

Interview of: Paula Murphy
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Interview Date: April 16, 2021



Paula Murphy
Patterson and Murphy Public Relations

Date: April 16, 2021
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Interviewer: Michelle Little
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Length: Seventy-eight minutes
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Michelle Little: Okay. This is Michelle Little, and I'm here with Paula Murphy, and today is April the 16th of 2021. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance COVID-19 Project. Just like I was saying a minute ago, this is the second of our interviews, but you and I have not talked since May 26th of 2020—

[00:00:31]

Paula Murphy: Wow!

[00:00:31]

Michelle Little: —was when I interviewed you for the first time, and I fully expect this round of interviews to be disorganized, rambling, just because I think that's our state of mind. [laughter]

[00:00:47]

Paula Murphy: You got that right.

[00:00:49]

Michelle Little: All of us are having trouble, you know, kind of keeping on track. So, I think to start out with, I was looking back through your transcript from last time, and where we left off, you were dealing with kind of as the city and the state were trying to figure out, like, ways to move forward through the summer, there were sort of some

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differing regulations amongst, like, the county and the city and the state. Do you remember how some of that played out for you during the summer?

[00:01:25]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, I mean, I can't give you specifics with dates and things like that. It did a little bit of that kind of back-and-forth, it felt like, for a little bit, and then it kind of settled into places being at 50 percent, you know, obviously to going really big for the restaurant clients, and then allowing wine and spirits to-go from the restaurants, which was a huge deal and a big bottom-line helper and saver for a lot of restaurants. But that's really kind of where we stayed for the most of, I would say, end of summer, fall, and into winter.

And even when it felt like or it was announced that, "Hey, you know, if you want to up those numbers a little bit, you know," wink, wink, "no one's really gonna say anything." The majority of restaurants that I work and the majority of people that I know, they still felt more comfortable with that 50 percent, you know. At that point, it wasn't like, you know, "Hey, let's just throw the doors open so we can make a bunch of money." They really were concerned for the health of themselves, you know, and their employees and their customers.

So, we here in Texas, our governor announced maybe a month or two ago—I mean, I'm losing track of time on that, but said Texas is open for business, and essentially flung the doors open, and it's, you know, accepted by some and not by others. Most of my restaurant clients have opted to stay at that 50 to 75 percent and all are requiring masks. So, what the governor said is everyone can be open at 100 percent,

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masks are not required unless a business—a business can choose, you know, to require it, but, in general, if you're out in the public, if you're out in the world, you don't have to wear a mask. Well, the majority of places are still saying, "We want you to wear a mask."

Thankfully—knock on wood—for my clients, that's been okay. They've not had a lot of pushback from people on that. There's been a few grumbles and [demonstrates], "I don't want to—what's the big deal if I have to wear it from the door to here, but then I can take it off?" And it's like, "Because that's what we say." [laughter] "You want to eat this tamale, you wear your mask in and out the door." And people just at that point usually—you know. It's different than you see some grocery stores, I think, having more angry people, but—knock on wood—my restaurant clients have been okay, but that's kind of where they are.

So that's where Texas is right now in April of 2021. We're open for business, and a lot of people are choosing to still do so cautiously. You know, and for restaurants, I mean for a lot of businesses, but for restaurants, you know, a lot of the workers in restaurants don't have healthcare. If they were to get sick, they will not be able to go to a doctor. So that's why, you know, they and then the owners of these restaurants, I think, are choosing to try to be careful, is to help take care of them. They don't have that added luxury. I'm not saying, you know, there's not maybe a whole lot you can do once you get COVID. I mean, you kind of got to ride it and hope you don't have to go to the hospital. I mean, I know a lot of people who've gotten sick and just dealt with it at home. But if these individuals were to get very sick, it could be *very* problematic, so I think that's the decision-maker here in Houston or in Texas. I can only speak to Houston. I can't say Texas.

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But there has been a lot of movement lately for, like, the Greater Houston Restaurant Association recently had a vaccination day just for restaurant workers. It was not publicly posted so that other people, you know, outside the industry could sign up. It was very much a, you know, “Text it to your friends in the industry” kind of thing. So, there are some of those things happening, which is good, trying to target—you know, here we have frontline workers in hospitals and all that have already gotten their shots. These people are also frontline workers, just a different industry. So, it is important to get them taken care of, so I’m happy about that.

[00:06:10]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that’s a great—that’s a great movement.

[00:06:13]

Paula Murphy: Yeah.

[00:06:15]

Michelle Little: You know, so once the gates sort of flung back open recently, has your work increased? You know, how has your workflow ebbed and flowed during the last year?

[00:06:33]

Paula Murphy: If I could show you a chart [laughter], from the beginning of COVID, it’d be a needle down, a needle immediately up, and that needle has just stayed up. It has

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not—it maybe blipped down one little micro thing, you know, kind of like a heartbeat [laughter], then no major drop. It has been—again, because I work with restaurants, but I also work with the Houston Food Bank, going into COVID, it was immediate disaster mode. It never stopped being disaster mode. It just stayed at this ultra high level.

And then with the restaurants being—you know, at the beginning of COVID, you know, they're totally closed for dine-in business, it's only to-go, it was like so much messaging at the beginning to try to get people to understand we are doing it or we are not, this is how we're doing it, this is, you know, what we have. I mean, it was constant changing of websites and social media and press releases.

So, you know, as the year ended last year, I would say things calmed down a bit. I mean, it wasn't like your pants were on fire at every minute [laughs], but it didn't stop, and that was due to the fact that, okay, now we do have more business, so we're open a little bit more. We can get back to doing a little bit more of our menu, because a lot of people were working with shortened menus because they had less staff. I mean, there's a multitude of reasons. But it wasn't the same holiday season with crazy catering and private events in restaurants, but it was a lot of smaller ones. Anyway, this is all to say it has stayed fairly high.

Now with the new year, it did, I'd say, drop just slightly, but then here in Texas we had a lovely thing called Winter Storm Uri that froze the state [laughs], and, you know, everybody was completely unprepared or not as prepared as they should be, and, you know, the Houston Food Bank had, I told you last year, had gone to, in 2019, distributing about 400,000 pounds of food per day, it immediately jumped in COVID to 800,000 a day, then went to a million pounds a day, stayed at that for months and months

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and months [laughs], slightly dropped near the end of the year, because people were starting to go back to work. So that was a—but then the freeze came and up we went, right back up to the 800, 900, and a million pounds a day. So, it's just like can we get a break here? I mean, it's like what— [laughs]

So that was a whole 'nother stream of busyness, you know, so it was like some of the messaging for COVID was able to not be as intense—BOOM! We were right back up there again. So, it's calmed down slightly, but I'm not going to say it has slowed down much. Things feel going at a little better clip [laughs] rather than a bear's chasing you through the woods kind of feeling, what it did during last year. [Little laughs.] So—

[00:10:04]

Michelle Little: Oh, my goodness. Yeah, the winter storm, I had a note to ask you about that, because, I mean, we can't not talk about that, that was such a major event for Texas.

[00:10:20]

Paula Murphy: It's been ridiculous and so unnecessary and so—it's confusing. It's like Houston, Texas is the energy capital of the world, and half of the city has no power? [laughs] I mean, I just—and I understand we're built for Category 5 hurricanes, we're not necessarily built for freezes, but, I mean, you know, it was simultaneously infuriating and embarrassing. [laughs] I mean really. And then, I mean, you know, here we are, you know, it's the 16th. What are we now, two months away from that? And there are still people that don't have water.

