like the itch that never goes away, and now I’m the only one here. One of the partners moved away. There were two of us full-time. And then I became a partner in 2000 and my business partner, the Patterson of Patterson & Murphy, retired in 2007.

So the company still has a specialty in food and hospitality and related businesses. Currently, I work with all restaurants, kind of at one end, and my other client is the Houston Food Bank. So I’ve been working with the Houston Food Bank for twenty years this year, and probably my longest standing of the restaurant clients has been a client

since before I started as an intern. They started just before I started my internship, so that's over thirty years. So, yeah, I don't like to rock the boat. I'm a long-and-steady kind of person.

[0:04:15.7]

Michelle Little: Excellent. What is your favorite thing about the work you do?

[0:04:21.6]

Paula Murphy: I think there's many things that I like, but among those are every day can be completely different, still basically the same, but one day you might be working just writing, one day it's going out to do the interviews to be able to do the things that you're writing. It's the interaction with people who are interesting and very passionate about what they do. I just think that it's a job that's very, very interesting and there's a lot of interaction with people, and ultimately I think that's what I like the most, is there are days I can be stuck in an office. We all do. Every job has that kind of thing to it, where it's the nuts and bolts, where you have to just sit down and do the work. But I get to interact with my clients, I get to interact with writers, and I love telling great stories about other people. [laughs] There's a lot of people doing really amazing things, interesting things. Sometimes it's a personal story. But I think it goes down to storytelling and helping people get their message out.

[0:05:36.9]

Michelle Little: Yeah, excellent, and that's a great segue to my next question, what a typical—and I know there's no typical day for you, but maybe what a normal week was like for you right before the pandemic hit, maybe what were some projects you were working on back in February, early March.

[0:05:58.2]

Paula Murphy: Well, a typical day for me, as I said, I mostly work with independent restaurants. I handle the social media for almost all of them, plus the media relations, so a typical day for me would be the first thing I would do is get up, get onto social media, make some posts for the day or schedule a post for later on in the day, check my calendar, see what meetings I have, and then I always keep a running to-do list. It's like something that never seems to go away, but I like to have a list. I definitely like to be able to check things off for my own, like, "You did accomplish some things today." So that's a typical day. Every day, there's some sort of writing, not just social media writing, but a press release or website copy, media announcement, editing a menu for a client, things like that. Every day involves something with photography, providing that to the media. It might be going to take new photos, providing ones that I've already done. So that's kind of what I do every day in addition to meeting with writers, calling writers.

But right before the pandemic, there were a lot of things in the works, and the pandemic did a number on those things. [laughs] Among those were several things relating to the James Beard Foundation Awards for this year. The Media Awards are held separately from the Restaurant Awards. The Restaurant Awards are now held in Chicago, and they have been for the last several years, but the Media Awards are still held in New

York City, and they are typically on a Friday. It's usually the last Friday of April. And then the Restaurant Awards are the first Monday of May.

Visit Houston, which is like the marketing arm for the City of Houston, was sponsoring the Media Awards this year, so they were selecting all the chefs that would be preparing the meal for these writers at their awards ceremony. So one of my clients was to be doing desserts for that, and it's a big honor to be asked and considered, and everybody was really excited about that.

The other thing was relating to Houston Food Bank, they have an event every year called Empty Bowls Houston, and they're held all around the country and all around the world, but basically it's local artists make and donate bowls, and these bowls are sold. A hundred percent of the proceeds go to that food bank. So when you go to this event, you see the thousands of bowls that are out there, when you purchase a bowl in Houston—it's \$25—you get the bowl and a simple lunch of soup, bread, and water, because that's all that some people might have to eat in a day, and that bowl is to remind you there are empty bowls in your community.

So Visit Houston, they always get my press release every year. This was the sixteenth annual event, and they asked us to be a part of it by providing bowls to be in the swag bag for the writers. So this was a big deal for this little grassroots—I mean, the Houston Food Bank is the biggest Feeding America food bank in the nation. It is not a small organization. But this event is run by a committee of volunteers that are all artists, so for them to be on this national stage and to be included at this event was a big deal for them. So as soon as this pandemic happened—and it was kind of like, no, wasn't cancelled yet, but it was “We don't know what's going to happen.” And now we all know

that it's been put off as far as being an in-person event, so the chefs are not going, the swag bags are not being done.

In addition to that, I had some restaurants who were finalists for the Restaurant Awards. We usually attend the James Beard Awards and now that is not happening. The awards are not happening, as far as I know. I don't know what decision is—I know it's not happening as it normally would. It may happen online. I'm not sure.

And the other thing was that another client of mine, Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen, it's owned by a female chef from the valley, the border of Texas, who has a wonderful restaurant and a cookbook, we were going to be doing a dinner at the James Beard House on Cinco de Mayo and that also got cancelled.

So it's funny that so many things were involving this one entity, but all very big deals for each of these clients, so that was kind of heartbreaking for everybody. So I know that Visit Houston is planning to do the sponsorship of the awards next year. I mean, hopefully things will all be back to normal. Empty Bowls will hopefully be a part of that, and hopefully Sylvia will be able to do her dinner somewhere in the future. In the interim, on Cinco de Mayo, they did a Zoom cooking class with Sylvia and people could join in. It's just not the same. I mean, it was wonderful, but it's not the same.

