



Katherine Wilkin

Roanoke, VA

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Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

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Project: COVID-19 and Foodways

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Jessica Taylor: Okay. This is Jessica Taylor and Iris Sweeney interviewing Katherine Wilkin on May 2nd, 2021, and this is for the COVID-19 oral history project. So your life has changed a lot since we talked last. Can you talk about some of those changes and where you are now?

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah. I don't remember exactly what month it was when we talked last, but in August I moved to New York City and started law school in September at Columbia. And I just had my last final exam of my One-L year on Friday.

Jessica Taylor: Congratulations! That's awesome!

Katherine Wilkin: Thank you. Yeah. It's been a very weird experience and change, especially, like, I have lived in Roanoke my whole life, basically, other than when I was an undergrad and was still in Virginia, so New York City is different, for sure. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Yeah. How has been adjusting to life in New York?

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Katherine Wilkin: It's been good overall, I would say. Our classes were mostly remote. I had a couple of hybrid classes where I would go in to one of the bigger lecture halls and they would have certain seats that were marked that we could sit in, and we would have our assigned seats which was definitely-- I enjoyed those classes a lot because I found it a lot easier to focus when I was in person than when I was on Zoom. But, yeah, it's been good. I've never been much of a city person, so I think it's been to my benefit, actually, that things have still been pretty closed down. It's not terribly overwhelming. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: And what was the move like in August?

Katherine Wilkin: It went pretty well, actually. I drove my car up here with our cats and my partner.

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And my partner's dad drove the U-Haul for us, which was very generous of him to do. And, yeah, it was just kind of a whirlwind. And we drove up overnight and unpacked and set everything up, and then we returned the U-Haul, and they went on their way. I think the most interesting thing was the two-week quarantine that I had to do coming up from Virginia. It gave me a lot of time to set up the apartment and get everything decorated. I don't think it would be as decorated as it is if I hadn't had that two-week period where I couldn't leave, so . . . [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: In terms of staying in touch with people in Roanoke, how are you doing that, and how are you finding that fits into your life?

Katherine Wilkin: A couple of different ways. So my family is still down there, and my partner's family is still down there, so we check in with them a fair amount. I also have stayed on with POWHR part time as the data coordinator, 'cause there were a few projects that I still wanted to hang onto and keep updated.

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So they have hired a new coordinator, which is really exciting. She's doing a really good job so far. But I still have generally weekly calls with the co-chairs of POWHR, so we'll check in through that. And actually next week I'm heading back down for a little while to see them and see my family and everything, so that'll be really exciting.

Jessica Taylor: In terms of your Roanoke friends that were involved in the restaurant scene on some level, how have you seen their situations evolve in the last almost year now?

Katherine Wilkin: A few of them have actually left the restaurant world, which has been interesting. Some have fully left Roanoke and moved to go to school, like I did. Others have just transitioned to other positions.

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A lot of them left the restaurant that I had previously worked at, and the former executive chef opened a sort of like upscale grocery sort of close to downtown that a handful of people transitioned to, which, from what I can tell, it's been thriving, which is excellent. I can't imagine what opening a new restaurant or food service facility is like in the middle of a pandemic, but it seems to have been going generally pretty well.

Jessica Taylor: That's great. Have you noticed patterns in who has decided to leave or close up shop or things like that in Roanoke?

Katherine Wilkin: Um . . . I would say yes, but it's not necessarily-- I think it's just people who, like, were particularly close with each other once this other place got up and running and they needed more staff, those individuals were pretty excited to go work with their former boss again.

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As far as broadly across the Roanoke restaurant scene, I'm not totally sure, actually. I don't know a ton about who has closed permanently, who's closed temporarily, how things are opening back up. That's one thing I've been pretty disconnected from since I moved.

Jessica Taylor: This might be another question you're not totally able to answer, but do you have a sense of how people in the restaurant world have continued supporting each other since we spoke last summer?

Katherine Wilkin: Well, I know there's still-- Roanoke has a mutual aid program. I saw that they had a GoFundMe a while back. I don't know if they're still taking donations, but I'm of the impression that they still exist. I know that a lot of folks have generally been encouraging each other to get takeout from places or eat outside when they can, especially now that things are opening up a little bit more.

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So I think that's been a big part of it, especially.

Jessica Taylor: Great. We also talked a lot about the Tip Jar, and when we talked last you were thinking about closing it down. Has that been the case?

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah. So I closed the donations for the Tip Jar quite a while ago actually, and I was slowly distributing it for a little while. I still have a little bit of money from that left to distribute. That's part of why I was looking into the mutual aid program because I'm going back and forth between making some late additional donations to people who are still on the list, because I do still have that spreadsheet live and people can still use it to send individual donations. It's just the pooling that is closed. I was thinking about doing that with just a few people or donating it to the mutual aid program, if that's possible, so still haven't fully decided what I'm gonna do with that but thinking about it.

