

Interview of: Lillia Callum-Penso
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Interview Date: April 27, 2021



Lillia Callum-Penso
The Greenville News
Reporter

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Michelle Little: Okay, we're rolling. Okay. So today is April 27th of 2021, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Lillia Callum-Penso for the Southern Foodways Alliance COVID-19 Project, and this is our second interview. The last time you and I spoke was May 29th of 2020. [laughs]

[00:00:25]

Lillia Callum-Penso: Wow! Am I allowed to say that?

[00:00:32]

Michelle Little: Yes, yes.

[00:00:32]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Wow! I can't believe it. [laughs]

[00:00:34]

Michelle Little: I know, I know. It's crazy. And I've been prefacing all of these interviews by saying that I fully expect this series of oral history interviews to be a little more rambling than—I mean, you know, I think everyone is having trouble thinking, you know, in order and remembering.

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[00:01:00]

Lilla Callum-Penso: In a linear pattern.

[00:01:01]

Michelle Little: Yes, linear patterns are difficult. [laughs] So I've been prefacing all of these interviews with that because I think it's just important for people that listen to this in the future to know that this is a weird time. [laughter]

[00:01:17]

Lilla Callum-Penso: We were living in chaos! [laughter] It's true, very real.

[00:01:24]

Michelle Little: Yeah. So, since we last spoke in May, I'd love to start with just how your summer went, because I know, like, one of the things we spoke about when we left off was that you weren't going to have daycare for the summer and, you know, you were working from home. So just how did the summer go for you?

[00:01:46]

Lilla Callum-Penso: [laughs] Yeah, let me rejoy my memory. It was pretty tough, as I recall, because I think cases started getting worse. Of course, they got even worse after that. [laughs]

[00:02:05]

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Michelle Little: Yes.

[00:02:06]

Lilla Callum-Penso: So, I think there was kind of like this hope for summer, that it would bring some sort of relief or, like, end, which seems comical now. But, yeah, so we [laughs]—we basically parsed together what we could. It was pretty tough. I had to learn to work in about thirty-minute increments, which is really hard, especially if you're writing or doing some sort of creative endeavor, where you need to kind of get into some form of zone. I mean, it wasn't—you're not, like, filling in charts or, you know, doing just kind of data entry, not that there's anything wrong with that, but I think, you know, for me writing stories, I need to be able—I need at least an hour.

[00:02:58]

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah.

[00:02:59]

Lilla Callum-Penso: And so that was really hard, because the kids were here and then we couldn't take them anywhere. [laughs] I actually was furloughed, so I was furloughed three weeks. This was a company-wide furlough, and we had actually gone through layoffs prior to that, and then we went through furloughs. Every employee did three weeks. That actually—I mean, I say this as someone who's very grateful to have been able to receive unemployment for the weeks that I was furloughed, so I don't make light of it. It was nice to have unencumbered time with my kids. I heard a lot of people talk

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about, “Well, the bright spot is I’m getting to spend this time with my family that I wouldn’t normally,” and I just felt like—I just felt like, “Am I missing something?” Because we were physically together, but we were not engaged with each other, because if you’re working full-time, it’s like a constant trying to find the time to work. And they’re kids. They needed attention. So, it was a constant battle. I felt like I was really losing my mind, honestly. But it was a good way to relate to other people that I was interviewing. [laughter]

[00:04:28]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:04:29]

Lilla Callum-Penso: And I think, you know, people did get a little more understanding about hearing kids in the background and, you know, hearing the tantrums and hearing the toys being thrown. I’m not sure if I should say this, but it got real real with my editor, who would call almost daily, and, I mean, it was like every time he called, I feel like I was wiping some kid’s butt. [laughter]

[00:04:56]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:04:56]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: So, I felt like, you know, I mean, if you want reality of balancing full-time work and full-time parenthood, there ya go. [laughter] But, yeah, we got through it, but it's like one of those things, I'm not—I mean, I think I was probably going to have a breakdown, like, really. It was tough. [laughs]

[00:05:24]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I'm sure. So how long—I mean, when did they go back to school? Did they actually get to go back in person in the fall?

[00:05:37]

Lilla Callum-Penso: So, yeah, South Carolina was interesting, and Greenville County, where we live, so Greenville County schools. So, my daughter—I have twins. They are a minute apart, but we had kind of determined that my daughter was ready for kindergarten and my son wasn't, so we decided to have him stay in K4 [phonetic]. Their birthday is, like, right on the cutoff, so we really—and we just decided they were different people, and ultimately that's what it came down to. So, my daughter was set to start kindergarten, and as we got closer and closer, yeah, it was like, "I don't know what to do," because Greenville County said they would offer an in-person option that would be based on, you know, DHEC [phonetic] guidelines and case numbers in this area. Well, as the case numbers began to rise, it just felt like that wasn't safe, so we ended up signing up for the virtual option. So, they offered a virtual option as well.