So those were some of the things that were happening. Several of my clients were putting in some new processes that I was helping them with, and those things kind of come to a stop, you know, just because it was "How do we figure out how to survive?" [laughs] Rather than start a new reservation system or overhaul the website or whatever, it's like "We've got to get down to nuts and bolts." So those are some of the things that got disrupted for me personally.

[0:12:03.7]

Michelle Little: Do you remember the first time you heard about COVID-19, like your early awarenesses of it?

[0:12:12.8]

Paula Murphy: Probably one of the first times that I'd heard about it was in regards to the food bank. I mean, we'd kind of been hearing things in the news and this and that, and the Houston Food Bank, they provide food in eighteen counties in Southeast Texas. Obviously, the main job of a food bank is to serve people who are food insecure, people who don't know where their next meal is coming from. But we know, because we know very well about hurricanes and things like that, the Houston Food Bank is always called upon in times of disaster. So in hearing about that this thing was out there and it was happening other places and was it coming here, they at the food bank made the decision "We should probably be forward-thinking, because we're seeing in China that when they get sick, they're getting quarantined. Okay, well, if people don't have food already and then they have to get quarantined, they can't go out, what are they going to do?"

So the food bank started packing quarantine boxes, and I'd have to look back in my notes and see when that was, but they were not for distribution. It was nothing like that, but it was "We're getting prepared. We're trying to think of what might happen." That was really the first time that I really heard about it in context of how it might impact me or my clients. Obviously, I'd seen some things on the news. And it was interesting, because we sent out a media advisory about that, just that this was happening and we

needed some volunteers to do this, and the media just jumped on it, and I think it was because it was like, “Oh—,” and not in a bad way, but, like, interesting, like, “Oh, somebody’s doing something about the—they’re already thinking about this.” So that is the first—that’s my memory. I don’t know the exact date, but that’s when that started happening.

[0:14:23.6]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then do you remember the first time you realized “Oh, this is really going to impact my life. This is going to change something”? Or there may have been a few moments like that.

[0:14:39.7]

Paula Murphy: Well, there were a few moments. I mean, after that happened with the quarantine boxes, then the media—it’s like we almost kind of started that dialogue with them. They knew we were thinking about it, at least in terms of the food bank, and they would want to know, well, what’s next or are people asking for these. It’s like, “No, we don’t—.” No one was being tested at that time. There was nothing like that. It was just “We’re going to get ready,” because when we have a hurricane, we get disaster boxes ready. It’s just “Be prepared.” It’s the ultimate—what is it—the Boy Scouts. “Be prepared.”

Then as things started happening with the other of my clients being restaurants, it started trickling in the news and it was talking about it’s spread by people being in contact with one another. Then when they really started talking about it being a

respiratory disease, restaurants were not told yet to close or anything like that, but one of my clients has four locations, four independent restaurants, three of those being Mexican concepts, and each one of them, on Sunday, they are known for their Sunday brunch buffet. And as we're hearing, like, this is a contact thing, this is a respiratory thing, this is a—again, very early on. No one had been closed. It was the thought of “We probably shouldn't do the buffet.” So, again, it was kind of thinking ahead, but it's like hearing things in the news and just kind of trying to pay attention. So that decision was kind of made, like, well, they have a menu on Saturdays, so they said, “We'll just do that on Sundays.”

And when I saw that, I thought, “This is going to be something that's really going to hit these people.” Restaurants, for the most part, are not about spacing tables out super far. I mean, they want the maximum number of tables and turn them as many times. And I think we all just started thinking, “Hmm. Something's coming down the line here.” So I know that that really made an impact in my mind.

And then watching the news while I was working—I have a home-based office and I had moved from my office into the front room so that I could have the TV on, and watching the TV and hearing the press conferences and all that, and I thought, “Oh, this is going to be interesting.” And it really hit restaurants hard. As soon as they were told they had to close, I mean, my immediate thought was for them and then my second thought was for me, that if they're not open, I mean, still communications need to be done that they are closed or if they're going to stay open for to-go business, that message still needs to get out, but it was “How am I going to make my living?” So, yeah, those were my kind of initial thoughts with that.

And just being a part of this restaurant community for thirty years, it's like you know so many people. You care about so many people. You know the valet when you drive up to your client's restaurant. You know the manager down to the dishwasher to the busboy. They're all familiar faces, and when you hear your client say, "I had to lay off four hundred people today," it's gut-wrenching for everybody.

[0:18:18.1]

Michelle Little: Absolutely. What do you remember about those early days after the shutdowns were put in place? Were you kind of scrambling and rearranging your workloads? And just what do you remember about those first few weeks?

[0:18:43.2]

Paula Murphy: In some ways, the first few weeks are an absolute and complete fog, because while the restaurants were maybe just—at this point in time, we're talking about just finding out "Okay, we have to close, but we can do to-go." There's that part. The food bank's now already going. They're doing the quarantine boxes. Now we're hearing other things, "This is what's going on here, and people are going to need help." And now that restaurants are closing and every other business is closing, that now means the people that the food bank serves is not just food-insecure people that they served prior to the pandemic, it now means guess what; you're about to get an influx of people.

