



**Stephen DeVries**  
**Food Photographer**  
**Birmingham, AL**  
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**Date: June 18, 2020**  
**Location: Remote Interview (Birmingham, AL)**  
**Interviewer: Michelle Little**  
**Length: 42 minutes**  
**Project: COVID-19 Oral History Project**

**Michelle Little:** So today is June 18<sup>th</sup> of 2020, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Stephen DeVries for the Southern Foodways Alliance COVID-19 Oral History Project, and we're conducting the interview today remotely via Zoom and Zencast. We're both at our homes in Birmingham, Alabama. And, Stephen, to start us out, since we're not doing a full life history, oral history interview like we normally do, could you introduce yourself and just give some background on yourself like if you were meeting someone new for the first time?

[0:00:41.7]

**Stephen DeVries:** Sure, yeah. So, yeah, I'm Stephen DeVries. I am a food and still-life photographer and director here in Birmingham, Alabama. I've been working in the photo industry for about thirteen years now and then in the photo and video industry for the past five to seven-ish years, and with my still work, it's predominantly food. Most of my client work is in the food and beverage industry, a lot of restaurants and grocery stores.

[0:01:11.2]

**Michelle Little:** Can you talk a little bit about setting up your business here in Birmingham and about your studio downtown and how long you've had that?

[0:01:25.6]

**Stephen DeVries:** Sure. Yeah, so I moved to Birmingham for college. Well, I transferred my senior year to study photography. I was at Auburn, and at the time, they didn't have a photo program, so I transferred to UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham] in 2007,

and during my final semester, I met quite a few photographers in town and started assisting professional photographers. And as soon as I graduated, I started working on my own, at the time, in weddings, shooting weddings. After a couple of years, I actually took a staff job doing documentary work with the church and their nonprofits that they support in New York. That was a one-year contract. When it ended, I was trying to figure out where to go next and I was sort of deciding at that point in time, was starting to look at leaving the wedding industry and finding a different genre of photography and decided to move back to Birmingham, because food was interesting to me and there were a tremendous amount of food publications based here in Birmingham, so it seemed like a really good spot to kind of test that out. So I came back and I tested a lot of things. I tried fashion and still life and I sort of did corporate portraiture headshots, a little bit of everything, but really kept gravitating towards food, and as I wrapped up my weddings and transitioned into food, I used just the structure and the network of magazines that were based here to sort of get things going. So I started with local magazines and did a lot of food photography with those, and then I used that to sort of pitch my work to regional magazines, and then with that, was able to pitch that work to national magazines, and then from there, grew into more commercial work, which is what we do now, for the most part. So it's sort of a long gradual process, but that's what brought us back to Birmingham originally, was sort of the grounding of the publication industry here that seemed like a really great place to be to start that style of work. I moved into The Phoenix Lofts on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue North. I lived there and had a live/work space, and then as my workflow and my workload got bigger, working and living in the same space wasn't really ideal anymore, and so I actually got a second loft on the fourth floor and lived on

the first floor and worked and lived in the same building, but separated work from home. And then again as my work continued to grow and the commercial clients got larger and the crews got larger, the production got bigger, we needed more space, so in 2016, we purchased part of the ACME Building, which is also on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue North just a few blocks away from The Phoenix, and renovated that into a studio. Then we've kind of added on to it and grown it a bit, but we've been there since 2016 in our own studio, which was great. One of the big benefits of moving into that space and growing it that way was we were able to sort of really build it and customize it how we wanted, whereas with The Phoenix, it was a rental, so you kind of got what you rented, whereas here I got to build the custom kitchen that we wanted and build the prop storage room and all of the things that I've collected in my mind over time working in studios in Chicago and Florida and New York, where a lot of places I work, I kind of picked and chose all of the things that I loved and we were able to really customize our place to make it just the perfect home for us.

[0:04:33.3]

**Michelle Little:** Yeah. I know you don't have like a typical workday or a typical workweek, but pre-pandemic, what was a workweek like for you lately?

[0:04:48.1]

**Stephen DeVries:** For several years straight, we have been super busy, which is awesome, because it's not always been that way and I know not everyone stays that way, but we've stayed really consistently busy. So for me, my typical workweek up to the

pandemic was-- there were sort of two things-- I was doing one of two things. I was either shooting-- a lot of my work is out of town. So I know I mentioned before I worked some in New York. I've worked some in Chicago. I work a lot in Florida, a lot in Atlanta. So there's a good bit of travel, and often I was working in studios in these other cities where the clients were, so there was a lot of that or working in my studio. But I was shooting a lot. If I wasn't shooting, then often my workweek was either meetings, prepping for shoots, so putting together pitches or pre-pro calls with clients, working out the logistics of shoots and then working with my in-house team to produce them, or it was soliciting new works and meeting with new clients, showing them my book, showing them our demo reel and just trying to get on people's radars for other work. So those are sort of the two sort of-- the office side of things and then the shooting side of things. But we were pretty slammed going back several years now in one of those two things, and sometimes both at the same time, depending on how crazy the week was.