So it was very, you know—again, I think that I don't—like, I think about people who have experienced these life events, like birth or marriage or death, in the past year, and

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these kind of milestone events, you know, maybe high school kids, graduations from college or high school, you know, these things that are momentous occasions that you had to kind of experience differently or not really experience [laughs], and for me, you know, it's minor, perhaps, in the long run, but walking my child the first day of kindergarten felt like a momentous occasion, and it was very odd to have—it was just like a screen. I mean, it was kind of sad to watch. [laughs]

[00:07:39]

Michelle Little: Sure.

[00:07:40]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But as kids do, you know, as kids are, they're very resilient, and Ella, you know, learned to kind of, you know, engage with the virtual learning, but I won't say that was easy, and especially for a kindergartener, where an adult has to be involved to help. They're on a Chrome Book, and a child that doesn't know how to read or write yet, I mean, you can't just let them be. So, it did require a lot of supervision and help from an adult, and so, again, thirty-minute increments of work [laughs].

[00:08:17]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[00:08:18]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: So, we did that. My son did—we did put him in a 4K program because he really needed some sort of engagement, and we just felt like that was the best option, but it was tough trying to balance, because also with my mom, she would have helped, but it was like, is it safe for her to come up if my son was going into a small, granted, very small school setting, but there's just so many unknowns.

[00:08:56]

Michelle Little: Right

[00:08:56]

Lillia Callum-Penso

So, yeah, so, yeah, I would not want to do it again. There are probably, you know, certainly pluses, like the commute was really short. [laughter] You know, walk upstairs. So, there are certainly pluses. But it's just tough. You realize, like—or I felt like I had a lot of guilt. I just felt constantly guilty because I wasn't, like, really engaged as I should be in any one area of my life. That's just how I felt. But, yeah, but we took it one day at a time. [laughs] And we're here to tell about it, so— [laughter]

[00:09:43]

Michelle Little: Exactly. That's what we're doin' now. So, are you still fully working at home? Has the newsroom gone back to the office at all? Or what's—

[00:09:55]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, the *Greenville News* opened—I want to say it was like November, probably mid to late November, they opened the newsroom, with protocol, so, you know, you had to sign in. At first, you had to kind of let them know what days, what times you were planning to be there. There were mask requirements. They were trying to keep down the number of people. You had to have your temperature taken. But because my daughter was still doing virtual school, that really wasn't an option for me. Then I have since—now my daughter is going in-person, so she got into in-person mid to late January and has been doing that, and it was a loaded—it was a hard decision, but one that has definitely made it a little bit easier for me to be able to do my job. So, when I go into the office, it's rare. I don't go in a whole lot, but I'm starting to a little bit more. And usually there's maybe like five or six people in a whole floor, so it's not a whole lot.

[laughs] So, yeah, I'm still working from home a lot.

I think, to be honest—and I don't know if any other parents are like this, but for me, I need—just my personality, I need solitude to kind of reset, and that was one thing, I was never alone, *ever, ever*.

[00:11:38]

Michelle Little: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:11:39]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Everybody was here, and so even if my mom came to help, they were all here, because where are they going to go? And that was really hard, not just for working, but just for your, like, sanity. I don't mean to make light of people who, you

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know, live alone and are lonely, because that's a real thing. So, all that to say, like, I am okay working from home because there's, like, one snippet of time I can maybe sometimes be alone. [laughs]

[00:12:12]

Michelle Little: Yeah. It's so important. I mean, yeah, just to be able to recharge and, like, be able to—and for you to be able to write. I mean, oh, my gosh.

[00:12:23]

Lilla Callum-Penso: And I worked from home a good deal before also. That's a whole 'nother story. But when I was pregnant, I was put on modified bedrest and had to immediately switch to working from home, which I hated. It was such a hard transition. And then after my kids were born, they had some—they were both in the hospital for a good while, months, and when I went back to work, I was able to be more flexible. They needed a lot of care and they couldn't be in daycare because of health issues, so I worked from home. So, then I got more used to it. So, I've worked from home for a good while for the majority of the time of, like, the past five years, so—[laughs]

[00:13:05]

Michelle Little: Okay, yeah. Wow.

[00:13:10]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But usually I'm by myself. [laughs]

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[00:13:12]

Michelle Little: Right! Yeah. It's a completely different thing, yeah. [laughter] I completely understand, and I don't even have children. [laughter]

[00:13:23]

Lilla Callum-Penso: It's like if somebody's all up in your space like all of a sudden, you know?

[00:13:27]

Michelle Little: Yeah! It's just a different work environment. [laughs]

[00:13:29]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, yeah. [laughter] These co-workers man, they're really demanding, super demanding.