So for me, it was—and, again, what I said was some of my restaurants were not going to open for to-go. So everybody kind of closed—so at that moment, I lost some of my workload. Like, I wasn't going to have to do messaging other than "This restaurant is

closed.” That’s it. Others were “We’re closing dine-in, but we have to-go.” So there was continuing messaging there.

The messaging needs and the work for the food bank was absolutely nonstop, so it was like my work—how do I say it? My client load went down and my income went down, because I basically said to these restaurants, “I know you own four restaurants and only two are going to be open. In good conscience, I can’t have you pay me for those restaurants that aren’t open. I’m not charging you for that.” This other client, “Let’s go down to half my retainer fee.”

So, I mean, I was happy to do that because *everybody* was in a bad way, but now my pay had gone down to half and my workload went to more than double, and there was no 8:00-to-5:00 days. My days are really not 8:00 to 5:00 anyway. I’m an independent sole proprietor who every client has my cell phone number. They’re texting me photos all day long for social media because I asked them to. But there were no “work hours” any longer. It was just *work*, and it was stressful, and you were worried about people.

And then media would want you to meet them at the food bank to film, and I have autoimmune disease. I have a mother who has pretty severe lung disease. I care for her. I have to be careful what I do and where I go so I can take care of her and then worry about me and still do my job. So it was just a lot at once, and I’m not unique in that. I mean, the whole world was trying to figure out what was going on. “How am I going to function? What are we going to do?”

But it just seemed like every day things unfolded, you know. It might have been people are now being asked to kind of stay six feet apart. I mean, I remember hearing the word “social distancing” for the first time and kind of laughing about it, and I thought,

“Boy, I can’t stand that word,” and then now it’s just like it’s everybody’s vernacular now. But you would go to meet a TV crew and it would be like normal. They’d walk up and they’d want to welcome you by shaking your hand and they were still doing that. And then it was literally like the next day, nobody was getting near each other. Everybody had a mask. They didn’t want you to come near them. They wanted to use a boom mic. I mean, literally there were times during this process where things literally—to me, it’s just like a switch went. It was one way, it was immediately different. Some things felt like they kind of evolved, but there were other things that just felt immediate. So that was interesting. So, learning how to do your job, what you’re used to doing.

And then when you deal in a business where you talk, I mean, to have a mask over your face and have people trying to do TV interviews, you can’t hear what they’re saying, it was interesting. And as we’re doing a Zoom interview now, and we all, living here and now today, see the news, I mean, it’s lightening a little bit, but when you see your favorite news anchor standing in their living room doing all their news interviews, it’s odd. It’s like, okay, I mean, but we’re going to roll with it. I think it was very impressive. It’s like everybody figured out a way. “How can we still do what we do with this new set of challenges?” I mean, and that goes from restaurants to gas stations to TV stations to whatever. I mean, it’s interesting, but we’ve found a way to keep the messages going out, and the news media, obviously, they’re doing a great job with that too. So I think that answers your question. I don’t know. I think I lost what the original question was. [laughter]

[0:23:56.4]

Michelle Little: That was perfect, yeah, about the first few weeks. So particularly the food bank, as you said, was just ramping up and up. Can you expand a little bit more about what it's been like for them and for your work with them in the last month or so?

[0:24:14.8]

Paula Murphy: Well, I mean, I can't say enough about them and food banks around the country. All food banks are supported by partner agencies. They may have a different name for them in different cities. Here in Houston, they call them partner agencies, and those are soup kitchens, church pantries, things like that. So the food bank gets food at a high level, and then the way they distribute it out to individuals is through these partner agencies.

Prior to the pandemic, they were distributing 400,000 to 500,000 pounds of food a day, which is still quite a large number. Again, they cover eighteen counties in Southeast Texas, so it's not just Houston. Pretty quickly, within days to the first weeks, they were up to 130 to 150 percent of distribution, so that means they were up to about 750,000 pounds, and that quickly went to a million pounds. So they are currently distributing a million pounds of food per day.

[0:25:24.0]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[0:25:26.5]

Paula Murphy: And like I said, usually their client is the person who is food-insecure. That immediately changed as every business started getting impacted and people didn't have a job anymore and worried about where their income was going to come from and how they were going to feed their family. So people would say, "Who's the food bank serving now?" And it's like they're serving anybody who needs help.

Like I said, we know how to deal with a natural disaster like a hurricane. Harvey is a hurricane that most everybody knows about, and just using that as an example, it devastated parts of Houston and the outskirts of Houston, and there was a lot of food going out that time, but there was also food coming in from food banks around the country. You know, they help each other when they need to. Food companies from outside of Houston were sending things in, supplies. Now you're in a situation where we've never been before. You're hit and so is everybody else, so you know what? Help is not coming. And not in a rude way, but everybody is trying to take care of their area. So it was switching mentality and very quickly that "We just have to figure this out. The need is here, the need is now, and we have to do everything that we can."

But some of these partner agencies, there's about 1,500 partner agencies in this coverage area, but some of them were having to close because volunteers didn't want to come. They were scared. Employees didn't want to come. Maybe somebody got sick. I don't know. So, I mean, they lost more than half of their partner agencies. So the need is greater, the ability to get it out is a challenge in the food chain, things coming in, truckers. Now your agencies, some of them are closing. I mean, they really had to do a lot of thinking, a lot of planning. They'd established these things they called neighborhood supersites, where it is a day of the week that they are in a different part of town, and they

go and they set up these tents, and depending on where they are, it might be a goal of serving 7,500 vehicles that day, 10,000 vehicles, 3,000 vehicles.