[0:06:06.1]

**Michelle Little:** And if I remember correctly, you had to travel to New York right before a lot of the shutdowns. Is that right?

[0:06:18.6]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah, and that was actually for meetings. We found like a one-week window that I didn't have shoots, which we hadn't had in a little while, like a full solid week, and I had several clients that I had been emailing and connected with. I find for me personally, face-to-face meetings and just getting to connect with people has been such a

huge part of how I've grown my business, and so I booked a trip up there to revisit a couple old clients that I'd worked with and meet with several new clients that I hadn't met or hadn't worked with before, but had been emailing with. That was right-- this is March 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> or something like that. I was there for four or five days. I actually flew home for one night and then flew to Florida for a shoot on March 9<sup>th</sup> and then came home from Florida. It was a two- or three-day shoot and I came home, and then basically had a day or two home and then everything locked down right after that.

[0:07:10.0]

**Michelle Little:** What do you remember about, like, just the climate in New York at that time and then Florida, just the virus awareness? What were you thinking about it? Were you worried about traveling?

[0:07:25.1]

**Stephen DeVries:** So our first sort of like interaction on a business level and a personal level with the virus was we actually hired a new employee in January. He graduated from SCAD [Savannah College of Art and Design] and came on as our full-time digital tech and post-productionist, so he's doing all of our editing and assisting me on shoots, and we tried to order a new Mac laptop for him. All of Macs, they were shipping from Asia, I believe China, and so we were told it was a two- to five-day turnaround, and then we ordered it and a few days later they called and said it could be months because their shipping centers were all shut down. So that was like our first interaction where the virus sort of-- and I remember at the time joking, like, "How crazy it is that this virus that's

happening all the way across the world is affecting us here in Birmingham right now.”

We, at the time, had no idea what was to come. But then going to New York, it had just started to become, like, publicly aware that there were cases in the United States. I think it was on the West Coast, Seattle or Portland or something. There had been a couple of cases at the time. And while I was in New York, if I remember correctly, like, the first case was, like, actually identified and diagnosed in New York, and so when I was there, everyone was starting to talk about it. Everyone was starting to be-- like, I saw several friends, and normally we’d give each other hugs or shake hands, and a lot of them were sort of like, “No, we’re not going to touch anything right now. We’re going to sort of keep our distance,” which at that time was a very strange thing. Now we’ve sort of all fallen into the rhythm of that, but at the time, it was very strange to, like, see old friends-- I went out each night for dinner with people-- and then not want to, like, shake your hand or give you a hug. And I didn’t think too much of it at that time. I flew from there, like I said, home for a day and then on March 9<sup>th</sup>, flew down to Florida, and they had just announced that there were cases in Tampa, and I flew into Tampa, so I remember thinking, like, well, I just came from New York, where there’s just been a case-- and at that time, I believe it was like Seattle or Portland, one of the two, New York, and Tampa were like the only places that had confirmed, and so I was hitting two of them in a week. I actually got to Tampa and got sick right away. As soon as I was there, like, I think it was a Monday that I flew in and got a really sore throat that night and the next day I woke up feeling terrible, so I went straight to the doc, the MedHelp or Doc-in-the-Box there, and they had already set the table up out front. But their whole thing was, “Do you have a fever? Do you have a cough?” I had neither, and they said, “Okay. You can come

in.” That was the extent of the checking. So I went in and got tested and I had strep throat, so somehow, I’m pretty sure, from my three-and-a-half-year-old I picked up strep throat on my one day home. So I actually came home from there sick and slept off for a couple days, and then-- my wife’s a professor-- we had a spring break trip planned. We were like, “We’ll just postpone it till I feel better,” and then as soon as I felt better, the whole world locked down. So I remember it was just very strange, because, like, I was sick, but I knew that it wasn’t that, but then there was like a lot of that-- like, going to the doctor’s office, and first time in my entire life I’ve been to the doctors and been met outside by somebody at a table asking me questions before I went in. But at the same time, it was all still so casual. They just sort of asked, and they’re like, “Okay. You’re good. Go on in.” It wasn’t very serious yet. I mean, it was serious, but it wasn’t, like, perceived as as serious as, obviously, we all know it is now. So it was just a very strange, almost sort of surreal experience to, like, get sick in the midst of it, fly home, and then, like, realize what is all happening, that-- little did we know what was all going on in terms of the spread of the virus.