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[00:11:04]

Michelle Little: In Houston?

[00:11:04]

Paula Murphy: There are low-income-housing places that still do not have their water back and/or—I mean, there’s a problem. [laughs] And this thing has definitely shone a light on some of the problems. I mean, it’s totally ridiculous.

[00:11:23]

Michelle Little: Oh, my god.

[00:11:23]

Paula Murphy: [glitch in recording] stressful time. I mean, I’m lucky that, you know, I have a roof over my head and had places that I could go. I did lose my power on Monday. So, the storm first started coming in, like, on Sunday and then into Sunday night, and I had power through about 11:00 o’clock on Monday, and it came on and off a couple of times. It was okay, it was fine. I stayed in here with no power, you know, no whatever, and I thought, oh, it’ll be back on the next day. Where I live, I’m not that far from a firehouse, and usually—I think I’m on the same power grid as them, so usually, like during hurricanes and that, it pops on fairly quickly, but it did not this time.

So, I mean, it wasn’t horrible, but it was cold. When I woke up that Tuesday morning, it was 40 degrees in my house. You could see your breath. And I thought, “Wow! That’s kind of cold.” [laughter] [glitch in recording] Michigan. I’ve been here

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thirty-something years now, but it's like, "My blood might have thinned. I'm a little cold." And I prepared a bowl of cereal and pulled off a banana, and I went out in my car to charge my phone, because I had no other way to do it, so I had breakfast in the front seat of my car that had heat warmers and charged my phone up [laughs] and found a place that I could go, because I needed to work. I didn't have Internet. So, you know, here we are, when something like this happens again, Food Bank is in disaster mode. So, I had to get somewhere where I could now be pumping out the message, "We're adding these distributions. You can go here. These warming sites are getting water and food," you know, so those type of things. So, yeah, it just, you know, added another [laughs] fun chapter to the story.

[00:13:21]

Michelle Little: Right. So how many days was your neighborhood without power?

[00:13:26]

Paula Murphy: So, my neighborhood was—I guess my power came back on on Wednesday, late Wednesday. I ended up just staying at my friend's house because the Internet was really spotty. I wouldn't have been able to do work. But also, you know, I covered all my pipes, I put the little coverings over the spigots, and, you know, I just thought, "Hey, I'm smart." I let one of my faucets just barely drip so nothing would freeze, took the hoses off the spigots so that wouldn't freeze. I mean, I undid my fountain in my backyard. I mean, I thought I was prepared.

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And I get a text message from my neighbor. He said, “Hey, I was walking down the driveway and I hear water flowing, and I kind of looked through the fence, and there’s water spewing out over your electrical panel.” And I thought, “You have got to be kidding me.” And I didn’t even—immediately it didn’t even click to me, but I thought, “Oh, my god.”

So, my friend had picked me up. I had left my car here, so she and her fiancé drove me back over here, and then I realized—I mean, I thought I was going to pull up and see fireworks coming out of my house, you know? But it turned out it was not the electrical panel; it was my water heater that is on the exterior of my home. So at least it wasn’t getting into my electrical panel. But I covered all the pipes below and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, but it was one of the pipes inside the water heater busted, and that’s when the water came back on, that’s when it started flowing out of that.

So, I mean, I’m lucky, because that was it. I mean, all I did is I took a quick video, I texted it to my plumber, and all I said was, “Can you order me a new hot water heater?” He said yes, and I said, “You don’t even have to give me a date. Just put me on your list.” So, I got lucky, because he was able to come. That was Thursday. He was able to come to my house on Monday, on Monday. So, I had no hot water for a few days, but that’s not that bad, you know. And I had places that I could go. But the power was back on, the Internet was back on. It just took a few days, you know, for that.

[00:15:53]

Michelle Little: Okay. Wow. And so, yeah, so that was a huge event for the Food Bank.

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[00:15:58]

Paula Murphy: Yes.

[00:16:00]

Michelle Little: I mean, you guys had a lot, a lot going on, and you had—did I see that the president even came?

[00:16:08]

Paula Murphy: Yes.

[00:16:09]

Michelle Little: Yes? Let's talk about that. [laughs]

[00:16:12]

Paula Murphy: That's been interesting. So, before I talk about that, because I think this other event plays into it, I would have to look back in my computer, but AOC, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is friendly with one of our representatives from Texas, Sylvia Garcia. Sylvia Garcia's a good friend to the Food Bank. We work—I won't say we work on policies together, but she is an advocate of the Food Bank. We've done food drives together here, you know, things like that. Well, when the storm happened and all these people were without water and power, you know, for multiple days, some people weeks, and, as I said, there's even some people *still* dealing with this, they started raising money for Texas, for Food Banks in Texas.

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Now, Sylvia Garcia, obviously, lives here, AOC does not, but really just put the pedal to the metal and started raising money. So, they said that she wanted to come, too, to Houston. She may have gone to other cities afterwards, but she came to Houston first, came to the Food Bank, and we did a press conference. She worked a volunteer shift. But they raised \$5 million for the Food Banks in Texas to be able to get additional water and food and, you know, emergency supplies.

And I'm not a political person. I just want to bring this up. This was also at the time the freeze happened, and this is when Ted Cruz was all over the news, spotted in the airport and on the airplane going to Cancun with his family, while constituents were left here freezing their tails off. So just to mention that [laughter], because I think that made the visit and what they were doing even more meaningful and, like, eye-opening to people, like, "Okay, we have a problem here, and thank God somebody's looking out for us." So, I just say that to say that—and that was a big press conference that I worked on, you know, welcoming her here and sending out all the information about that.

So then about a week or so goes by, and we're starting to hear that the president might be coming to Houston and mainly to see vaccination centers and how that's happening, but I think also because of the freeze, because that got so much play in the media, and it's just like, you know, we can't catch a break, is what it feels like, you know. [laughs] COVID, hurricane season, this, I mean, it's been one thing after another.

And so, anyway, I was at a—we had a *Today Show* shoot, and the mayor was also there, so I was talking with his media person, and she said, "Hey, I heard the president might be coming."

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I said, “Yeah, I heard some—.” In the news, they were kind of rumbling about it.
I said, “I kind of heard that.”

And she goes, “I’ve even had people from D.C. contacting me, asking me if I know.”

I said, “Well, that’s interesting.”

So, anyway, that was a Sunday. I said, “Do you know anybody to contact?”

She said, “No, I really don’t.”

Anyway, so Monday morning I woke up and I was like, “What do I have to lose? Like, no big deal.” So, I Googled the phone number for the White House and I called the White House, and I said, “Can I have the number for the Scheduling Department?”

And they transferred me to a phone number that had a recording, and it said, “If you want to make a request of a visit,” blah, blah, blah, “for the POTUS, you email this address. For the FLOTUS, you email this address. For the VP—,” you know, goes on down the line. So, I was like, “Eh, whatever.” So I sent an email to this email address on the recording and just said, “We’re hearing that there might be a possibility that the president will be coming to visit Houston, and I’m sure the schedule is already set, there’s many things to do, but I just want to put it out there that if you’re here to talk about COVID and you’re here to talk about winter storm, it cannot go without mentioning and recognition the work that the Houston Food Bank has done. I would like to invite you to come visit, if at all possible.” And I just put a few things. I mean, the numbers speak for themselves, and I have a stat that I want to share with you. But I said, “The poundage of food that was distributed, the counties that we cover,” I mean, it wasn’t really that long. It sounds like a longer email than it was. But I said, you know, “They’re

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a client of mine for twenty-one years, but they're also a charity that I have supported previous to that. I give my personal money to that, my personal volunteer time."