And it's a drive-through model. That was the other thing. Usually, people go to a food pantry and you go in and you get food from somebody or you're at a client-choice market where you can basically shop like it's a grocery store, meaning you select things. "Okay. My family likes this. They don't like that." But with the rules about contact and the stay-at-home orders and this and that, everything really had to go to a drive-through model and a no-contact model, and so these neighborhood supersites were these large sites. "Get an influx of food into this neighborhood because we don't have as many pantries doing this."

And they're great in that sense, but the response is overwhelming. I mean, the first one that we did, I was just sitting here working at my frenetic pace of trying to get all this stuff done and somebody called me and said, "There's four TV helicopters flying over our distribution. They don't know what's going on." Like, I think the media, at first, thought something had happened, like an accident or something. And a few days before this, there had been on the news the coverage of a San Antonio food bank where the lines were stretched five to ten miles down the freeway and closing off, so we had the exact same response that day. And you see that and your heart breaks, and then it makes you feel better about what you're doing that you have this thing set up and that "I'm trying to communicate it," and you do it. But, ultimately, it's all kind of sad. But there's, like, work that has to be done.

I'm tearing up because we were at one of the distributions and this writer wanted to interview a family, and I was pulling over cars as they had gone through, and some

people said no and this and that. And I asked this man and he said, “I don’t speak English,” and his wife said, “I don’t either.” And then this little voice came from the back seat and said, “I speak English,” and it was this nine-year-old little boy, and he said, “I want to be interviewed.”

And I said, “You’ve got to ask your parents.”

And they said, “Fine.”

They were not in a nice car. I mean, they were—I’m just saying that they obviously were not wealthy, by any means, but they were happy and smiling and so appreciative, and that little boy told me that—he said, “We are here to get food to hand out to the homeless people that live outside of our apartment complex.”

And it was like, okay, now, this is why we all do this. There’s always the other side, where people take advantage or whatever, and that’s, I think, been at very much a minimum. But when that little kid said that, it’s like I’ve got nothing to complain about. I’ve got a job. I have a roof over my head. I have a demand for my skill set and what I can do, and so I’m just going to keep doing it and I’m not going to complain. And that’s how I began to deal with it, because if you really sat in front of the TV, which is one of the outlets for my clients and my messages, if you just sat and listened to that, and if I just sat and looked at my to-do list, I mean, it was too much. It was overwhelming. But it’s gotten better, but it was too much and just enough, in that it made me feel good about what I can do and my little part in this new normal.

But what they’re doing is unbelievable, I mean what food banks are doing. It’s crazy. So it’s still right at a million pounds a day. It’s lightened up a little bit, I think, because some people have gone back to work, but that’s still there. They’ve had to do

different things. They don't do direct delivery to clients on a normal basis, but they have started some partnerships where they can do direct delivery to senior citizens and/or people who are quarantined because they have COVID. So they're learning—I mean, there's some—it's like there's a playbook for disasters, but that's only been one chapter. What they've written before is only a chapter. The playbook is totally being rewritten right now because this is nothing like they've seen.

[0:32:41.9]

Michelle Little: Right. Wow. That's amazing, amazing work that y'all are doing. Now, you personally, I think you said earlier, I mean, you saw pretty much an immediate, like, 50 percent drop in your income?

[0:32:57.6]

Paula Murphy: Yes.

[0:32:58.7]

Michelle Little: And then has that continued? I think you applied for some government assistance?

[0:33:07.9]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, as far as like payment from my clients, it's stayed at 50 percent, and that will change. I know that will change, but, you know, I have longstanding relationships with my clients and they're more than just a client. A lot of them are family.

I know they're hurting. I mean, if I can do without because I know they're doing without—I'm never going to lose—knock on wood—my home. I'm fine. I'm a saver and I'm pretty good with my money at times. But it just felt like the right thing to do. I mean, you can't get blood from a turnip, and it just is just the right thing to do.

I have a couple of clients that are not going to be paying clients anymore, and then, oddly enough, I got a call from somebody who said, "We need some help on a project that we're going to do." And I'm thinking I can't imagine somebody [laughs] is going to take on a new client or a new publicist in the middle of all this. But, interestingly enough, they said, "We want to make it an eight-week project." When I really stopped and thought about it, it's like they've gotten PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] money, and you have to pay that money out over—so they're being creative with their—so it's a cookbook project that they want to work on. So, anyway, I feel blessed and fortunate that someone, number one, thought of me and that that happened when it did.

I did apply for PPP, and I will do my best not to curse in this section of our interview. This was the most disorganized, ungodly ridiculous process that I think I have ever gone through, and the thing is I think it was that way for most people. And I understand that it was started to help people, but it shouldn't have been rushed the way that it was. I don't know. The first thing you were told was to go to the Small Business Administration and apply for an EIDL, an Economic Income Disaster Loan, and that was the first thing they told you to do, and that was a loan of—the way things were announced some way, you then found out they were evolving different, but they said it was a ten-thousand-dollar loan that would tide you over as you figured things out. So in the end, though, what it is, it's \$10,000 per employee, with a maximum of \$10,000, so for

a sole proprietor, in the end, it's a thousand-dollar loan. It's something to help. But this I applied for at the end of April. It is now what? May 26th. I just got that money maybe a week ago. So if you were somebody that was really on the skids and really needed that money, what good did it do? So that's what I understood—that was the first thing that was announced.