[00:13:41]

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh. [laughs] So, like, shifting a little bit to your reporting, do you feel like—is it still very pandemic-related, what you're researching and writing about, or have you been able to shift back to maybe some of the topics you were thinking about pre-pandemic?

[00:14:05]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, I think it's shifting some. Like, I think the pandemic is always kind of in the background, like whereas more it was in the foreground, but, like, I'm writing about a lot of restaurants opening, I mean, which I was not writing about restaurants opening before, except for one. I did write about one restaurant that opened in the middle of, like, the shutdown, when things were shut down.

[00:14:31]

Michelle Little: Oh, my goodness!

[00:14:33]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But, yeah, now it's—what I find interesting is that, I mean, there is a ripple effect. I mean, you can't deny the pandemic has influenced, has impacted every aspect of our lives, I mean, from toilet paper to meat to, you know, in the case of restaurants, what I find, it's like you see patterns. So, I was like, "Oh, my god, all these restaurants are opening in downtown Greenville," and they're all kind of locally—they're, like, local people opening them. I'm like, "That's strange." Or it's unique. It's interesting. And while real estate, you know, the pandemic affected real estate prices, and real estate's been, like, crazy going up in downtown Greenville, and while it kind of put a damper on—the pandemic kind of stymied some of that increase, so it's paved the way for more opportunities for other people. So, you know, there's things like that. There's always kind of some level of influence or impact.

I mean, I'm working on a story on staffing challenges right now, which is, you know, a national conversation, but also within the context of, like, the debate about raising the

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minimum wage, because there are restaurants here that are being forced to kind of raise wages, you know, paying \$20 an hour for a cook, because they can't find anybody. So, it's been kind of an interesting thing. And the staffing challenges, it's nothing new in restaurants, but what I understand is that it's like total crisis now [laughs], where it's like exponentially more challenging because just people have left the industry or if you talk to some owner/operators of restaurants, they think the unemployment benefits being so easy to get has kept people from working. Of course, it depends on who you talk to about that, but I think the pandemic has exacerbated something that was already an issue. So, there are things like that, yeah.

[00:16:51]

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

[00:16:52]

Lilla Callum-Penso: I think the pandemic will still be part of our conversation for a long time, but, yeah, I'm doing a lot more stories where it's not just the focus. [laughs]

[00:17:02]

Michelle Little: Okay. That's—I mean, that's really interesting about the staffing issues. So, I mean, so as restaurants are now opening back up, you're saying they're just having a really hard time even finding workers to fill the positions.

[00:17:18]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, it's just—I hear it from *every* single person I have talked to in restaurants. Every restaurant I know of is hiring. They are trying. I heard, although I haven't substantiated this, there's a new restaurant that was announced, like, over a year and a half ago, and they may have to delay their opening because they haven't been able to hire, like get enough staff. So, yeah, it's an interesting—I mean, it's interesting, and I've heard from some people, you know, it's like, well, you know, some people left the industry because they got this level of perspective where they were able to be home, and suddenly, oh, they celebrated birthdays with their family or they had a night off, and they eat dinner with their family or they just had more normal hours, and it's like, you know, when you're kind of mired in what you do day to day, you're just kind of on autopilot. Sometimes you're doing—and you don't have the perspective, so a lot of people got this perspective of, like, “Oh, this is what life is like?” And they, you know, liked it and maybe they found jobs at Lowe's, you know, where they had normal hours and they got paid the same or more. [laughs] And they didn't have to deal with—I mean, maybe they had to deal with, like, nasty customers, but their tips weren't—their salary wasn't based on dealing with nasty customers. [laughs]

[00:18:53]

Michelle Little: Wow.

[00:18:53]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah. So, I think—I mean, it'll be interesting. I mean, I've heard from a number of people that this will be—like, you know, hopefully it pushes forward a

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discussion around the structure of restaurants and what the industry—you know, how the industry can improve on a lot of different levels.

[00:19:17]

Michelle Little: Yeah. Wow. And another thing you mentioned when we talked back in May, you know, when everyone had this hopefulness for the summer being better than it ended up being [laughs], but you mentioned that restaurants were also dealing with just the politics of reopening versus not reopening and what that messaging was to the public.

[00:19:49]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah.

[00:19:49]

Michelle Little: How did you see some of that play out?

[00:19:53]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Whew! It's still playing out.