[0:10:50.8]

**Michelle Little:** Did they have the COVID tests ready in Tampa? Did they even consider testing you for that?

[0:10:57.2]

**Stephen DeVries:** I don’t know if they did. So I was actually in Lakeland, so I don’t know if they had it there yet or not, and I most certainly would assume they didn’t at this

Doc-in-a-Box. It was just sort of like a little MedShare place. They may have had them at the hospitals. I don't know. But I didn't have any of the-- because I had a really sore throat, but I didn't have any cough and I didn't have a fever and I hadn't lost taste. I didn't have any of the symptoms of it, and they did the rapid strep test and it came back-- I mean, he was back within minutes and say, "Oh, yeah, you 100 percent have strep," and put me on medicine. And I actually felt-- I was back 100 percent to normal within like two days. I think we caught it quick enough. But, yeah, there was no even discussion beyond the person asking me as I walked in the door, "Do you have a cough? Do you have a fever? Have you lost your taste?" You know, it was a couple of quick questions, and that was the extent of it.

[0:11:43.9]

**Michelle Little:** Wow. And now you have to answer that to go to a hair salon. [Laughter]

[0:11:47.7]

**Stephen DeVries:** Right. Or anywhere.

[0:11:49.9]

**Michelle Little:** Okay. So you get back and that's mid-March. Then what are some things that started to happen to you and your business after the shutdowns and the stay-at-home orders went into effect?

[0:12:03.1]

**Stephen DeVries:** So we had a ton of projects on the books, a lot of video projects for a variety of different brands on the books, and as soon as I got back from that, we started getting calls really quickly about people saying, “Hey, we’re going to put this on pause. It’s still happening, but we’re just going to put it on hold and come back to it.” And then it was sort of like one happened, then two, then three, then four, then, all of a sudden, everything was put on pause and on hold, and within a week or two of coming back, it was pretty obvious that we weren’t going to be shooting much, if anything, for a little while. Everyone had kind of pulled the plug on everything and just put everything on pause until we had a better idea of what was actually happening.

[0:12:40.0]

**Michelle Little:** And when they put the ordinance into effect here in Jefferson County, could you still go into your studio?

[0:12:52.0]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah.

[0:12:55.0]

**Michelle Little:** What happened to, like, any type of work you could still do?

[0:12:58.6]

**Stephen DeVries:** So at the very beginning, we could still work in the studio, but we didn’t have anything happening for the first couple of weeks. I’ve got myself plus three

others, so there's four of us on staff, so right away, we kind of let everyone go work remotely from home and just we were buttoning up old projects and just trying to keep juggling all the balls of the new projects that were going to happen eventually at some point, and with the possibility to still shoot in the studio. Then once the City of Birmingham announced their ordinance that shut down all non-essential businesses, my studio fell into that, and we actually called the city just to confirm that we could not shoot and was confirmed we could not shoot in the studio. So I actually went up there and picked up a good bit of my equipment and brought it home to my garage, because the City of Homewood had a different ordinance that would allow me to work, myself, from home. So we brought stuff home here just in preparation, in hopes that maybe something would pop up. That way, at least we had things here and were able to do it. We've got a garage that we were able to sort of transform into a little in-house photo studio. And then, like I said, shut the studio down, and largely, it was vacant, aside from my studio manager popped in once a week to check the mail, but outside of that, it was pretty much vacant for a pretty large stretch of time there.

[0:14:14.1]

**Michelle Little:** And did some things pop up that you were able to shoot at home?

[0:14:21.4]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah, I had a couple of clients that I've worked with regularly over the years that-- and being in the food industry, I had some restaurants, but also some grocery stores that were either staying busy or trying to stay busy that still had stuff they

wanted to produce, so I had a couple people call and ask if we'd be willing to do a remote shoot with a very, very small crew. Normally, our crew's at least four or five people, sometimes, especially if it's video, upwards of twenty, thirty people, and they asked if we could do it with one to two people on set and shoot from home and follow all of the local ordinances. So we were able to do just a few. I want to say we did two or three shoots across a period of a couple of weeks, but we did get to do a couple in the house and they went great, and that allowed us to sort of beta test our remote workflow, which works with Zoom as well, and breakout rooms and the ability to sort of move clients in and out and show people stuff in real time. So we kind of worked and dialed that in from the garage while shooting a couple of projects here.