So I applied for that, and when I went to do that, you had to download a form, a PDF form, fill it out, scan it, and then you would have to upload it. Well, in the time that I downloaded and filled it out—and I needed to get one piece of information from my bank—when I went to upload it, that link wasn't there anymore, and so then you had to apply in a different manner, and all that numbers paperwork that I did, when you ultimately went on, the way they changed it, you didn't have to put that in there. Okay. So that was April 30th. It's there and it's in. Okay. Whatever.

Then they started saying in the news, "You're going to need to go through your bank that has your business account." And then that's when they started talking about something that's called a PPP, and it was like, what's EIDL, PPP? I mean, what is what? And this and that. And, you know, maybe some of it's also my fault, but I'm trying to do my job. Now, here I'm doing my twelve- to sixteen-hour-a-day work week, I have no time to research any of this. [laughs] I have no time to—so I'm trying to do that and be mindful of this. I've lost half my income. How can I protect myself? I don't even understand all the rules. The rules keep changing. And I know that this is all a new world for everybody, so we all need to be patient.

But then when they said you're going to need to go through your bank, I called my bank and my bank said, "Oh, no, we're not doing that, but if you want to take out a loan, we can sell you a loan."

It's like, "I don't want—no. That's not what I'm asking for."

Then two days later is when they said, "Okay, PPP, you've got to go through your bank. There's going to be a time you're going to go in, try to log in, then you apply for this thing."

Well, I was too busy. I mean, I couldn't do it. I mean, I was like onsite at the food bank and handling that, and by the time I came back, the whole system had crashed for my bank and millions of other banks and they had filled up the max capacity of who could get a loan, and this and that, and it was absolutely frustrating. And it was very isolating and I felt very not—like, who's going to worry about me? I mean, I'm worried about me. Believe me, I'm worried. But there's got to be a better way to do this. So, no, systems are down, can't do that.

So a week later and still nothing from that EIDL, and so then about a week or two later, I don't remember, I kept trying to fill out this paperwork and it kept saying, "You have to use the bank that you are established with." Anyway, I'm going too long with this.

But then they did a second round. I was able to get in, but when I finally logged in, they gave you no idea of what paperwork you would need once you got in. So then I finally got in and I'm like, I don't have the paperwork that they need. I mean, now what do I do? So I'm trying to gather what I can. It was like a race against the clock, because I know I'm going to get either logged off. If I don't do something quick enough, I'm going

to lose out, because everybody's scrambling and fighting to get in this position where I'm sitting now, and, I mean, I was in absolute tears. And for two and a half hours, I sat on my computer trying to apply for this loan—[laughs] edited myself there—only to every time you'd get to where you'd upload the documents, it would give me a system failure, kick me back to the beginning, and it would not have kept any of the information that I put in. It was two and a half hours of doing this over and over and over and over again, and finally at the end of it, it said, "Your loan has been received."

And I thought, "Okay. I can't believe it." So there was that slight moment of like, okay, I'm feeling better.

And two days later, I get an email from them saying, "You did not upload the right documents. You have—," I think it was twenty-four hours, twelve hours; I don't remember—"to send us the right documents or you're kicked out of the queue."

Well, I mean, you either have it or you don't have it, you know. One of the things they were requiring was your tax return for 2019. I hadn't done my 2019 taxes yet because the government said we didn't have to. Plus, I was supposed to be meeting with my accountant right when the pandemic showed up, and so he was not meeting with anyone, so we hadn't finalized it.

The other thing was they were requiring a copy of my business license. In the state of Texas, you are not required to have a business license, and especially for my profession, we don't have a license. I mean, if you're an aesthetician or a lawyer, you do within your industry. So wanting and demanding things that I can't give and that's the only way I can get this loan, I mean, I wanted to—I don't know. I don't know what I wanted to do, but I really wanted to kick the cat, whatever. I mean, it was just—I don't

know. It just seemed unbearable to me, and I just was like, “You know what? Forget it. I’m not going to get this money. I’m just going to have to find my own way. I’m going to have to take care of myself.”

So, long story even longer, finally I got connected to an actual banker who called me simply because he needed my new expiration date on my driver’s license on file. Other than that, I bet you nobody would have called me. So then I was like, “You poor fella, I’ve got your contact information now. This is not good for you, because I’m going to ride this like a pony.”

So, anyway, he did end up kind of helping, but it was a whole ‘nother like three-, four-week process. And then sometime in there, I got an email from them saying that “You do not qualify.” I don’t know how a sole proprietor who’s lost half their income does not qualify. I don’t know, I mean, and everyone kept saying, “Go to a different bank. Do whatever.”

And I’m like, “I followed the rules. I did what you told me to do, and, actually, it’s a hindrance for me.”

Every person that I knew—maybe not every. Let me say 98 percent of the people that I know that actually had gotten money at that point had left their bank and had gone to a smaller bank who did their loan for them. I didn’t know you could do that. I was told you couldn’t, so I didn’t.