[00:19:56]

Michelle Little: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:19:58]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: I mean, you know, you can't please everybody. I think eventually here the governor did shut things down, and then there was, like, a mask mandate that required masks to be worn inside restaurants, places of business, and included restaurants, so staff and customers, unless they were, you know, seated at a table. And, like, that was once dining reopened, so at first here, I mean, we weren't shut down that long, especially compared to places like New York City or Chicago or even Asheville, North Carolina [laughs], which is not even—it's about an hour away. So first outdoor dining was allowed, and then indoor 50 percent and now it's full capacity, and masks are no longer—they're encouraged, but no longer required, so again it is on—kind of the onus is on the individual restaurant owners or business owners, but I can speak to restaurants, just that's who I deal with mostly, to make those decisions, and then if they do, to enforce them. And that was a challenge before, is that also even when the mandate was in place, like, you know, who's enforcing it. You know, I mean, should the city police be—I mean, that was the thought, so if there's no real consequence, it's kind of like restaurant owners were—or in some cases, you know, like sixteen-year-old hosts of restaurants were having to, like, tell people, “Oh, sir, please put your mask on,” and getting yelled at. So, it's just—at a certain point, I did hear from some restaurant owners, it was like, “It's just not worth it. Like, we're tired of arguing with people.” Some people were like, “I can't enforce this.”

[00:22:05]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

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[00:22:05]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Others have been—you know, I think it depends on your style of food and your clientele. Unfortunately, you know, people are different. I mean, there are some restaurants here that, you know, have been very, very consistent with their policies and have been outspoken about—you know, not outspoken, but very, like, forthcoming about, “Just because things have changed legally, these are our policies in our restaurant,” and I think they have turned people away, but in some instances, depends on, you know, who your base clientele is, whether you kind of have regulars or not you depend on. So, it’s definitely a headache. It’s hard for any of those—and, again, I can only speak for restaurants. I think it’s really hard on—I empathize with restaurant owners. I mean, I hear the stories and it’s horrific how horrible people act, how just completely disrespectful people can be. I mean, I’m just—I just don’t understand. [laughs]

[00:23:26]

Michelle Little: I know. I mean, it’s astounding. I had the same conversation with a worker in Home Depot one day. I just kind of asked her—for whatever reason that day in the store no one—hardly anyone was wearing a mask, and I asked a worker, and she just kind of, you know, threw up her hands and said, “We’re just so tired of being yelled at.”

[00:23:49]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah.

[00:23:50]

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Michelle Little: I mean, my heart just broke for them.

[00:23:53]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah. I just don't—you know, and I don't know where that is in human—I don't know, like—to me, I was talking to my mom about this. Like, to me, some of this pandemic living and the way that we have responded as human beings, and the way it's been kind of like so different, depending on where you live, it's almost felt very *Lord of the Flies* to me, where it's like if you have the means and you have this, you can get this, but we're all kind of looking out for ourselves. It's like there's something that—and I don't know—you know, I try not to speak of my political leanings, but I do think, unfortunately, it's gotten political. I don't think it should be political, but it's just—I think that maybe with more cohesive leadership, maybe there would have been some sort of difference? But I don't know, you know. I just—but it's really struck me, especially as I hear about the behavior that people—the way people are acting, I mean, I've watched the vaccine rollout, the way it's played out in some areas, you know, just strikes me as, I don't know, like, very worrisome [laughs] for human nature. It's, like, worrying me. [laughs] I hope it's not human nature.

[00:25:45]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I mean, that's another point I wanted to bring up, just how—so how have you seen, or have you seen the vaccination patterns, you know, as different categories are eligible, how have you seen that impact restaurants and workers? Have you noticed—

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[00:26:09]

Lilla Callum-Penso: There was a push here to get restaurant workers pushed up in the vaccine cycle. They were not. But I think, you know, South Carolina, it is rolling out. We do have a number—I think, like, it's being—I just saw something about it was slowing for the first time, but, you know, it's been fairly—I will say that I get my second vaccine shot Thursday, so in two days.

[00:26:39]

Michelle Little: Yay! Exciting!

[00:26:39]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah. So, I feel like it was really easy for me to make an appointment versus, like, my sister's experience in Atlanta. I don't know if it was demand or there's just greater population or just the higher demand, people wanting the vaccine, but she had a harder time making an appointment. So, you know, it's kind of interesting. So, I feel like people here, at least where I'm living, if you want it, you can probably get it. And now everybody is eligible. But I think there were certainly, you know, some people who were grumbling, like, or, like, concerned about going back to the front lines, where you're dealing with the public, because I have one restaurant worker tell me, you know, like, if you're a customer, you have one interaction with—and you go to a restaurant, you have one interaction with, like, a server or whatever, that person's

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having interactions with, like, you know, so many people, so they are exposed in a much—you know, a much greater way.

[00:27:48]

Michelle Little: Right!

[00:27:48]

Lilla Callum-Penso: And so, I mean, now I do think more—I hear more and more, like, people in the industry are getting vaccinated, so that’s really good, but that was really frustrating for some people initially, and, you know, a reason people didn’t want to go back to work in restaurants. [laughs]

[00:28:08]

Michelle Little: Sure.