So, anyway, and I hit "send," and then I was texting with the head of the Food Bank because we had another media interview that day, so I was confirming the appointment with them. And I even said to them—I think it's in there, still in there, it's still in my phone. I said, "You're going to think I'm crazy, but I just sent an email to the president to invite him to the Food Bank if he comes to Houston." [Little laughs.]

And his reply back to me was, "Good luck with that." [Little laughs.]

I thought, "Okay." I go, "Well, what do I have to lose?" So, we were kind of laughing about it.

So, two, three hours later, I go to the Food Bank, we're doing this interview, you know, inside the building, and he finishes up. They have a live segment and this and that, and we were there for about an hour. His name is Brian Greene. He's the president and CEO of the Food Bank. He looks at me and he says, "Paula, come here." He kind of waves me over with his finger.

And I said, "Uh-oh. What did I do wrong?" Like, joking around.

He's like, "Come here." He's waving his finger. We've got masks on, so I can only see his eyes, and he's waving his finger at me.

I said, "This is like getting called into the principal's office. What's going on?"

He was like, "Would you just come here? I need talk to you." So, he pulls me over totally to the side, and his eyebrows lift and his eyes get really big, and he said, "I got a call from the White House that the president wants to come visit."

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[00:22:52]

Michelle Little: Oh, my goodness.

[00:22:52]

Paula Murphy: Is it only because I sent the email? No. I mean, was it just me? No, probably not. Would I like to say that email had something to do with it? Yes. [laughs] But I don't know for sure, but it has to be, you know, being in the news and partially the AOC thing and, you know, we have worked *so* hard to get the message out about what Houston Food Bank has been doing during all of this, and we've had lots of local, regional, international, national coverage. So that was probably part of it, too, but I just have to say with a small little point of pride that I did email, and he was like—could not believe it. It was like three hours after, I would say, maybe three or four hours after, and he just couldn't believe it.

[00:23:37]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[00:23:37]

Paula Murphy: So, anyway, it was a really, a really big deal.

[00:23:40]

Michelle Little: Yes!

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[00:23:42]

Paula Murphy: So that was a whole ‘nother thing, and a good thing, but that was another big project, you know, working on how do you plan for something and try to get people to come for something, but you’re not allowed to tell them why they’re coming. [laughs] So one of my jobs to do was to get some clients there who had received food from the Food Bank, and to be able to say why this food was important to them. And it’s hard to call somebody up and say, “Hey, can you come to the Food Bank [chuckles] tomorrow?” Or Thursday, whenever I’m calling, “We’re having a big event.”

“Oh, really? What’s going on?”

“Well, I can’t tell you, but we have a VIP coming.”

“Okay.”

“But then the thing is you have to be here—the event is not until 1:00, but you have to be here by 2:00, excuse me, have to be here by 10 a.m. because of security and sweeping and all that kind of stuff. Oh, the other thing is you also have to have a negative COVID test within twenty-four hours of being here.” So, it was one of these, like, “Can you come today? We’ll give you a COVID test. And then can you come back tomorrow and basically spend your whole day here? But I can’t tell you why you’re coming. I mean, I can tell you that I want you to be here because you’re a client and you’re the whole reason we do what we do, and we want you to be able to talk about that if someone asks you about that.”

“Well, who’s going to ask me about that?” they would say.

“Well, I can’t tell you.” [Little laughs.] I mean, it was so cloak-and-dagger, you know. I mean, it was crazy.

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But in the end, it all worked out, but, I mean, we had to—unless you were an essential, essential worker of the Food Bank, like you were pulling product from the warehouse or you were a driver or you were a volunteer, I mean, there were volunteers there working and all that. We had to limit the number of people that would be in the building. Everybody had, you know, security checks. There were multiple security sweeps in the building. I mean, I went around the corner at one point to go to the bathroom, and there's, like, a person in a bomb suit, I mean like full-on—you know, it's like, "Okay, this is really serious." [laughs]

[00:26:00]

Michelle Little: Wow!

[00:26:00]

Paula Murphy: And the thought that I had when I'm in the middle of this, it's like they have to do this for every visit that he makes. Like, I cannot even imagine. I mean, the level of coordination and accuracy and care, I mean, it was just unbelievable.

[00:26:00]

Michelle Little: Wow!

[00:26:21]

Paula Murphy: But in the end, it was a big deal because it really did feel like, you know—and the Houston Food Bank didn't take it like this is just for the Houston Food

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Bank; it's like we want you to understand what Food Banks do, and they're in every community, and this is why they are essential to every community, because we're in an unprecedented time where unbelievable and unprecedented things are happening, and you have to know that there's someone there that can help. And in order for us to help, there needs to also be the help behind it, and, you know, legislation for some of these things is very important. We rely on the community, but there's certain things that have to come from, you know, from legislation.

So, it was a really great visit. I didn't get to—I really didn't get to meet the president, as in I didn't get introduced to he or the first lady. She was there as well. But the damndest thing happened [laughs], and there's a long story behind it that I'm not going to bore you with, but we were not allowed—we were told we were not allowed to take pictures, that they have a photographer and that they would provide us with some photos. We requested one photo opportunity, and that was we wanted to have one of our marketing and communications team members to be outside the building when they were leaving, when the motorcade was leaving. They wanted the picture of the Food Bank employees that were there and the volunteers, because there were some volunteers, to be able to line up with signs saying, “Thank you for coming,” you know, that kind of stuff, and waving goodbye.

So, they initially had said, “Yes, you can do that.” Day of, for some reason, they changed their mind and said no. But since they had said yes, we brought a staff member in from the marketing and communications team, and we also brought in a photographer friend of ours. One was going to get the shot from one angle, and one was going to get it from another. Then they said we couldn't do it.

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So, the lady from the White House that I was working with said, “Well, I saw the girl show up with a camera.”

I said, “Yeah, that was for the shot that y’all said we couldn’t do.”

She goes, “Oh, I wondered if you were thinking you wanted her to be in the photo pool.”

So, the first lady was coming first, and she was going to be there about an hour and a half before the president came, so there was a local media pool that was going to be, like, the pool cameras for any local media and any other media. So, there was one TV camera, NBC affiliate and reporter, the *Houston Chronicle* photographer was there, there was one TV station social media editor, there was a Spanish speaker, so that way they were the pool media, so because we couldn’t have everybody. So, if any local TV wanted anything, they were getting NBC's feed. If any local media wanted photos or regional media, they could get it from the *Chronicle*.

So, I said, “Well, I mean, we weren’t planning for her to be in the media pool, but if she can be, that’d be great.”

She said, “Doesn’t hurt asking.”

So I go, “Okay.”

So, the next thing I know, she says, “Yes, they will allow your person to be in the media pool.”

It’s like, “Great!” So, her name is Maggie. So, we tell Maggie, yes, she’s in. Great, great, great.

But then they said, “Well, wait a minute. Has she had a COVID test within the last twenty-four hours?” And she had not. And myself and one other person had been

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there the day before, and we went ahead and got one because we were there, you know.

So, I got one.

So, they're like, "Well, someone can be in the pool, but they have to have this—."