So the update on this is I have gotten my loan. It was no small task to get it. It happened about a week and a half ago, and now I’m going to have to really hunker down and review the rules to this thing, because if you don’t follow them to the letter of the law, none of it is excusable. So that’s where I am now, and with the help of my

accountant that does my taxes, who was in the same boat, he's a sole proprietor, was getting jerked around by his bank. I mean, we would call each other, or, actually, send each other texts, "Did you get your money? Did you get your money?" I mean, we were, like, watching out for each other, and I think that helped. That was the only thing that—I wasn't happy that he hadn't gotten his money or that my friend Stacy hadn't gotten hers, or I could name 100 names of people who have a small business like me, but I felt really alone and then I realized I'm not alone.

Who was alone were sole proprietors. We got completely screwed in this process. When they tell you that a sole proprietorship, a small business, was 200 and below, and then you see publicly traded companies who have 200 or more getting the money designated for small businesses, I mean, it was absolutely crushing, crushing. And people are doing all these sweet, touchy-feely ads about the frontline workers and small businesses are the foundation of our country, and this and that, it's like, "You've got to be kidding me. Not the way that we're being treated." I mean, I know it was all done, I guess done with the best of intentions, but run absolutely—it was like a clown car, okay? It was a circus. And I think it's finally gotten better, but it did not need to be that difficult and confusing and gut-wrenching. It was terrible. It just made a bad situation worse, honestly.

[0:45:32.0]

Michelle Little: I'm so sorry. That's horrible.

[0:45:36.1]

Paula Murphy: Well, I mean, like I said, I'm lucky that I still have some money coming in. I have a job. I mean, like my friend Stefano [phonetic] who cuts my hair, he's a one-man shop. He could not do his work. He was not *allowed* to do his work. I mean, it was worse off for people who could do *nothing*, you know. I mean, every time you think you have it bad, you just really got to like—it could be worse. It really could be. So it's worked out, but I still don't know. It's still not—it's kind of clear as mud in my mind how all this is going to work out, honestly.

[0:46:12.1]

Michelle Little: Right. So how are you feeling as we move into the summer? I mean, what is the current status of your clients there in Houston, and what do you think the summer holds for you and your clients?

[0:46:28.5]

Paula Murphy: Well, the interesting thing has been that—I don't know if it's the same in other states, but you'll hear something in the news, like the mandate, the stay-at-home mandate. Federally, they want you to do this. And then we'll hear from our governor something, and then we hear from the county judge and it's slightly different, and then you hear from the mayor and it's slightly different. It's like do these people not know they also can have a Zoom meeting, that they can also, like, pre-meet and get on the same page? Because it's crazy, Michelle. I mean, you have your governor saying you can open, business is open, you can sell to-go liquor, you can sell wine, you can whatever. Then you have TABC, Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission, coming in and saying, "Oh,

no, wait a minute. Don't forget we need our money." But then the Harris County judge will say, "No, you can open, but only this."

It's been very confusing, I think, for all businesses, but definitely for restaurants. They don't know what they're supposed to do. "We can, we can't. What do we do?"

So the messaging in that has just been—I mean, you've just got to have stuff written and ready to go and hit the button. "Okay. Which option can we send out today? We are open? We are only open for to-go?" I mean, it's been kind of crazy.

So probably two weeks ago, restaurants were allowed to open at 25 percent capacity. That's not much. That's very difficult, especially when you think about that you've had to let your staff go. Most of the staff is probably on Unemployment [Insurance] and they're making pretty good money on Unemployment, but if they got off of Unemployment to go back to work at their job, if something happens and the restaurant can't maintain at 25 percent and they have to be let go, those people cannot reapply for Unemployment. So a lot of restaurants were having trouble to reopen because these people did not want to come back to work, and I don't blame them. I mean, hourly wage for a server is not much. You've got to rely on tips, and if you're at 25 percent capacity, you're not making a whole lot of money.

It's very hard for restaurants and it's very hard for a lot of industries. I'm not saying that, but if you just want to nail it down, I mean, restaurants are so much a part of communities. They employ millions and millions of people around the country. I mean, one restaurant, I mean, that entity impacts farmers, food producers, shippers, the valet company, the guy that washes your napkins. I mean, it's everybody. So we were 25

percent this past week. It went up to 50 percent, so a few more have opened because of that, but it's still a challenge.

And when I talk about this, like, mixed messaging, they had announced on this certain Friday you can open for 50 percent capacity. The day before that, the Harris County judge went on and said, "We are extending the stay-at-home mandate through June 1st."

So now these restaurants who had made the decision to open because we're now at 50 percent, went out, hired the people, did the this, placed their food orders, got their website up, got stuff back up on all the reservations, is now like, "Are you kidding me? Now you're telling people to stay home again?"

So it's really difficult. I mean, I don't know. It's almost like a paintball match. You just have to be there and be ready and dodge, dodge as much as you can and go this way, and you've got to be ready. I mean, the other word, for me, of this COVID-19 thing, "social distancing" is one and the other one is "pivot," and that's all anyone is doing, is pivoting literally hour by hour.