[0:15:20.7]

**Michelle Little:** Yeah, and can you explain that a little further, like what a typical-- and I know this is a lot to ask you to explain, but what a typical that you would normally do with fifteen to twenty people, and then what you kind of had to pivot to doing in your garage with two to three people.

[0:15:38.8]

**Stephen DeVries:** So on a normal-- I'll just say a small shoot, because this is the easiest to explain. On a small shoot in the food industry, normally you'd have myself and my assistant and sometimes a second assistant, one that works the computers that's called a digitech, and the second assistant that helps moving lights and gear and things around. You'd have a food stylist and their assistant, and a prop stylist. So that would be your

crew of six. And then you would normally have either my producer or the agency or client producer or sometimes both producers. You would also usually have a couple of representatives from either the creative side of the agency or the client, so our directors or graphic designers, creative directors, so people that are sort of helping craft the vision for the shoot, and you're working with them directly. So even on a small shoot, you'd often have five or six photo crew and three to four, at least, clients, anywhere from five to ten people, and during the shoot, I would be collaborating with my lighting and camera angles with the prop stylist to build out the sets and figure out the backgrounds and all of the propping and then the food stylist to put the food together, and then the creatives, whether the art director, creative directors, would be working with us to make sure that we're hitting their vision just right and that we're getting everything done the way that they see it in their head so that when we're done and we hand them the files, it comes together in their designs or whatever they're utilizing these files for, right. So they're really collaborative on it. When we shifted to the house, to shooting at the house, it was me and a food stylist, and so we would have to do the propping ourselves. We, once or twice, had a prop stylist drop props off for us, but to minimize people on site, we didn't have them on set, so me and the food stylist had to kind of collaborate and deal with surfaces and props ourselves. I had to run the cameras, the computers, all the equipment, and the food stylist had to, like, prep, cook, style themselves, and it was just the two of us. And then we utilized Zoom to allow the creative directors and the agency contacts to sort of participate. So we utilized an iPad with a live camera on it that allowed them to see what we were doing, talk to us face-to-face. If they wanted to look at props, we could carry it over and allow them to see the props. Then we used a screenshare through Zoom

from my computer that we were shooting to so they could actually see the shots themselves, so they could see what they looked like with lighting and editing. So we kind of had two different things. Then on a more complex shoot if we had a creative director that was working with us and a client, we would work with the creative director and then have the client in a separate room in Zoom, and then when we were ready and had everything ready, we'd bring it all into that room to show them what it looked like, and that allowed us to sort of manage the workflow and kind of keep things flowing. But, yeah, it became a much more convoluted process than having someone just standing right next to you talking, when you have to sort of balance all of these things at once.

[0:18:20.3]

**Michelle Little:** Wow. Now, what about the food that you're actually shooting those days? Was it difficult-- I mean, because I'm thinking about grocery shopping during the early phases of the pandemic. It was very hit-or-miss. So were you able to get the food that you needed to shoot pretty easily?

[0:18:40.4]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah, so one of the first shoots we did was like a proprietary branded frozen pizza and they shipped them directly to us, so we just got boxes-- I mean, I think it was fifteen boxes, was just box after box after box of frozen pizzas, and, luckily, we have a second fridge in the basement and a deep freeze, so we were able to pack them all in. For the later shoots that came where we had to actually source various groceries-- I remember one was specialty cheeses and we had to have a variety of different cheeses-- it

was a combo of the client shipping us some that were going to be really hard to find, the food stylist and their assistant-- so they actually hired an assistant to shop ahead-- they were on set with us, but they hired to someone to help shop, went out to various different grocery stores to try and find stuff, and then also did online orders, used Amazon. So we just a variety of different platforms to try and get the right stuff here, whereas in the past, they would just go on a grocery run to the store and pick it up. Now it was doing online stuff, going to in-person stores, having a second person going to other in-person stores, and asking the client to ship things, all just to get the right stuff in.

[0:19:44.4]

**Michelle Little:** Good grief. Now, as things have started to slowly reopen, at what point were you able to go back and start working in your studio?