So, then I look at the professional photographer that we had asked to come. He didn't have one, so he couldn't do it. And I didn't have my camera with me. Maggie has her camera. Okay. So now Maggie's there. Well, Maggie goes out to get something and tries to come back in the building, and she's locked out because they're security sweeping the front of the building.

So now they're telling me—so now we've decided I'm going to be in the White House media pool [Little laughs] and I have to use Maggie's camera that I don't know anything about [Little laughs], and she's stuck outside, and they've now texted me and said, "You have to come down right now with your camera to leave it in this room so we can security sweep."

I'm like, "What?" [Little laughs.]

So, I look at this professional photographer friend of mine that we brought in, and I'm like, "I need you to set this camera on the most basic generic setting for successful photos. I'm going to be in a warehouse." [demonstrates]

I run it downstairs, I leave it, you know. Anyway, there's more to it, but that's the bottom line of it.

But next thing I know, I am in the media pool with the local media and I'm like—I don't know. I mean, to start with, I'm about ten feet away from the first lady when she shows up, and everybody was—it was cute, because everybody was really quiet, you

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know. [Little laughs.] She walked up. Nobody's saying anything. And then somebody in the pool goes, "Are we allowed to say hello to the first lady?" [Little laughs.]

And she says, "Yes, please. Somebody talk to me." [Little laughs.] I mean, she was great and personable, you know, and somebody was paying attention because she showed up in Houston Food Bank green. I mean her jacket was green. It was like, okay, good call on that one.

So, I got to follow them around as she went to different places and she learned about the different programs. They had told us in advance she did specifically want to hear about child hunger and our efforts with that, so we told them about our Backpack Buddy program and our Kids Café program. She went back in one of the volunteer areas and packed some of those bags. Then we went into another room to talk about senior hunger, and there were volunteers packing senior boxes, so we were able to talk about that. So that was our media pool, our little, you know, local network.

So, then they said, "Okay, the president is coming. Now we're going to go take you guys outside and you're going to be joined by his media pool."

I mean, this is my first rodeo on this one. [Little laughs.] The *Chronicle* photographer's a friend of mine, so I'm looking at him like, "Brett, what's going to happen?"

He goes, "Okay, a *whole* bunch of people are going to come running towards—I mean, there's a lot of them and they travel with him, and they're the bigwigs." And he goes, "We're second level, you know, to them," whatever.

I'm like, "Oh, okay." And when I'm telling you we're outside and we're waiting and we're hearing the Secret Service, you know, talking into their wrists and their collar

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[Little laughs], you know, like, “Eight minutes, seven minutes,” whatever, and then here comes the motorcade, and I don’t even know. It seemed like there was fifty cars in this thing. There was limos, limos, huge, you know, SUVs. There was an ambulance, there was a tow truck, there was everything possible [Little laughs] so that if something went wrong, they were ready. I mean, it was crazy.

So, sure enough, you know, they pull up and these just media cameras just start charging towards us, and I was like, “Oh, my god. You were not kidding. They’re running.” [laughs]

And they’re like, “Oh, yeah, we all have to go hurry and get in place, first stop,” you know, blah, blah, blah.

So, anyway, now we go up the stairs and we’re in the warehouse, so I know what the tour thing was going to be because I was in those planning meetings, no idea that I was going to be on this tour, and so now we’re, like, going down the aisle, and Brett’s like, “Where are we going?”

I’m like, “Oh, we’re going to Aisle 12,” you know. [Little laughs.] And he’s looking at me because he didn’t know what this happened.

Anyway, so we get in place, and, sure enough, it’s like, you know, you’ve got *AP* and *New York Times* and, you know, they’re all there and we’re behind, and here I am with my—I mean, I can’t even see. I mean, I’m 5’5”. I’ve got these 6’2” people—I’m just holding my camera up [Little laughs] and my cell phone. But I actually got some good photos, I mean.

So, anyway, we did that, and then it was like, “Okay, push back, push back, next stop.”

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And I'm like, "I know where we're going."

So, it was interesting to be in there, because these photographers and some were reporters, but mostly photographers, they're looking around, they're like, "Man, this place is *awesome!* Like, how big is this place?"

I'm like, "The Houston Food Bank is 46,000 feet [glitch in recording]."

[00:34:56]

Michelle Little: "Let me tell ya." [laughs]

[00:34:57]

Paula Murphy: Like, immediately go into PR mode, like it's just like coming out of my head, and they are kind of looking at me like, "Okay."

But we just keep walking, you know. So, we get into what we call the Carousel Room, which is one of our main volunteer areas, and it's a very cool space where there are carousels suspended from the ceiling and they move in a snakelike pattern through this volunteer space. So, this is the first time this has ever been used in a Food Bank. They're normally used in, like, car plants, automation plants. So, like it'll come from the warehouse with food on it, unsorted food from food drives and things like that, and the volunteers will pull it off, put it on their workstation, work it, you know, divide it, then they put it on a different shelf as the things constantly go by, and it goes back in the warehouse, divided, so that they can put it the same way.

So, this is where volunteers were going to be, but also some of these clients that I had called to bring in were going to be, and the president was going to speak with all of

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them. So, I knew where they were going, and so these photographers are all looking around, and then the White House announces, “Okay, you can line up in an L-formation between this point and this point,” so I’m looking at my buddy Brett from the *Houston Chronicle*, and I’m like, “Well, the president is going to go right there.”

And he’s like, “How do you know this?”

I’m like, “Just—he’s gonna go right there.”

So, this photographer, other photographer overhears us, and he’s, like, looking at me. I go, “I work with the Food Bank. I’m sorry.” You know what I mean? [unclear]. But I said, “This is what’s gonna happen,” and dah, dah, dah, dah. So, I was able to, like, go—I kind of went in my PR mode of setting people up for the best shot, and “Hey, we need to move this,” you know. Anyway, it was hilarious, and it worked out. But, I mean, at one point, I mean, I was a foot, two feet away from the president.

[00:36:58]

Michelle Little: [unclear].

[00:36:59]

Paula Murphy: So, I didn’t get to meet him, but I felt like I got to meet him. And at one point, I was looking through my camera viewfinder, you know, focusing up for a photo, and he just turned and made, like, direct eye contact into my camera, and, I mean, I almost jumped. I mean, it was just like, “Ah!” you know. Anyway, I have a picture of, like, that exact moment. But it was very cool. And he spoke with some young kids and grandparents and volunteers and, you know, went down the line, and everybody was

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masked, and everybody had been tested. Anybody that came in close contact had to have a negative test. But it was a really cool experience.

One thing that, you know, that touched me, it's like, you know, you see these people on TV and then you see them in person and it's kind of a different thing, but you think of them in their work life, and sometimes when you get a glimpse of their personal life, it's very kind of impactful.

So, one of the ladies who's a longtime volunteer of ours was there, and when he walked up to her, first of all, she threw an elbow up to him to do an elbow bump, and I thought, "Ah, she's gonna get tackled! What is she doing?" [Little laughs.] Like, Secret Service is everywhere. And Biden just walked up and elbow-pumped her and, you know, was talking. And one of the things she said to him—and I'm literally like two feet away from them, taking pictures of this and can hear everything, but she said, "You know, I'm a longtime volunteer and I'm an Apple Core leader," which means she's a dedicated volunteer that gives almost like a full-time job per week of hours to the Food Bank. But she said, "Before I worked here, I worked at MD Anderson and I know, you know, that MD Anderson—," and the minute that she said that his eyes started tearing up. And she said, "I know that that was a special place for your son Beau."