So going into the summer, for restaurants specifically, I don't know. I hope that business will pick up. They're not going to be at 100 percent capacity for quite some time. I mean, I just can't see that happening until there is a vaccine for this. Can most of them make it on 50 percent? I don't really know. And if you live in an area where there's mild temperatures, a lot of people feel more comfortable outdoors, so your patio is kind of key, but if you live in the South, where it's hot, hot, hot, you're not going to seat your patio like you normally would, so you literally have to make it on what you have inside your restaurant. And restaurants are trying to be mindful of not raising their prices,

because people are so impacted by their income and what they can spend, but then meat is more expensive and produce is—there's so many factors to it.

So I think summer's going to be a question mark, kind of, sort of. They're really just going to have to pivot day by day, see what food they can get in. You know, they're paring down their menus. They're still trying to do to-go because some people still don't want to leave home. Some people are listening to that mandate, stay home through June 1st. I don't know if that will be lifted.

And then here comes hurricane season, so that's our next big question mark of restaurants, of what will happen. That also becomes the next big factor that the food bank—I mean, they're already thinking about it. Like we did with the quarantine boxes, every season before hurricanes, they get these disaster boxes ready early. Can we do that? I mean, there's such a limit on product right now. A disaster box is a lot of non-perishable goods. That's the hardest thing to get right now as a food bank. Normally, it's meat and produce, and meat is hard, but canned goods are really hard to get right now, and it's because everybody—not everybody—a lot of people are still in this “stock my pantry” mode. “What if something happens? I have to have reserves at home.” And the hard thing is more and more people are getting this assistance from the food bank at this food drives, but there are people who really literally don't have the money to shop and they *literally* cannot stock their pantries, and if they can't get that food, it'll be disastrous for them.

So summer, I think, is going to be a challenge. The one thing I will say is there are school meal programs all around the country. Kids who get free and reduced meals during school can get free and reduced meals during the summer, but that's mostly for the

kids. That doesn't always address the entire family. So there will be that help, but maybe the demand won't be as high because people are going back to work. But we will see. I don't know, because I know people who are going back to work, but they've been given a mandatory 30 percent drop in pay or stuff like that or their hours are reduced. So, I mean, it's not like you're just going right back necessarily where you were.

So summer will be interesting, I think. [laughs] Just about anything could happen. And if people are not following the distancing rules and we're seeing the numbers going back up, I don't know. I mean, is this just going to be the movie *Groundhog Day*, you know, that we lock down, we do what we do for a little bit, and then we think, "Oh, god, I can leave and I can go out"? I mean, that's honestly what I'm afraid is going to happen. I mean, this Memorial weekend here in town, there were pictures, and they're now going around the country, of this one club downtown here in Houston that has a pool. I mean, there must have been 250 people there packed like lemmings next to one another. I mean, it was absolutely not socially distanced, and it's like—I don't know. So that's another thing that I think we'll have to wait and see for the summer.

[0:55:05.6]

Michelle Little: Yeah. Well, what are you doing personally to stay sane during all this?

[laughs]

[0:55:13.4]

Paula Murphy: I don't know. As weird as it sounds, I kind of have focused a lot on work. Number one, I didn't have a choice to. But I think feeling like, ooh, I'm a small

part of the solution has made me feel better. I literally have to go—I haven't been as good this last week, but I have been taking mental health walks. I mean, there were some days there was no reason I should have left my desk, I had so much to do, but I had to go walk and just focus on something different and just, like, change perspectives.

I work out of my house and I have a dedicated office here at my house, and the unfortunate timing is that my next-door neighbors have been renovating their home since February and a lot of it's happening right outside my office. So my other thing I had to do to keep myself sane was move around my house. [laughs] I always joke if I go work out in my backyard, I call it my satellite office. I've had to do satellite office like every couple of days because I'm trying to get away from the noise of that and not feel like I'm caged in one little space, has kind of helped.

Doing Zoom, as much as we all complain about it and whatever, to be able to do Happy Hour with friends outside of the house has been good. Obviously, texting and whatever with friends. And sometimes at the end of the night, it's just mindless meal—excuse me. Mindless TV. I don't want to think too much about anything. [laughs] And I said mindless meals. I mean, I don't even know. I mean, some of the stuff that I've been eating is absolutely ridiculous, chips and onion dip being at the top of that list. I mean, it's like I think we're all reverting back to things that have some sort of a comfort feel or a very simplistic basic whatever. And, believe it or not, I haven't bought potato chips in years. I have bought a bag of potato chips every week since this damn pandemic started, and, I mean, I don't know.

Oh, and the other thing that I've done—this is so ridiculous, and it's funny how things kind of take on a mind of its own. I don't even remember why I did this, and I'd

have to look back at my photos, but I figured I'm home, I'm not going anywhere, I can wear my workout clothes or I can do whatever, and I put on a silly t-shirt. I don't remember which one it was. It might have been a Rolling Stones shirt. I don't remember. And I made a joke about it that it was my t-shirt of the day, and then I was like, man, I mean, I don't even wear t-shirts, okay? I mean, to the gym, yes. I have two drawers full of t-shirts in there. I have no idea why, where—I don't know how I accrued all these t-shirts. And then I have this friend of mine that used to live here and he lives out of town, he keeps sending me weird t-shirts, weird stuff. I mean, this is before the pandemic.