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**Stephen DeVries:** I don't remember when the exact day was, but when Birmingham city announced that their ordinance was going to relax and allow businesses to operate again, we went ahead and immediately all the equipment back from the garage. The garage worked out fine and it was definitely a great way to keep us shooting, at least on a minimum level, during, like, the beginning of all of this, but it was not the most ideal situation, especially because of the amount of equipment that we need, the kitchen space that's needed. It was just a lot here. So getting back to the studio definitely opened up the ability to work a little bit more smoothly. So we moved everything back right away. Even to today, we still have all of my staff working remotely unless they need to be at the

studio, so they're only there if they have to be, whether it's for a shoot or if my studio manager has to be up there prepping things, but outside of that, they're all still working remotely. But we did get everything back there and then started going back into productions there. And all of the travel productions have essentially frozen, so a lot of those people are now choosing to work remotely with us here.

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**Michelle Little:** Okay. And have you been able to keep all of your staff through all of this?

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**Stephen DeVries:** Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah. Like I said, there are three of us—well, four of us, three full-time staff members and myself—and everyone is still going strong right now. We applied for a PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan and got one of those, which helped during the very beginning stages of this, and then, yeah, everyone is still doing good at the moment.

[0:21:21.5]

**Michelle Little:** That's great. What was the process like? I mean, I've heard so many stories about the PPP application process. I mean, what was your experience like with figuring that out?

[0:21:37.9]

**Stephen DeVries:** We had a good experience with the process of it. So I work with a small local bank, so I have a banker who has worked with me for years, and we text—like, I have a very, like, close relationship, so it’s really easy for me to communicate. So we started talking immediately via text and then email, “Here’s what needs to happen. Go ahead and prep these files.” He kind of gave me a lot of coaching through what to do to be prepared before it even started, so we were able to give him our application. I mean, the second that it opened up, we had it all ready to go. Then the problem with it-- this is where it got complicated-- is, like, then the whole thing changed, and he said, “Hey, all that stuff we did, well, they just gave me new rules and it all changed, so we now have to amend it and change this paperwork and do these things differently.” And then it changed again and they said now the calculation for how much you can apply for changed based on this, that, and the other, and we had to change a bunch of other things. He worked really closely with us to keep it as smooth as possible, and it was a lot of back-and-forth, and it was stressful, because while I’m working with him, you’re seeing, like, the news saying, like, “The funds are running out. The funds are running out.” I kept seeing news briefs. So what happened was we finally got all the stuff through, got approved at the bank, got submitted to the SBA [Small Business Administration] and then got approved there, and then got an email back that said, “Sorry. The funds ran out.” So we, like, did everything all the way up to approvals, were all good to go, and then the money ran out before we got any funding. So he just kept our application open, and when they basically replenished the fund with that second round, he put ours through the day it opened, and then we got ours. So the process of working with the bank was good. The process of the

loan itself was a moving target. So everything we did, all of a sudden, we did the wrong thing, we had to change what we did again.

[0:23:17.0]

**Michelle Little:** So how long was it from when you applied to when you actually got funding?

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**Stephen DeVries:** It was several weeks. From the very first application, then running out of funding through them refunding, and then getting funds was probably close to a month, several weeks. But once they opened the second time up and he put our application through, I think we had funding in our account within like three days. I mean, once it all went through, it happened really fast, but it was a long and murky process. We just never quite knew if we were actually doing the right thing or what email we were about to get next.

[0:23:53.8]

**Michelle Little:** How much revenue do you estimate you lost through the shutdowns?

[0:24:00.8]

**Stephen DeVries:** We were talking about this the other day. It's a really tricky thing for me because of the way my billing works is rolling, so we were still getting paid a ton through all of this for jobs that we had done earlier in the spring, even big jobs we'd done

last year that had a really slow payout or things that were in post-production that we were wrapping up. We definitely took a hit I think really specifically in April, because our funding for the PPP didn't come through till May. We worked for the first half of March, so we were doing okay in March, but then April was sort of our really dry month. We definitely had a few little shoots in the garage that kept us going. Then once May hit, we had the PPP funding, we started doing more work back in the studio. Then June, once it opened up, we started shooting again pretty regularly. So it wasn't as bad as it could have been and definitely not as bad as a lot of-- we were really lucky to have had a very, very busy fall, so we had a good backlog of things kind of coming across the door and we were in post-production, so we could still work on things that we'd already shot, so we were able to keep things going in some capacity.