[00:28:09]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But, yeah, because I know, like—I think North Carolina pushed restaurant workers forward sooner than South Carolina, but we **[unclear]**.

[00:28:21]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I think so.

[00:28:22]

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Lilla Callum-Penso: We had a legislator in South Carolina who, like, came up through restaurants. He's, like, a trained chef, and he was really pushing for restaurant workers to be more, like, in Group A, 1A, and I think they were in 1B? But it took a while to, like, get to 1B.

[00:28:45]

Michelle Little: Yeah. Yeah, I was really astounded that restaurant workers weren't higher up in the categories, because, yeah, you're right, it took a long time to get to 1B, and then it took a long time to get to 1C. [laughs]

[00:29:01]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah. So it's just—and, yeah, I mean, so now, you know, it's like I'll hear about, like, whole restaurants where, like, all their staff was basically infected, because, of course, like, [laughs] they work in close quarters.

[00:29:27]

Michelle Little: Right!

[00:29:27]

Lilla Callum-Penso: You know?

[00:29:30]

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Michelle Little: Oh, that's terrible. And I don't know if this is—I did want to ask you about this, if you, like, knew if restaurants were handling this differently or how—but I remember when things were starting to open back up again, back in the summer, and the first couple of times we tried to go somewhere—well, first of all, you never knew if something was going to be open. Like, you would plan to go, and you'd maybe even—I remember one time we got all the way downtown, but then the restaurant we were planning to go to, an employee had tested positive, so, I mean, just within minutes, they posted it on Instagram and they completely shut down for a number of days, and I noticed that pattern throughout most of the summer. I haven't noticed it as much lately, and I didn't know if it was because, you know, maybe entire staffs were vaccinated or if they had come up with a—you know, they just tried to, like, send that employee home for a while. Have you noticed if they are trying to—if they're handling it differently or—

[00:30:44]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Hmm. Well—

[00:30:45]

Michelle Little: And it may be a tricky thing to talk about. [laughs]

[00:30:45]

Lilla Callum-Penso: They're definitely handling it differently, and it depends on who you talk to, because I've heard some people in the industry who are like, "That restaurant, basically, they didn't shut down. They're just like—." But I can't substantiate some of

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that, but it would stand to reason just anecdotally that now more people are getting vaccinated, so it may be—and a lot of people have already gotten COVID. [laughs]

[00:31:14]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:31:14]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But it would stand to reason, though, that I don't, like—I imagine there's still people who are getting infected. I still have seen some restaurants, like, say, “We have to shut down.” It happened just a few weeks back, a nicer restaurant here, but there's so many restaurants here, so—

[00:31:39]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Lilla Callum-Penso: [00:31:39] I don't know. I think there definitely has been different ways of handling it. That being said, there was a lack, again, of, like, clear direction on what your response was supposed to be, because—and I've seen this even with, like, my kids. My son, a child in his class, their parent tested positive. Well, my son is in the class with—the child didn't test positive, but they weren't going to get the child tested. So, basically, they took the child out for like, you know, ten days, and then—but I had to get my child tested. Like, I didn't know, you know—you know, it's just like how do you—what's the appropriate response? So I did get my child tested and he was negative.

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But then I had a situation where one of my good friends got a positive test, and she just didn't know where it came from. I had been around her outside, and then I ended up being honest and I told my kids' schools, so I had to keep them home until I got negative tests, and it turns out she had had a false positive. It was, like, a rapid test, and her second, you know, non-rapid test was negative. But, you know, it's just like so much math and, like, planning and coordinating and, like, trying to figure out—so I don't think it's easy on a business that has that situation. It's just trying to, like— [laughs]

And for restaurants, you know, this was a challenge of them shutting down. It's like a machine, you know. All the systems kind of need to be calibrated and they can really have some issues if they're all shut off. And then you have food that you've purchased that will go bad, so it really is detrimental to shut down, you know. You're really losing a lot.

[00:33:45]

Michelle Little: Absolutely!

[00:33:47]

Lilla Callum-Penso: So – [laughs] So, you know, so I don't pretend that—I just don't think it's—I know that it should feel like—it feels like it's black-and-white, and I don't want to, you know, pooh-pooh public safety *at all*. All I'm saying is that I can see the shades of gray, where it's a challenge to figure out how to make up those losses.

[00:34:13]

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Michelle Little: Oh, absolutely, yeah. No, that makes total sense. I mean, even, like you're saying, within the school systems, the rules just seemed so arbitrary, almost. It's like, well, if Person A was, like, maybe within six feet of Person B, or if they didn't test—I mean, it was just so many different ifs, then, you know, and that's the school system— [laughs]

[00:34:39]

Lilla Callum-Penso: I know.

[00:34:39]

Michelle Little: —that's really thought through these risk assessment plans. So I can see you're right. I mean, restaurants, you know, it'd be so hard to have any kind of cohesive planning.