So that's been one stupid thing that I've done that's been funny, is I've been wearing these t-shirts, and I post a picture of me in these stupid t-shirts. I mean, one of them is Bob Ross painting happy trees in a solar system. I mean, I don't even know—I bought the damn thing for 2.50 on a clearance rack thinking I'd never wear it. I mean, I wore that. So wearing my t-shirts of the day, I actually get texts from people asking me why I don't have a t-shirt on if I have a regular shirt on one day. So I know that's totally ridiculous, but it's been fun. [laughs]

[0:58:55.6]

Michelle Little: I love it. I love your t-shirt posts.

[0:58:58.7]

Paula Murphy: And then now and again, I have to say, gin is my friend, and I do have a gin and tonic after work. [laughs]

[0:59:06.0]

Michelle Little: Amen to that. [laughs]

[0:59:07.8]

Paula Murphy: Not every day, but—

[0:59:11.0]

Michelle Little: Amen.

[0:59:14.3]

Paula Murphy: Well, I don't know.

[0:59:14.3]

Michelle Little: Well, I know we're closing in on an hour, so I know I need to let you go.

[0:59:18.5]

Paula Murphy: Oh, I thought you needed me for two hours. I was just sitting here. I could talk to you all day long.

[0:59:24.4]

Michelle Little: No, we are good. Now, is there anything that we have not talked about that you want to be documented about this time and about what you're going through?

[0:59:38.7]

Paula Murphy: I don't know. I don't know if it's necessarily about anything that I'm going through or it's maybe that everybody's going through. I don't know. I think there's been a lot of positives for this, I think. I live alone, so I'm not quarantined with anybody. I mean, I see people and all that, but I think that families are spending a lot more time together. They might not be thrilled about it [laughter], but I think, overall, that they are. Again, when I satellite office and I come in my front room—and I've been staying up here a lot more. I live not far from downtown, I mean not right near downtown, but I'm what's called inside the Loop. I live in Montrose, which is kind of a hip area of town, and I live in a neighborhood that has a lot of old bungalows, but we don't have, necessarily, a lot of kids. And people don't normally walk up and down my street. I don't know why. It's a very quiet street. I'm one block off of a main street, but you wouldn't know that. It's pretty quiet. But it's really interesting, I think people are exploring their neighborhood more. They're actually getting out and walking here, where they wouldn't—normally, they would drive to, like, Memorial Park and do that there. I've seen a lot of strollers, so it mean they've come from other blocks.

A lot of people that know have adopted dogs, either permanently adopted or gotten a rescue dog. So I think there's, like, been some going back to the basics on things. I think some people have really had to do some overhauling of their expenses and really getting down to “This is frivolous and this is not,” which is probably something we all could and should do on a regular basis anyway. But I do think that there's been some of that.

These restaurants, in trying to get open, they've had to pare things down and simplify, because there are a lot of complicated things that have to happen, and I think even in some of the work that I've had to do, I mean, it's like—not that a restaurant press release is necessarily a J.R.R. Tolkien-length novel kind of thing, but right now it's like simplify it, condense things down, just the nuts and bolts and whatever. I think there's a lot of that. I think simplifying things has been something people have had to do, and I think it's something that this situation has forced us to do, and maybe we will all benefit from that.

I don't know. I'm just trying to think of what else. I think you appreciate things more. You think, "Ah, I should have done that, because now I can't go out and do that. That trip I wanted to do, I was supposed to go on, I didn't," you know. There's some regret on some things. I don't know. I can't think of anything else major other than just there is some meaningful work that all of us have done during this, as small as it may seem, but I think it is making a difference, and teamwork is a big thing.

And I'll tell you the other thing is community, especially you think about restaurants. Every nonprofit in town always asks restaurants for gift cards for their fundraisers and this and that, and you never know if you're going to see these people again, and oftentimes you don't. But that was one thing, like, a lot of people said, "Hey, if you've ever asked somebody for a gift card, you need to go out there now and get to-go food or you need to go on their website and buy a gift card for when they reopen, and if they don't reopen, don't worry about it." But that, I think the restaurants have seen that in the people they've donated to, the customers that have been coming to see them. They have felt community. As they have been closed and relying on to-go and things like that,

it's that community that they've worked so hard to build came to their—I'm not going to say rescue, but came to their support during this time. Restaurants are supporting one another in figuring out how to do things and sharing ideas. I mean, they have text things going. There are people coming together to help feed the restaurant community workers who are not working. At the food bank, it's all about community.

So I think that's another big word. I think it's "socially distance," "pivot," and "community," are the three words that I'm taking away from this damn COVID-19, that and the "COVID-20," because that's the weight that we're all putting on, is the COVID-20, from all the snacking that we're doing to relieve our stress. [laughter]

[1:04:45.1]

Michelle Little: Isn't that the truth.

[1:04:49.6]

Paula Murphy: My lord. It's got nothing on—what was it, the college fifteen?

[1:04:52.4]

Michelle Little: Right, freshman fifteen.

[1:04:55.3]

Paula Murphy: Freshman fifteen. There you go. It's the COVID-20 officially. [laughter]

[1:04:59.2]

Michelle Little: Oh, that's wonderful. Well, I think those are all the questions—because we're trying to keep these to about forty-five minutes to an hour because we know everyone is working so many more hours. So I'm going to go ahead and stop recording, but don't hang up just yet, because I want to make sure we're downloading correctly.

[End of interview]