[0:25:00.3]

**Michelle Little:** And so what are things looking like now? How much back to normal do you feel like you are right now? [Laughter]

[0:25:14.7]

**Stephen DeVries:** In terms of our workload, we're just right back to normal. I mean, probably about a month ago, maybe not quite that far, but towards the end of May, all of the clients that had, like, postponed or put things on hold all came back at the exact same time, and so June has been just as busy as I've ever been and July is packed out as well. So it came right back. I think part of it is a lot of people that had put everything on pause needing to get it done now and some of them having budgets that will dry up if they don't

use them within a certain time period. So I think there's a lot of people that had drug them along as far as they could and are like, "All right. We've got to do these things now." I also just hear chatter amongst clients in our meetings, is there's some level of apprehension about "Is this going to all lock back down? So we should go ahead and get our shooting in now and get production happening." So I think a lot of people are also trying to do things now while they feel like they can, not knowing what next month or the month after might look like. So I think there's a lot of things in play. But we really hit the ground running again, and I joke with my wife that, like, it had been so slow that I'm really grateful to be busy, but I wasn't ready to be so busy, because we were-- like, there was no transition. It was from zero to 100 like overnight, which is a great problem to have, because after having months of not working, it's great to be busy, especially with a staff and to have everyone back active again. But it was a much, much quicker transition into normal working mode than we were expecting, actually.

[0:26:39.0]

**Michelle Little:** And what, if anything, has stayed-- like, as far as the number of people you have on shoots, just what still looks different as far as your workflow and the way you're doing things now because of COVID?

[0:26:58.9]

**Stephen DeVries:** We've kept crews to as minimal as possible per the productions that we're doing. So some productions, you just can't do without a certain level of crew members there to make it happen, but to whatever extent we can, we've minimized it.

But, luckily, I have an awesome staff and my staff worked really hard. They did some OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] training. They did a bunch of webinars for various production companies that were working through policies and procedures and ways to proceed in a post-COVID United, or during. I don't know if we're calling this post-COVID United yet, but sort of how to proceed with production now that this is the world that we're living in or this is our reality. So we put together, really early into this, really robust policies and procedures that we're following at work that require all crew members to read these documents, sign these documents, and then follow specific sort of things in terms of social distancing, masks on set, having temps taken when they come in, answering specific questions about if they've been around people who they know have had it, things like that that allow us to create as much safety as we can on set. So that's definitely changed the workflow, because now we have a lot more steps. Used to be you just came to the studio and walked in to shoot. Now there's a lot of steps involved in doing that. There's a lot of extra paperwork on our side. It also gives our clients a sense of security knowing that we're taking as much precaution as possible, gives our crew the ability to relax, knowing that everyone's doing the best they can to keep things as safe as possible and that we're taking it very seriously. So it sort of keeps the atmosphere as normal as possible, but being on set with half the amount of people that you normally have, sometimes less than that, wearing a mask the whole time, keeping your distance, those things just sort of change the nature and the culture of what we do, so it definitely has a very different vibe than what we're all used to. And even down to-- there's just a lot of collaboration in what we do. You're working with the food stylist, the prop stylist, and myself, and moving things and tweaking things, and everyone

sort of is collaborating to get that perfect shot, whereas now if you want a prop moved, you have to ask the prop person. You don't touch the props if you're not them because we're trying really hard to eliminate-- and if the food needs to be tweaked, there's no one touching it. It used to be in the past where if the prop stylist tweaked something, they could just reach over and click the camera just to see what it looked like, and now no one touches the camera except for the digitech. So there's a lot more structure in place, that it slows things down a little bit, but it also just changes sort of the whole feel of the production now.

[0:29:22.8]

**Michelle Little:** So, I mean, like you just said, it slows things down. Are your shoots taking longer each day than they used to?

[0:29:30.6]

**Stephen DeVries:** Some of them are taking longer than they used to. Some of them, we're having to just acknowledge that this is our current and new reality, and so we have to take that into account when planning the shoots. So that's been one of our ongoing conversations with clients, is just discussing how to set realistic expectations for how much we can do, knowing that the workflow is just completely different than what we've been doing for the last-- forever. And so, understanding that. Instead of someone standing next to me going, "I like that," or, "No, move it to the left," now I have to get on Zoom, say, "Hey, guys, sign back on. I'm here. Can you look at this?" They have to look at it, they discuss, and then we do it. So that thing that used to take five seconds now takes five

minutes. We just have to take all that into account. So there's been a lot of discussions going into shoots with clients about managing expectations and making sure that we're all aligned on what we feel confident we can realistically accomplish in a day, and it's different than it used to be. But then, yeah, we also just had longer days. There have been quite a few longer days where things just go past what we're used to. And I think if this becomes the normal, that'll have to be sort of a bigger discussion on how you handle it. Right now I think everyone, especially on the production side, the stylists, the photographers, everyone's just excited and happy to be back working, so no one's too worried about if the day goes over by a little bit, but on a long term, there's really specific rules about how long crew can work and what breaks you have to give per how many hours on set, and so there's a lot of that, once we get back into larger-scale crews that'll have to all be considered when thinking through how to handle COVID-19 policies. But for the moment, everyone's just excited to be there working, so we'll push through and make it happen.