And he just—I mean, a tear came out, and he said, "Most of the reasons that I've been to Houston in the past was to come to MD Anderson, and it definitely holds, you know, a special place for me." I mean, that was just—I felt it was, like, a very personal, tender moment, you know. We all have our day jobs [laughs], but, you know, it's nice to see a personal side to somebody as well.

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So, anyway, everybody felt very honored. They asked a lot of questions. It wasn't just going through the motions. There was a lot of "How is the USDA helping? Where does this stuff come from? How does this get out? What are *you* noticing? What are *you* most concerned about? What are *you* fearful of?" You know? So that felt good. I mean, it was definitely not just a "Hey, stand to get my picture taken." Obviously, there was a lot of that going on, but it felt like it was at least partially a fact-finding mission, so that was good.

So, the Food Bank's had a big twelve months, sixteen or however many months. I mean, this started in March of last year? So, a big thirteen months overall. [laughs]

[00:40:13]

Michelle Little: Wow. What an amazing event.

[00:40:17]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, it was something, you know, and I know we're divided politically in this state and in this country, but for me, this had nothing to do with politics. This has nothing to do with the fact that it was Biden and not Trump. I mean, if I had heard Trump was coming on this, I would have emailed him, too, because I am so proud of the Houston Food Bank and what they have accomplished. It's unbelievable.

So, I wrote a stat down that I wanted to give you.

[00:40:48]

Michelle Little: Yeah!

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[00:40:48]

Paula Murphy: So, on March 1st of 2020 to March 31st of 2021, the Houston Food Bank has distributed 297,980,183 pounds of food.

[00:41:05]

Michelle Little: Oh, my goodness! That's, like, incomprehensible (sic).

[00:41:10]

Paula Murphy: It's literally—literally. And that is why I called the president. [laughs]

[00:41:15]

Michelle Little: Yes! [laughs]

[00:41:18]

Paula Murphy: Because I don't know that another Food Bank has done more. I really don't. I really, really don't. I mean, I'd have to call and get the stats, and we could get them from the other ones, but this was—again, this wasn't about political party. I even had to say it to some family members, you know. It's like, “No, this is about the leader of our country acknowledging the hard work of an organization that serves the community.”

[00:41:43]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:41:45]

Paula Murphy: In the worst time—hopefully, we don't have another. [laughter] This won out. So that was the kind of inspiration for that. I wanted them to get notoriety. Noted. Not notoriety. Take that—strike that. The word is recognition. I wanted them to get a pat on the back.

[00:42:06]

Michelle Little: Yes! Absolutely! Oh, my goodness! And the fact that they, you know, asked so many questions and y'all were able to, like, give your view and what all you're dealing with on the ground there, that's *so* important.

[00:42:20]

Paula Murphy: And Brian Greene, who's the head of the Houston Food Bank, I mean, I just can't say enough good things about him. I think he was probably the perfect person for this, because I'm not going to say he doesn't understand the impact and the importance of this, because he does, and I'm sure maybe inside he was just like a quivering bowl of Jell-O, but you'll never know that, but he understood what a big deal this was, and it wasn't like "I this," "I this." It was "we, we, we." And, you know, he boasted about his staff, you know. He boasted about our partner agencies. I mean, he's very much a big picture about no one does anything in a vacuum, no one, and we have not done this in a vacuum, and we're learning as we go, but, you know, he doesn't get—really not even star-struck. I was going to say he doesn't get overly star-struck, but I

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don't even know that he gets star-struck. But he just speaks so well and calmly and gets right to the point, and I think he was able to get across a lot of messages in a short period of time.

But they had told us they may only be there forty-five minutes, and when you think of days and days of preparation for a forty-five-minute visit, it just blows my mind. [laughs] And in the end, they were probably there almost double that, because they were asking questions. They took pictures with some volunteers, not everybody. I mean, they had a schedule they had to keep. They did go to the vaccination center at NRG Stadium after the visit at the Food Bank. But the president had stopped at, like, an emergency command center before the Food Bank, and the governor was there, and then he came to the Food Bank, went to the vaccine distribution, and then left. So, to be one of three stops, pretty—I mean, we're feeling pretty honored about that.

[00:44:20]

Michelle Little: Yes! Yeah.

[00:44:21]

Paula Murphy: There ya go. [Little laughs.] It was an interesting chapter. And I still have my White House media pool badge, because I'm like that's never gonna happen.

[00:44:32]

Michelle Little: Yeah, you got to frame that.

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[00:44:34]

Paula Murphy: [glitch in recording]. I mean, that was the most random thing ever to happen.

[00:44:40]

Michelle Little: Oh, that's *so* exciting.

[00:44:43]

Paula Murphy: But then afterwards, I have to say when we're in that room and I'm telling this other photographer, "Go there and go there and go there," he goes, "I don't know who you are, but I like you." [laughter] And he was the guy from the *Associated Press*, and it was his photo that ran the next day on the cover of *The New York Times*.

[00:44:43]

Michelle Little: Oh!

[00:45:03]

Paula Murphy: And it was funny, because there were these boxes up on the shelf, and I was like—the girl standing there, I was like, "Serene [phonetic]! Move that, move that!" [laughs] It's like, thank god, because he got a shot with the little kids that were very short. Anyway. So, it was fun. [Little laughs.] But, you know, everything in COVID has not been bad.

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[00:45:24]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:45:23]

Paula Murphy: It's been stressful. It's been stressful, you know. We probably could have done without having to distribute that much amount of food, but usually in, I think, times of stress, and like they say, when someone dies, you see the best of people and the worst of people, that's definitely happened during COVID, during this time.

[00:45:47]

Michelle Little: Absolutely.

[00:45:49]

Paula Murphy: I feel lucky to see a lot of good.

[00:45:51]

Michelle Little: Yes, for sure. Well, speaking of good, and you were just mentioning the vaccination sites, so you were actually one of the first people I know that was able to get vaccinated. Was it back in January?

[00:46:10]

Paula Murphy: I got my first shot at the beginning of January, and that came about because I was trying to get my mom signed up for a vaccination, and I just kept—you

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know, my mom is eighty and has COPD, which is a lung disease, and I just kept checking links. You know, there were, like, very few things out there. If you're this age or you have these certain health issues, you know, blah, blah, blah, you could sign up. And so, I was hitting, you know, flopping out, not having any luck, and one Saturday I just happened to refresh this link, and the next thing I know, it was this whole calendar—well, it was the day first, but it was a whole day showing all appointment times that were available. Then you could click through and there were additional days. And I almost fell out of my chair.

And I called my mom and I said this and this and blah, blah, blah. “We got to get you signed up. They have times.”

So, it was happening in downtown Houston at our baseball stadium, so I live not far from there. My mom is about forty minutes south of the stadium. So, I was like, you know, “I'm gonna come, pick you up. Let's go do it.”

Well, the one thing with my mom with having COPD, she doesn't do anything very quickly, and because she has trouble breathing when she exerts effort and energy and all that, you know, she immediately has to think of the logistics of things. Well, not only does she has to, but that's what she does. She goes to worst-case scenario. “Oh, I can't get ready soon enough to come and do this, and I don't—,” you know.