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Jessica Taylor: Reflecting back, what do you feel like the long-term effects of the Tip Jar were on folks in the restaurant world?

Katherine Wilkin: I'd like to believe that it gave people a little bit of hope, even though it was generally a pretty small amount. I did hear from some people that they were getting some contributions through that. And I'm hoping-- this is kind of broader than just the Tip Jar, but I think in general the mutual aid programs that have sprung up in Roanoke and throughout the entire country, I think a lot of them are going to keep going in some capacity. They might shift their focus a little bit depending on what is going on at the time, but I think that sort of focus and people wanting to put energy into mutual aid, I think that'll keep going.

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And I think a lot of people saw the benefits of that when you can't necessarily rely on other programs or when life is just really uncertain, being able to rely on each other is really important.

Jessica Taylor: What's been your sense of the effect of the stimulus checks, which I don't think either of those had happened when we talked last, on people that you know in Roanoke and obviously yourself, as well?

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah. So I'll start with myself. I appreciated it. I was, unfortunately, not in the-- not unfortunately-- I was fortunately in the bracket of people who didn't necessarily need it because I was working from home still with POWHR. So I chose to donate a fair amount of it. I also did keep some for my savings account because taking out law school loans is not a fun thing to do. [Laughter]

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I think it did help a handful of people. I don't know. The rollout was a little weird to me, if that makes sense. I think there just was always a lot of uncertainty surrounding it, even when they started talking about the first one, and even the second one, too, just what that was gonna look like. And I know when they did come out, I saw a lot of stories of people who got stimulus checks who didn't even live in the US and just a bizarre distribution that went on with that. But I do think it made as much of a difference as \$1200 can for people, especially depending on where they're living and what the cost of living is there. I think personally with my own politics, I would've preferred to see a little bit more of a robust program for those who were truly in need, but yeah.

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Jessica Taylor: I guess one of my last questions before I ask some follow-ups was about the places on Williamson that you were concerned about in your previous interview.

Katherine Wilkin: Mm-hmm.

Jessica Taylor: I think there was a pho place and then a place that did tacos, and I wanted to see if you had kept up with what had happened to the places that were giving you comfort last summer?

Katherine Wilkin: I don't know if-- I believe they're still open. I think my friends would've told me if they closed because they also really enjoy those places. I haven't kept up closely with them, although I have had-- because pho is such a comfort food for me, I've only found a couple of places up here that are really nailing it so far and one of them's all the way down in Chinatown, which is the opposite side of Manhattan for me so it's harder to get to.

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So visiting that pho place is definitely going to be on my list when I go home, so hopefully they're still doing okay. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Okay. So you mentioned that you're coming back home for POWHR-related stuff.

Katherine Wilkin: Mm-hmm.

Jessica Taylor: Do you want to talk about how that work has evolved and how mutual aid has informed that or affected that?

Katherine Wilkin: Sure. Like I said, a lot of the work was remote anyway because everyone on the MVP line is pretty spread out. I think people shifted to even more remote than they were, of course, which is always hard, especially when those in-person meeting times are incredibly valuable. So the reason I'm going down is the Mountain Valley Watch team will do some retreats here and there.

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And since we're all finally vaccinated, we figured it would be a good time to do it and get together and catch up with each other, so I'm really looking forward to that. I think as far as how mutual aid has informed it, I think there's always been this ethos within the organization and the communities of helping each other out and supporting each other. So if there was any change, I just believe that it maybe solidified that a little bit more, although, like I said, it's always been a big part of it. That was kind of the origins of it anyway was supporting each other and helping each other through fighting a massive pipeline. One thing that I've been following not super

closely recently but there are a couple of runners that are doing a protest run along the entire route and watching videos on Instagram of people checking in with them and helping to feed them and just following them on their run is really cool to see happen.

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Jessica Taylor: I meant to ask you about the food that folks were bringing to the runners. Do you know anything about that in particular?

Katherine Wilkin: I don't. I think it was just kind of a potluck situation. I got a couple of pictures from people who went to-- I think it was, like, the beginning of it up in Northern West Virginia, just like a little outdoor gathering at a park with some home-cooked food that looked nice.

Jessica Taylor: What are your predictions for the future of the area in terms of the restaurant scene, but also in terms of mutual aid as more people are getting vaccinated and as things are kind of opening up and people are also getting restless for the summer? [Laughter]

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah. I'm excited to see what happens over the summer, especially. I do personally have some lingering concerns about some of the variants that are going on, so there's still the impacts of that up in the air.