[0:31:06.4]

**Michelle Little:** I don't know if this touches any areas of your work or not, but as we all watch commercials or look at marketing pre-pandemic, there's certain things that just make us cringe now, like just people touching things. So does this new messaging or new way of looking at things, does that touch any area of your work just as far as what makes us cringe now? [Laughter]

[0:31:36.3]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah, we have lots of discussions, some on that note, but more regularly, a lot of our discussions just hinge around how does the messaging—whatever the client I’m working with, how does this messaging feel-- “evergreen” is a word that’s thrown around a lot. How does it feel like it’s something that can last, but also is really appropriate right now? So there’s a lot of nuance in specific word choices or language to make sure that it feels really relevant to what’s happening right now, because we’re all living through this reality together and it’s a very abnormal reality for all of us. But then also is it something that, if and when this sort of starts to change and we go back to whatever normal looks like, will this also not feel so tied to COVID that it’s a sort of one-and-done and now it’s dated and we have to do something new. So there’s a lot of consideration on how to use language. We had that discussion with a client today on the phone, just how to use language that says—like with this specific client, it was how do we use language that says we’re spending more time cooking right now because instead of going out to restaurants and being out eating, we’re all home cooking, so how do we use language that says we’re spending more time cooking without saying, “We’re trapped at home because of COVID-19, so we’re spending more time cooking,” but says it in a way that when people see it, they can relate, “Oh, this is probably because I’m stuck at home,” but also if we played it in two years and this is history for us, they could see it in that day as like, “Oh, we’re just spending more time--.” So there’s a lot of those discussions, like how to craft language and messaging around intentionality for our current time, but also beyond. And then there are a lot of discussions about things-- and, I mean, we shot a piece of a commercial early on in this that was really COVID-19-related, and then all of the current political stuff happened and the company froze the commercial

because it didn't feel like the right timing for it with the messaging that they had had. So there's a lot of movement. I think everyone is just reacting as best they can right now, but it's a very reactionary-- whatever happens next, now we have to sort of take that and adjust our course based on that. But, yeah, it's definitely on everyone's radar when they're discussing creative and coming up with concepts and making game plans. I mean, we watched-- something popped up the other day about a commercial, was people, like, licking their fingers. That was literally released in March and then instantly was pulled off. But it was a beautiful commercial, but no longer something that anyone wants to see in our current situation. So I think there's a lot of that happening.

[0:33:51.7]

**Michelle Little:** Yeah. So, I mean, what are you thinking as we move into the summer and the fall? I mean, what are you expecting or hoping for your business?

[0:34:05.9]

**Stephen DeVries:** I mean, our hope is that the curve continues to flatten and lessen and things sort of slowly but surely shift back to normal and we can continue doing the productions that we're doing now, but also start to slowly edge back into the productions that we're used to doing. There's something about the energy of a large crew. The bigger the crew, the more collaboration, the more moving parts, and as the photographer or the director, I get to sort of work alongside everyone there, and there's just a great energy to that that's a little bit lost right now with everyone having to stay small and stay separate and keep your-- all this stuff. So I think there's the hope that we'll get back to that. I

think the reality right now for us is that people are very busy right now coming out of the first wave of the-- not knowing if there's going to be a second wave, and so right now it's just get into production, work and do what we can do, and then see what happens next. I think we're just sort of trying to be really flexible and prepared for whatever, so if that is we start to get back into big production and get to work on the big projects, awesome. If it's that a second wave happens and we have to slow down again, we're just trying to really prepare ourselves for whatever's next and just be ready to kind of go with the flow as it happens.

[0:35:18.2]

**Michelle Little:** What about travel for you? Do you have upcoming shoots that you've got to travel for? Do you think you'll be traveling as much in the future?