I said, “Mom, you'll be fine.” I mean, this is 9:00 o'clock in the morning. I said, “They have times as late as 4:00.”

“No, no, no.” So, she did not want to do it.

Then it said on there if you have certain health conditions, so I just thought, well—so I have arthritis and psoriasis, I have autoimmune disorder, and I've had

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neurosurgery for a pituitary issue, and so I was just like, “Well, let me just click and see what it says.” And it sent me to the thing and said, “Sign up for a time.” And I paused for a minute, and I thought, “Okay, I mean, I’m not that old, but I’m old enough. I’m getting there. I’m forty-nine.” I felt kind of guilty, like should I actually do this, or should I not do this? And I just decided to go ahead and do it. I mean, I don’t feel like I skipped the line necessarily. I got lucky. But the fact that I do have certain health concerns and I literally have been out in it, I mean, I have been at the Food Bank distributions with 10,000 people driving by, you know, so that made me feel better about going ahead and signing up for it, because if I was staying at home and never had to be out in the public, but since the beginning of this, I mean, at least two or three times a week I’ve been around thousands, if not hundreds, of people.

[00:49:18]

Michelle Little: Right. Yeah.

[00:49:19]

Paula Murphy: So, anyway, so I got my first shot and was really excited to do so and didn’t have any problems. Then I’ve been fully vaccinated since the beginning of February, so I got my second shot in February.

[00:49:35]

Michelle Little: That’s so exciting.

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[00:49:36]

Paula Murphy: And had no problems. So, I was lucky. I had no side effects. I mean, at one point I'm like, "Did I really get the shot?" [Little laughs.] I mean, not that many people, but someone I know that went the same day got very—had a lot of, you know, kind of harsh side effects, and I just wanted to take a nap. So, I mean, you know, but that could be just life. [laughs]

[00:49:36]

Michelle Little: Right, right. You were lucky.

[00:50:01]

Paula Murphy: Yeah. So, I still wear a mask, I still, you know—and I'm being careful because I think it's important to do that, and, you know, sometimes I think that it's important mainly even just to put other people at ease. They don't know—I mean, I'm not going to walk around with my vaccination card, you know. And they say even if you are vaccinated, you can carry it to other people. So, it's not that big of a deal to me. I don't politicize wearing a mask. It's not super inconvenient. If I'm inside somewhere and I need to go out and get a fresh breath without my mask on, I do it. So, anyway, I still wear a mask pretty much wherever I go. I mean, a lot of the restaurants that I frequent, clients and non-clients, I'd say 99 percent of them require a mask, and I don't have a problem with that.

[00:50:55]

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Michelle Little: Right. Yeah, so what was—I mean, I remember how I was able to get my first vaccine last month, and it was just such—like, it was so emotional. I mean, what was the day like for you? And you're at a stadium. I mean, just like—

[00:51:16]

Paula Murphy: Well, it was funny because it happened so quickly, it wasn't like—I didn't get to sit and ruminate on it too much. I mean, it's like—I mean, I was like, okay, when I made the decision, I'm going to sign up, I'm going to go at the earliest time, and it was like 10:00 a.m. was the earliest one, and it's now like 9:15. [Little laughs.] So, I literally threw something on and I ran out the door, and it was more concern like, okay, where should I go to park? Where should I—you know, I didn't have too much time to get too worked up about it, but once I got in there and you're in line, and there was every kind of person under the sun. I mean, there was all ages. There were people you could tell had very bad health. Some didn't. you know, there were young kids there that, you know, who had been through cancer treatments.

But it was funny to be in the baseball stadium, you know, where we won the World Series. I mean, you know, okay, it skipped a year, but it was—you know. [laughter] But it was very interesting, you know. And you had to go and sit in the stands and wait for your time to be called, and it's like you're in there, and it's like this, you know—you know, it really is a beautiful stadium, and it was just like I couldn't believe I was there. Then I'm, like, filling out the paperwork. Then it was kind of hitting me. And the energy was so positive, you know, because it's like, ah, yes, we're like kicking the

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can down the road, like we're moving forward, you know, like we're making some sort of progress.

So, then they called, you know, our group, our time frame, and it was a very quick and, you know, painless process. Like, everybody just seemed jubilant to be there, from the people who were directing you which door to go in to the people calling, "Okay, time frame such-and-such, please come over here," you know. "If you're here for this time, go there." The nurses were excited. I mean, that was, you know—several of them, that was the first day they had been giving shots.

[00:53:23]

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

[00:53:24]

Paula Murphy: And it was really a cold day. It was overcast and rainy, and it was very cold, and it was really cold in the stadium, but they had, like, heat lamps and, you know, stuff in there. Everybody was just very "Are you okay? How are you feeling?" It was just like "I'm ready! Just, like, stick the thing in. I got no problem." The guy next to me was afraid of needles, and they had to cover his face with his jacket. [Little laughs.] I had nothing. I got no problem. I am so ready for this. And, yeah, it was just a really good feeling because it was like maybe we'll be able to, like, exhale a little bit, like, relieve a little bit of the tension in your shoulders when you're out, you know.

Like, being at these Food Bank events and stuff, where you see all these people and you can't really hug them and you can't do whatever, but you're getting in close

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proximity with them to talk to them, you know, even when you have a mask on, you're just like, "I'm being careful. I'm hoping you—I don't know. Are you being careful?"

You know. It's the same as any of us going out into the world these days, but when it's just car after car, you know, like people—there were times that it was a little worrisome, you know?

And we did have a national TV crew come down in November, I think it was, and we kept our social distance, I mean, for the most part. Every now and again, you'll find yourself—you know, you're only four feet apart or you're whatever. We were all masked and we were very careful, but the next day, they called us and told us that the reporter they had sent down tested positive for COVID. So now we were all worried, you know, "Oh, god, so now—." So, there were a couple little scares. Overall, not many. Knock on wood. But that was probably the biggest one.

So, to be able to get the vaccine, I just was like, "I'm going to feel better about doing this." I mean, I was going to do it, no matter what. That's my job and it was important. But it did feel like a little bit of stress was getting relieved.

And like I said, it was cold and whatever, and, you know, you know how they have you stay for that fifteen minutes? I mean, I had no problem with, you know, that or anything, but I thought that I might start getting tired right away. I mean, someone had said, "Once it's in there, you're going to start feeling some things right away." The weirdest thing for me for the rest of the day, for the majority of the day, I kind of felt euphoric. I mean, it wasn't that. It was like, I mean, I was like ready to go.

I left that stadium and I immediately drove to a restaurant and had a bowl of pho and was like all happy, you know. A couple people that—I saw some people that I knew

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there that were also getting their shot, so I was texting them, “How you doin’?” I mean, I ran a couple errands and then I went home, and I didn’t have anything. I had a little soreness in my arm that started about eight hours after, but other than that, I didn’t have any problem.

And the same thing happened after the second one, and it was even quicker that time. I mean, it was a well-oiled machine over there. I got there early, I was taken early, I was out early, and I went and had pho at the exact same place. [laughter] A creature of habit, I guess, but it was like, no, it was another cold day. It was just funny, soup seemed like the right thing to do.

[00:56:51]

Michelle Little: That’s your vaccination routine now.

[00:56:52]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, yeah. So, no, it was good, and I do feel better about it, you know. I got to be careful for myself, for everybody, and have to be careful for my mom, who is now fully vaccinated, so that’s good.

[00:57:04]

Michelle Little: Excellent.