[00:34:52]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, and just—and it's so—you know, you can't control where people go outside of work, and this is—I heard, just at least in the context of schools, I think *The New York Times* might've done some big piece, but that, you know, really you could have safe in-person school, but you can't have everything else open. Like, you can't be opening gyms and restaurants and bars, and that really, if you want safe schools, you want schools to be open full-time for in-person, you can't open up the rest of society. Like, you needed to have—and, unfortunately, like, everything kind of—there are these other things opening. [laughs]

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So, yeah, it's been a tough thing because—and I've gotten called out. We always do a roundup for, like, Thanksgiving, restaurants that are serving Thanksgiving, that are open on Thanksgiving or Christmas or, you know, that you can get to-go stuff from, and I always do two lists, you know, dine in and takeout. And I got called out for doing a dine-in list back in November, and it's something that I have really thought about. You know, I was trying to kind of be supportive of restaurants that were open and, you know, as far as I knew, trying to be safe, but, of course, you could argue—many people would say it's not safe to be open at all, to have any sort of dine at your place.

So I've really thought about that, and now, you know, I've felt like should I be pushing people to eat at restaurants? I do want to support the restaurants on some level and convey their experiences and what the issues are that are affecting them, but then what is my responsibility in terms of just because it's open, is it safe thing to promote dining in? And it's been something—it's been a question that I've had to kind of figure out. Again, I am not, like, a critic, but there's that line, I feel like—I don't know. I don't have a great answer, but I definitely, like, for Easter, I just chose to focus on takeout, and I'll probably just do that for Mother's Day, like, around different places offering takeout for Mother's Day instead—you know, I mean, many restaurants are offering brunch for Mother's Day, but I figure that's just not something I feel super comfortable promoting, not that I wouldn't share a post on Facebook, but I don't know that I want to—like, I will do more of a formalized list of to-go options.

[00:37:46]

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Michelle Little: Oh, wow! So you've had just a lot of internal conflict about just how your messaging and your writing is affecting people's choices, then.

[00:37:59]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, because you never know. [laughs] I mean, yeah, because I've heard different things from different people, so— [laughs]

[00:38:08]

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

[00:38:10]

Lilla Callum-Penso: So, yeah, you know, you wonder—like, I can't argue that I'm a passive role in this, I guess. [laughs]

[00:38:20]

Michelle Little: Oh, my goodness. Yeah, that's something I maybe didn't even think about when you and I did our interview back in May.

[00:38:28]

Lilla Callum-Penso: I didn't either, you know, because it was like restaurants were shut down and then they reopened, but dining was still—like, people still seemed hesitant, a lot of people, so I was really trying—I was trying to, you know, push, promote, like, takeout and to-go, but I just—you know, we aren't past this yet, and so is it on, you

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know—it's not that I won't write about restaurants, but I don't know that I need to push dining out or dining inside them. [laughter]

[00:39:14]

Michelle Little: Wow. That's really difficult to navigate.

[00:39:20]

Lilla Callum-Penso: [laughs] It's weird, yeah. I don't know.

[00:39:25]

Michelle Little: So what do you think—oh. Well, first let me—I feel like we can't not—I mean, because when we spoke, it was a little ahead of all this, but, I mean, there've been so many protests and demonstrations, you know, over the past year, so did that—did you report on any of that? Did that—how did that impact your work throughout 2020?

[00:39:58]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Yeah, I did report on that, actually. In June, there were some—there were, like, a lot of, you know, protests after, you know, the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, so, yeah, and I ended up doing a story on kind of exploring, like, what role restaurants play in getting involved in, like, issues like that, because there were a number of restaurants—there was this young woman here who really called out some of the restaurants for, like, being so silent, like—and so it kind of intrigued me, and I ended up talking to her, and then I talked to more restaurants, and then I saw more restaurants

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kind of be vocal. So, you know, there was—you know, so I kind of wrote a story around, like, what is the responsibility as a business owner, as a member of the community, you know. Maybe you're not getting involved in, like, the presidential conversation, but in this conversation around what people, you know, feel like is human rights and human dignity, you know, what is your responsibility, especially as many people had rallied around local restaurants, you know, helping support them during the shutdown and trying to be—you know, like rallying behind them. So this woman, you know, was arguing, like, "Where are you now? When we supported you, where are you supporting the community?"