[0:35:26.7]

**Stephen DeVries:** I've done one travel shoot since the whole pandemic started and it was to Nashville, so it was drivable. Right now I've communicated with most of my regular clients that I'm happy to travel if it's drivable, but I'm trying not to get on airplanes. Beyond just the health potential risks of being on a plane, for us, we have to travel with a lot of equipment. I have to travel with a couple crew members, so it's just a lot more involved. So we just have a little more control over our own sort of safety when we can drive, so we're trying to limit anything out of town to driving. But even with that said, I've only had one client that even wanted to do a shoot out of town, and everyone else right now as been really on board with shooting remote with us here, working in

Birmingham. We have a great crew, a great sort of infrastructure for everything that we need to produce shoots here, and so for the time being, it seems like most of my clients aren't even working at their-- they're all working from home or working remotely, especially my clients in the larger cities, like Atlanta and New York, for sure. Like, a lot of them aren't going back to the office, so the last thing they want is us to come up there to an office that they're not in or to a studio that they're not in. So I think for the time being, we're going to stay with shooting locally and remote as much as possible, shooting travel only if it's drivable and we feel really comfortable with it, and that's something I have to gauge with my crew members each time. And beyond the actual safety of it, there's also just the comfort level of being able to tell my crew here, "I haven't been anywhere. I haven't traveled. We've been really quarantined and really safe," and once I start doing things like getting on airplanes, suddenly, all the people I work with back here have to be cautious of what and where I've been. So we're trying to just maintain as much comfort level and safety for everyone around us, as well as ourselves, that we can. With a collaborative job like this, there's just so many more people than myself involved in it, so we're trying to make sure that we think about the big picture and how do we do this in a way that's sustainable within our current circumstances.

[0:37:26.5]

**Michelle Little:** And what about networking with new clients? Because, I mean, you said earlier it's-- I mean, of course, it's always best to meet potential clients in person and really get to know people. Have you been able-- are you trying to do things via Zoom now, or how are you navigating that?

[0:37:45.7]

**Stephen DeVries:** I haven't done much. I mean, when this first started, it was sort of no one knew what was happening and everyone was just trying to figure out which way was up, so we really sort of slowed that down. We, like I said, continued into post-production on jobs we had wrapped and started working on pre-pro on jobs that were coming at some point and just were trying to get things going. We started back into a little bit of production in house here, literally in my basement and my garage, and then were able to transition back to the studio. So in the midst of all that, we've sort of really been focused on the production that's happening, the post-production from before, and then having training, setting up policies and procedures, putting together documents, and just preparing for how to shoot in this COVID-19 world that we're in now. So with all that said, we haven't really had a lot of time to do marketing. We've done a little bit of-- like, we send e-blasts out usually quarterly. We send print mailers out. We haven't done any print mailers because I don't know that anyone wants to touch anything physical right now, but we've done a few e-blasts and then largely just kept the social media stuff going slowly but surely, and then really focused on production right now. We haven't had a chance to do much networking, and that's something that we'll have to start to consider moving through the summer and into the fall, like how do we keep that going, because it has to sort of be a revolving door. You always have to be going out and meeting new people and just continuing to network and grow your network, so I'll have to start thinking about what that looks like, but we haven't really gotten into that too much yet since this all started.

[0:39:11.8]

**Michelle Little:** Yeah, for sure. Well, I think those are all the questions I have. Is there anything that I didn't ask or that we didn't talk about that you wish people knew about what photographers are dealing with at this time, or food photographers in particular?

[0:39:33.0]

**Stephen DeVries:** Yeah. I've talked to a lot of photographers, because I have a ton of friends in the photo industry. I feel like food photographers that do the type of work I do, which is largely commercial and largely studio-based, are actually probably in the best position because you can shoot it without going places and you can shoot it without people. Larger restaurants, especially with, now, takeout and e-commerce stuff, are doing okay, and grocery stores are doing well, and so there's still stuff happening there. I think it feels to me like the photographers that I've spoken to that are really struggling are editorial ones because magazines are really getting hit hard right now, and then photographers that do anything to do with people because there's so little interaction available. So portrait photographers, fashion photographers, documentary photographers, those people seem to be the ones that are getting hit the hardest because there's just this level of disconnect where "We can't do that right now. We can't be around other people." So I feel like it's worked really well for us, and we feel really lucky and really blessed that, like, we have clients that are still active during this, whereas a lot of people don't have clients that are active at all. I think it's just going to be a continually evolving situation to sort of see what happens next and where do people go, because at the same

time, there's also restaurants that are just shutting down left and right and people going out of business. So there's just so much movement happening in all directions. But, yeah, I would say in terms of, like, what's going on with photographers right now, this studio-based still-life photographers and food photographers seem to be the ones that are able to weather this the best just because the nature of the work allows us to keep going, which has been our experience. Like I said, we had the one really slow month, but one slow month isn't a big deal, whereas a lot of people I know have had four slow months. So that's been kind of the way that we've experienced it so far.

[0:41:28.6]

**Michelle Little:** That makes sense, yeah. All right. Well, I'm going to go ahead and stop recording, but hang on the line.

[0:41:36.5]

**Stephen DeVries:** Perfect.

[End of interview]