[00:57:05]

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Paula Murphy: So had to get her another appointment elsewhere when she was ready to go. So that's good.

[00:57:12]

Michelle Little: That's so great. And how did—was there a certain point when all restaurant workers were eligible in Texas or, like, were all the Food Bank workers, did they fall under a certain category?

[00:57:28]

Paula Murphy: The Food Bank workers did not fall within a category themselves, which kind of surprised me, because they're essential workers. I mean, they are essential workers. Just within the last month, I'd say three weeks, actually, they've really here in Texas been more—it's been announced anybody sixteen and older is eligible. So, for the longest time, it was still the 1A healthcare workers and all that, then 1B, and it stayed at 1B for a very long time, it felt like, and then it has dropped down. So, we still have a lot of these large distributions going on. We have the Texas Medical Center, which is, like, world-renowned, one of the biggest medical centers anywhere, so a lot of those are having these large vaccination sites. At the beginning, only a couple of them were. Now many more are. We have many drive-through sites. So, yeah, so that's where it is right now. Restaurant workers can get it now, based on sixteen and older.

[00:58:42]

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Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah, it's—I mean, the same thing here, just, like, trying to figure out which category everybody was in, and, you know, like you said, just, like, refreshing those pages every day on your computer.

[00:58:58]

Paula Murphy: It's a full-time job. I mean, I would just sit and be writing and save something, and I'd click the tab up to the thing and hit "refresh." Nope, nothing there. I mean, I had, like, four of them open at any one time. Then once I was able to get it, I posted it up, you know. I mean, that's the other thing. I mean, if I saw something, I'd post it on Facebook, or I would text it to people. I mean, I knew a lot of people that, you know, qualified or needed it. So, then it became "Let's help everyone else figure this out." [laughs] So—

[00:59:32]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I remember I had a whole, like, browser section set up just for all that, because we have—I mean, there's so many different sites to check, you know.

[laughs]

[00:59:43]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, and what a lot of people started doing, I don't know if it's the same other places, but it seems like there are a fair amount of people in the rural areas that have no interest in getting a vaccine. Now, they're not getting maybe as many as the large city centers, but they are getting them, but a lot of people started figuring out they

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don't want 'em. So, I'm just going to drive up there. I'll drive an hour after work, and I'm going to sit there and take the chance that they'll have at least three or four left over. So that's a lot of people started doing that, and it's still happening that, you know, you'll drive forty-five minutes away kind of out in the—quote, unquote, “out in the country,” and you can get it because they don't want 'em, because there's a lot of, obviously, competition in the fourth largest city in America. [laughter]

[01:00:37]

Michelle Little: Right, right. Not an easy place to get that done. [laughs] Oh, my goodness. What were—this is kind of jumping back a little bit, but what were the holidays like for you? That was one thing I just kind of wanted to ask everybody. I know Thanksgiving and Christmas were different for everyone this year.

[01:01:01]

Paula Murphy: Yeah. Workwise, you know, kind of the same. We always promote—I mean, most of my restaurants, all of my restaurants, current restaurants, are closed on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, but they do to-go always, and so it was just—you know, they were really busy with that.

Personally, they were good. It was interesting. Thanksgiving was fine, just small, myself, my mom, and my two sisters. Christmas was interesting because I did have another COVID scare literally—what was Christmas? A Friday this year?

[01:01:45]

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Michelle Little: I think so.

[01:01:45]

Paula Murphy: It was Friday. My sister that lives about an hour away was driving in. Our kind of usual thing is she drives in to my house, she picks me up, we load all of my stuff in her car, then we go down to my mom's house, which is about forty minutes away. And we were doing that, and I had gotten up and gotten everything, you know, final wrapping done, gathered all this, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, you know, packed up my laptop, blah, blah, blah, and I get a text that one of the Food Bank people that I work with had—she had been exposed, but we didn't know it, but she was starting to not feel good. We had just had a team retreat at the Houston Zoo because we thought, okay, we're going to have it outdoors, because we'd been working virtually or two of us would be at an event, not all four or five of us were together very often, and the head of the marketing and communications team had, you know, little gifts she wanted to give everybody, so we did that. This girl was kind of, you know, not feeling great that day, but didn't say much.

Anyway, I'd just packed everything up. My sister was literally about to be there any minute, and I get this text, "Sara has COVID." And I'm like, "Now what do I do?" I mean, I'd had one shot. No, no, no, this is Christmas. I hadn't had any shots. What am I talking about? But I'm like, "Do I go down there? Like, do I put my family at risk? Do I—I don't know."

So, I waited for my sister to get here, and I just like—I kept, like, stepping backwards. She's like, "What are you doing?"

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I'm like, "I just got this text," and whatever.

So, I found a place that could do a rapid test and it came back negative. We went ahead and, you know, I said to her, "Are you okay being—?"

She said, "I believe that—," you know, "and you've been careful."

So, we went ahead and went down there and I told my mom, you know, and I said, "I'm just going to try to stay away from you." [laughs]

And she—"You've been tested?"

So, I did keep distance a little bit, I mean not like I'm sitting on my mom's lap on a regular basis. [Little laughs.] But I just tried not to be too close. So, it made a little bit of a stressful start. That was Tuesday before Christmas, because we were going to go down there and make cookies and, you know, deliver things, you know, presents to neighbors, you know, over the days before Christmas.

So, anyway, I never ended up getting it. I've never tested that I've had antibodies, so I was lucky. But that was a little stressful part of Christmas. Other than that, it was good. It was a time to have finally a little down time and not think about work the whole time.

[01:04:28]

Michelle Little: Right, right. Well, good. Okay. Well, I know we're a little past the hour, but one last question I wanted to ask, and then if there's anything else you want to add, but how do you think everything from the last year—I mean, how do you think things will—will it change the way you work or the way your—you know, the Food Bank or

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your restaurants, what do you think some of the maybe lasting impact of this is going to be? And I know it may be too early to even know.

[01:05:04]

Paula Murphy: No, I mean, I think it's hard to know for certain, but I think there are definitely things that people think will stay in place. For me personally, as far as my work, like literal company work, I'm not as impacted as some people in that, you know, they were always going to an office and now they're working from home. I have worked from home for the last decade or so, so that is not as big of a difference for me.

What is different for me in my job is getting together with media, you know, entertaining media at my clients'. That has been few and far between to nonexistent, not that they're not going, not that I'm not communicating about them, but, you know, you're not taking somebody to lunch, "Hey, let's go do this." That doesn't seem to be happening. A lot of times I will just set it up for them to go or they pick something up to-go. So, I don't know if that will come back fully. Maybe it will. I think that's all going to come down to personal levels of comfort on their part and my part, so that's changed a little bit.

You know, it's always been a good idea in my job to have a good file of photos and, if possible, B-roll available to media in case they need it at the drop of a hat. That was even more necessary during this time, because a lot of—depended on the media outlet, but a lot of them, a lot of the media outlets wouldn't allow their camera people to go or they wouldn't send a photographer, they would ask for supplied photos, or if a TV station would go, like a local station, they were allowed to do interviews and film outside,

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but they were not allowed—their company policy was to not go inside, so, I mean, that's something I try to be good about anyway, is having available artwork. That became even more crucial, and I just think now, I think that's going to continue because these media outlets are like, "Hell, if I don't have to send somebody, sure," you know. So, I think that's going to be that way.