So, yeah, and I thought it was a really important question she asked, and so I did, I wrote about that, and it's something that I still—I'm still pushing the issues a little bit, not necessarily around protests, but in a broader sense, like what is the role restaurants play in the broader good of community? So, for instance—because they did get a lot of support, and restaurants here got PPP money and the EIDL loans, and one thing that really helped a number of restaurants here was CARES Act money that went towards feeding the community, so we had several different instances where money—I think there were two different organizations that each got—I want to say \$500,000 of CARES Act funds to funnel to local restaurants to make meals that were then picked up and delivered to nonprofits to feed people in need. And, of course, food insecurity has grown, hunger has grown, especially among children without, you know—and so I just thought—to me, I thought—I loved seeing that. I loved seeing that action. You know, it helped restaurants, it helped the community, and what struck me is that it happened so fast. People were able to pull that together so fast, and I'm like, "Oh, my god. So there's

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now this infrastructure in place, like you know how this can be done.” And I’m not saying that, you know, restaurants—I know it takes a lot of money. You can’t just give away everything. But I still want to know how could this infrastructure that was set in place, how can we use that? Like, how could it be used? It’s kind of like you’ve pulled back the curtain, so you know you can do this if we work in this certain way.

So I’ve been trying to, like—that’s—I’d like to do something more on that and just kind of revisiting that idea of, like, the role, like the broader role that restaurants might play or could play in feeding the community and, you know, I think COVID—we should have had this perspective already, but COVID in some ways did provide this perspective on what’s important and also the suffering that—like, the disparities in our communities. And so, I mean, you can’t unsee that. So I’d really—and I think restaurants—you know, and most restaurant owners, I do think, are—they care about the community. So, you know, I’d like to see more—I personally would like to see more—see what might come of this infrastructure that was built. We’ll see. [laughs]

[00:45:19]

Michelle Little: Yeah. Well, that dovetails really well into what my next question is. What—and I know it’s a little early to be maybe drawing conclusions about this, but what do you think will be the last impact of the pandemic, like, on your work, you know, but also just on you personally? Like, what are things that you’ve changed throughout the pandemic that you’re thinking, “I think this is how we should do things from here on out”? [laughter]

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[00:45:58]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Man, that's a good question. Well, I think, like, thinking about restaurants in the broader conversation of community is one thing I'd like to do more of, and it's something that I do—I feel like—I won't say struggle, but I want to bring food as a topic beyond just kind of what people think, you know, my job is, just going and eating at places, which it's actually not, because I'm not a critic, but that being said, I'm going to a tasting for a new restaurant at lunch today. So— [laughter] But that's not all it is. There's a lot of politics and culture and, you know, if you look to restaurants and things, you can see just so much. It's like such a window into a community. So how can—like, I want to look at deeper issues and see—I guess I would say that that's something I'd really like to do.

I mean, it's also made me realize I need to improve the diversity of my sourcing. I have a number of diverse sources, but in the sense of like where I was writing so many stories so fast and things had to be turned around so fast, I'm, like, looking for a restaurant in order to comment. I found—well, I was going to the people that I could go to easily, and if you look, it is restaurants that maybe can afford to have a PR company or, you know, restaurants that I've just had a relationship with in the past, and while there are immigrant-owned restaurants and there are black-owned restaurants, I would say the majority, you know, are white-owned, you know, maybe. So that's just something that I think, especially when you're starting to talk about these other issues, too, like the protests and just you want to—I think that I'd like to be able to make sure that I am spreading the conversation and what's happening to a broader—in a broader sense, because the experiences aren't all the same. [laughs]

[00:48:32]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then just, too, I mean, logistically, how have you been doing your actual reporting? I mean, are you going out in person now? Are you doing interviews masked? Or, I mean, how have you had to adapt?

[00:48:51]

Lilla Callum-Penso: I have done a lot of phone interviews. I do do in-person interviews. I prefer in-person. I've done Zoom interviews. And when I'm in-person, I do mask, wear a mask. There have been maybe a couple times I have not, if I'm honest. I can kind of feel out people. But I think more recently I feel like that's just my policy, so until I'm fully vaccinated—my kids aren't vaccinated, so now I do feel a little more easier about it because my mom and my sister are fully vaccinated, my husband's fully vaccinated, so I feel like that will help me feel a little more at ease, because I haven't really wanted to do a lot of in-person stuff, because you can't control those scenarios.

And, you know, this is so silly, because it shouldn't be an issue at all, but—you know, I was describing it to someone, like the mask thing, and you don't know, like, if you show up at a place, like, is everybody going to be wearing a mask, are they not? Are you going to be the only one? And it's like you're either overdressed or underdressed. That's how I feel. Like, in our life, our family was either overdressed or underdressed, and usually underdressed. But it feels like you just don't want to stand out in any way, and that's how it feels so—in a place where—like South Carolina, where it's just like the wild west, it's different place to place. You really don't know what you're going to arrive to. [laughs]

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[00:50:34]

Michelle Little: Right.