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But I do think that with people getting restless, like you mentioned, I know I definitely want to go out and not be cooking for myself all the time again. [Laughter] I'm sure a lot of other people are feeling that way. And I think particularly in a place like Roanoke where there is a lot of open space, it's easier to do that. So I think that'll have a really positive impact on the restaurant scene.

I am interested to see, too, if anybody expands. I haven't seen anything about-- I have no reason to expect that they would, but I think that'll be interesting to see. As far as mutual aid in Roanoke, again, I like to believe that it'll just continue to happen in some form or another. I don't know what that's gonna look like.

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I think after this collective struggle that we've all been through in the last year now, I think people might take some time to take care of themselves and their loved ones, maybe shift away from a focus on mutual aid, especially as things pick up and get a little bit better, in a way that's fully understandable. I mean, we've all been trying to take care of each other for a full year and I think it's fair to be a little bit selfish now that things are hopefully getting a little bit better. But yeah, I think the restaurant scene will bounce back. I think Roanoke is gonna keep growing. I mean, it's a hospital town and even in the time from when I left in 2013 to go to college and then came back in 2017, it changed so much and got cooler. I don't know if it was a product of my age or if it actually had grown.

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But yeah, I think it'll continue to get better.

Jessica Taylor: Awesome. Iris, can I turn it over to you?

Iris Sweeney: Sure, yeah. One question I had was being involved in the Tip Jar, and I know it's kind of coming to a close at this point, but do you think that's changed some of your habits as, like, a consumer at restaurants?

Katherine Wilkin: Not necessarily. Having worked in restaurants for so long, I've always been the kind of person to over-tip and be a little bit conscious of what the workers are going through because I did it for so long, so I get it. I think one thing-- kind of tangential, but one thing that I've learned throughout the pandemic in general about frequenting restaurants is some of the pros and cons of delivery services.

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And while it's a great way for restaurants to continue to serve customers, especially when they can't be there in person, a lot of those delivery services take a lot off the top, and there's also additional workers implicated so you have tips to the delivery people, you have tips to the restaurant workers. So that's actually one thing that I'm interested to see how it evolves, as well, 'cause I know I have been a little bit more conscious about trying to go and pick up food when I can instead of getting it delivered because it's just that additional cost from the restaurants, especially, and that can make a big difference, even just a couple dollars on every order.

Iris Sweeney: Right. Yeah. And then, I think the only other question I had was, what do you miss about physically being in Roanoke?

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What do you miss about being more-- I know you're still involved with POWHR but being a little bit more connected to the larger activist scene in the area?

Katherine Wilkin: I miss the mountains a lot. [Laughter] I'm very, very excited to go back. I know that there's hiking and outdoor activities around New York City but, especially being in law school, it's really hard to get out of the city and to have that time. And Central Park just

doesn't do it. People will tell you that, oh, you need to go outside, go to Central Park. It's not the same. It's beautiful, but . . . [Laughter] Yeah, I'm really excited to just be back in a more rural space and reconnect with the folks back home because, yeah, I just haven't been able to stay as plugged in as I would like to, but it's about what I expected really.

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Iris Sweeney: Right.

Jessica Taylor: Is there anything we should talk about or that we didn't get to that we should get to?

Katherine Wilkin: Not that I can think of. I mean, generally, life has kind of proceeded in this weird new normal, and law school has been kind of like all encompassing with my brain capacity really. [Laughter] I'm still, like, becoming a little bit more functional again after taking all of those exams. So, yeah, I can't think of anything though off the top of my head.

Jessica Taylor: Well, as a closing question, do you feel like activism during COVID or mutual aid during COVID has influenced your career trajectory up to this point?

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Katherine Wilkin: Yeah. I mean, I did always know that I wanted to go into environmental law. I wasn't totally sure what I wanted that to look like. I think the pandemic in general and mutual aid that's gone on during that has helped to, weirdly enough, both narrow and expand what I want that to look like. So I think I might be moving-- I might try to move away from the administrative end of environmental law which does a lot of appellate litigation and is a little bit more removed from the impacted communities. I think I'd rather do a community or movement

lawyering model. But that also comes with the expansion of the subject matter because, especially in New York but everywhere really, environmental law and environmental justice is inextricably tied to social justice and community equity.

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And I'm excited to see how that plays out. There are a couple of organizations in the area that do environmental justice activism through the law that I'm really excited to hopefully get involved with. So, yeah, I've kind of broadened what I might be looking at instead of necessarily just doing environmental work, but yeah.

Jessica Taylor: Awesome. Well, that's perfect. Here, let me stop, and hopefully nothing will go wrong. Thank you for your time.

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