For restaurants, as I see what they're doing, I just—I mean, most restaurants have always had to-go, but I think they're going to have more robust to-go programs, and I think restaurants opening up are going to consider that in their design. I know I have an existing client that has four restaurants and is opening a new one, which, you know, they've just really been stressing about that. It should have already maybe been open, but obviously been delayed. People wondered if they would still do it with COVID, but it's moving forward, but their design has taken into account a bigger to-go area and more convenient access to it from the outside, so I think that's something that people will do.

We are now allowed to do wine and cocktails to-go, which I just—it surprised me that the state of Texas passed that, that the Texas Department of, you know, whatever, Firearms, Alcohol—I can't even believe, but that's allowable and it's moving forward, and that has saved a lot of people.

Someone did just this week bring a bill forth for the House to discuss. They wanted to say that wine should be able to be brought into any restaurant, and the Restaurant Association and restaurateurs absolutely did not want that to happen. I mean, they've already taken so much of a hit. I mean, to be able to do that, I mean, you know, alcohol's always been a money maker for restaurants, obviously. So, anyway, but that got struck down just a couple days ago, so that's good.

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And, you know, as far as masks and all that, I don't know. I mean, I think we are going to come to a time where we're not going to be wearing masks, but I don't know. I don't know if restaurants are going to say, "We want our staff to wear them. You are going to wear them." And I don't know. I just don't know about that. I feel like some of my restaurant clients, I can see them being like, "We want to keep this going," but I don't know. Then does that become a—can you really force somebody to do that, especially now when we're being told you can't? I mean, you can go without wearing a mask in Texas. So, I don't know.

For the Food Bank, I think many things have changed for them, and I think one of the main things that will probably remain, maybe not for everybody and for everything, but during COVID, it has been contactless distribution as much as possible. When people would go through our drive-through sites, which we don't always do, they were done during COVID only, those may repeat. I mean, they're not an every week or everyday thing, but they got repeated during Winter Storm Uri. It's like, "Well, okay, guess what we've got to do. Okay, good, because we've got the game plan. Let's just do it." But any—like, our partner agencies, when people go to pick up food there, you know, you still don't go in to most of them, which, before, you always went in. So, I think that that might be something that will continue, at least in part.

A lot of the Food Bank workers that are not essential, that have to be onsite, are working from home, and I think they're being told to—you know, they can continue to do that. They'll have a space at the Food Bank where they can go and they can work, you know, like a common space and whatever if they want to do that, so that's been kind of interesting.

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They took on a second warehouse during COVID, and I think that's going to remain. I mean, the numbers are not dropping, at least for—I mean, we're not at a million anymore, but I think we're coasting right now at about 700 to 800,000 pounds a day. So, you know, there's no reason to get rid of that warehouse because it's needed.

So those are the things that kind of jump to my mind. You know, I think some restaurants have enjoyed using QR codes for menus, rather than having an exorbitant printing bill of just printing new menus, you know, every week or every day, or they can just go online and change it, and that's a cost savings to them. I have a feeling a lot of people will continue to do that, for sure.

[01:12:08]

Michelle Little: Hmm. Yeah, I mean, [glitch in recording].

[01:12:10]

Paula Murphy: I tell you, I wish I owned stock in a to-go container business [Little laughs], because I'm telling you, it's hard to get it. And at the beginning of COVID when all these restaurants were going to to-go only, of course, they called Sysco or Benecke [phonetic] or whoever their rep is, and tried to put in these orders, like, "I need four times—." Like, "We don't have it." I mean, people who really were Johnny-on-the-spot and placed their order, they bought out as much as they could, so they had to basically take what they could find. You know, if you were somebody that got the eco-friendly and the whatever, you may not have gotten that. You had to go to Styrofoam and whatever.

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And then with imports and stuff being impacted, you weren't getting a lot of those. So, for a while, that was really hard to come by.

[01:12:59]

Michelle Little: Oh!

[01:13:01]

Paula Murphy: So, you know, but I think put your money in to-go containers. [laughs]

[01:13:09]

Michelle Little: Good stock tip! [laughs]

[01:13:10]

Paula Murphy: Yeah! So, anyway, but that was interesting. But, you know, sometimes when I stop and think about it, I cannot believe a year has gone by. It's been absolutely unbelievable. And this is going to sound like the damndest thing. You're going to think I am so strange. It's not that I miss being in the heart of COVID, because I kind of don't, I mean I really don't, but there was something interesting about that period of time, the working around-the-clock and the stress of it, but there was a—I don't even know how to say it. There was kind of a—I won't say a beauty to it. I can't put my finger on it, but there's days when I'm like—I just felt like I was a well-tuned engine. Like, I had so much to do, there was not a chance to have down time, and I just—it was focus, like, all day. It was like, you know, you flip a switch and then you unflip a switch. It was like I

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got up in the morning and the switch was flipped [laughs], and it just went, went, went, went, went until 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock, and then I would flip the switch, and then it was, you know, not worry about work for a little bit, you know. I don't know. There was something about it.

The feeling of accomplishment, it was stressful and the stress is not good for any of us, but the feeling of accomplishment and the teamwork that I saw among the people that I work with was unbelievable. Seeing little moments of, like, magic and community and stuff like that through the Food Bank work really made it worth it, and, like, just when you think you couldn't take it for another hour, like, something would happen and you're like, "Okay, I got it. There's a reason that I'm doing this."

I don't know. I don't miss it. I'm not necessarily nostalgic for it. But even—I mean, just the other day, I was kind of looking back and it was like, first of all, how have I gotten through that, and second of all, there was something kind of cool about it. I don't know. It was like a goal, like we had a goal. You know? I don't know.

[01:15:19]

Michelle Little: Common purpose.

[01:15:21]

Paula Murphy: Yeah, I guess that's the thing, you know, like when you're in something and that feeling of "I just got to dig myself out of it," you just dedicate yourself to doing that. I don't know. But I cannot believe that it's been a year, and I'm really proud of everybody [laughs], you know, for having done it, because I hope this never happens

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again, you know. I hope that this doesn't linger a whole lot longer. Who knows? I just don't even know what I think is going to happen, but I think we're all changed a little bit in a good way and in a bad way. I don't know. I think masks are kind of going to be some people's mainstay and other people's not, and I hope that that doesn't become a contentious thing, but I don't know.

[01:16:16]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

[01:16:18]

Paula Murphy: I think we've all learned to do without in some ways, you know?

[laughter] You know, things are not always as readily available. You can't jump on a plane and go do whatever, you know. Those things have been hard, but it's a lesson to us, you know. We're definitely a consumer economy, and it's like, you know what? Just when you think you can do whatever you want, Mother Nature, whatever, is going to tell you differently. And we learn that in hurricane season every year, we've learned this with Winter Storm Uri in Texas, and I think all of us have learned that in COVID, and I hope they're just lessons that we take seriously and learn from, because that can be the only benefit of it, I think.

[01:17:02]

Michelle Little: Right. That's a very good point, yeah, the lessons we take from this, for sure.

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[01:17:07]

Paula Murphy: Yeah. So, I don't know. It's been interesting. [laughter]

[01:17:11]

Michelle Little: It's been a year.

[01:17:13]

Paula Murphy: That's all I'm going to say. It's been a year. Ay-yi-yi.

[01:17:17]

Michelle Little: [laughs] Okay, well, I think that's a great place to stop. I'm going to go ahead and hit the "stop record" button but hang on the line.

[End of interview]