[00:50:34]

Lilla Callum-Penso: And, you know, I cover more than just—well, during the election in November, you know, it was all-hands-on-deck, so I was out at polls talking to voters, and you didn't know what you were going to [laughs] encounter, just wearing a mask then. So it was like—oh, me. But, yes, if I meet in-person, I mean, granted I'm going to this tasting today, so I will be eating, so I won't have a mask on. I'll have a mask when I arrive. So, yeah. But I do prefer in-person, so I'm starting to do more of those. [laughs]

[00:51:16]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

[00:51:18]

Lilla Callum-Penso: As my time allows, because my kids are in school, but it's really—I only have about five hours a day where—so if I'm—so I have to kind of balance and measure, like, the worth of do I want to drive to this place, sit down, interview, drive back, and that could be like two hours, and then I only have three hours to work, or, like, it's just all balancing, trying to figure out the best use of my time. [laughs]

[00:51:46]

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Michelle Little: Right! Yeah. So then what about you personally and your family and your family life? What do you think will be the lasting impact of what you've all been through this year?

[00:52:02]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Hoo. It's been a really hard year, and I say that, you know, also acknowledging our privilege to be able to work from home, to have more flexibility—knock on wood—to not have gotten COVID, and to have money and a car. [laughs] Not to be threatened with eviction. And it's also been really stressful, I mean, just having my mom here, to be honest. She had certain opinions. She lives in Atlanta, and Atlanta was handling things differently. Their mayor was handling things differently from the governor or Georgia, and the governor in South Carolina was just like—it was just like living in a different world, so you're merging these two different approaches and realities.

And so I—and, you know, just trying to—I'm not alone in this, but I think it highlighted a lot of disparities among men and women, mothers and parents, because I felt like I had been thrown back, like, thirty or forty years, just carrying the burden of the virtual schooling and the kids, because my husband's job expected him to go into the office, and it was like, "Well, you know, what?" [laughter] "Do they know your kids are at home?" And it was really frustrating, and it caused a lot of, you know, hard conversations between my husband and I, just like hashing out, like—it was like we were vying for time, and the exhausting. And so I think we are, you know, better at communicating. I think we always have been, but it can slip. You take for granted that you need to keep

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working on communication with everybody, you know, friends, family, you know, partners, kids.

So I think—yeah, I mean, I wish that I—I know there are people who say, “Oh, I’m just so grateful for all this.” And it’s not that I don’t find positive elements at all in this. I just think that—I wish I had, like, some real, you know, wisdom and, like, lesson that I, like, could take from all this. I think that [laughs] we can—like, I can balance more than I thought. [laughter] But, yeah, I mean, I just think—and I hope that I value people around me a lot, you know. I hope I provide—that I show that appreciation. I think it’s really important.

So I hope I answered the question. I feel like I might have gone off. [laughs]

[00:55:29]

Michelle Little: No, you did, you did. It’s just hard to even know at this point. I’ve pondered whether or not to even ask people, but I just—I mean, I’m just kind of trying to gauge where people are right now, so, yeah.

[00:55:43]

Lilla Callum-Penso: No, I mean, it’s a great question, because, yeah, like where—what does this all mean? Is there meaning? [Little laughs.] Like, I hope so. I really hope so. I feel like sometimes it depends on the day, you know. Sometimes I’m like, “Oh, my god, people are so mean.” [Little laughs.] And then other days, I’m like, “Oh, people can be really great.” And so people are people. [laughs]

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[00:56:11]

Michelle Little: Right. Exactly.

[00:56:14]

Lilla Callum-Penso: But, yeah. Yeah, so I hope—I'll think about that. [laughs]

[00:56:23]

Michelle Little: Yeah, it's a good thing for us all to ponder. [laughs]

[00:56:26]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Absolutely.

[00:56:26]

Michelle Little: And maybe in ten years we'll know the answer. I don't know.

[00:56:33]

Lilla Callum-Penso: I feel like that may be something that doesn't come right away. It's almost like you need a little distance from something, because we're not through it, and it still feels pretty kind of like jarring, like it was just like how do we get through this? But, you know, that may come with perspective, like a little bit of a distance.

[00:56:56]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

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[00:56:58]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Check with me in, like, five years. [laughs]

[00:56:59]

Michelle Little: Okay, I'll mark that on the calendar. Yes. Well, is there anything I didn't ask you that you had been thinking about?

[00:57:11]

Lilla Callum-Penso: No, I think you did a great job. Yeah, I mean, I just—I'm honored to, you know, get to share some of my thoughts and experiences. I'm sure that so many people have really valuable ones, so it's an honor to be asked to do that.

[00:57:34]

Michelle Little: Well, I've really enjoyed both of our interviews, and I'm just really grateful that you chose to participate, so—

[00:57:42]

Lilla Callum-Penso: Well, thanks. How have your other interviews been going?

[00:57:45]

Michelle Little: They're good. So I'm going to go ahead and stop the recorder.

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[End of interview]