

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021



Russell Chisholm
Roanoke, Virginia

Date: May 7, 2021
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Interviewer: Jessica Taylor
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Jessica Taylor: Okay, there we go. So, this is Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble interviewing Russell Chisholm. It is May 7, 2021, and he's calling in from Newport, Virginia, and we're in Blacksburg, Virginia.

So we're going to just ask you some follow-ups from the first half of your interview which we did, I believe, early last summer, which is incredible. [laughs] But first thing I wanted to ask you about that we had talked about was the supply chain between the coffee growers who you actually—you know them, and then coming to Appalachian Virginia, and I wanted to see how the supply lines have changed or evolved over the last year since we last talked.

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Russell Chisholm: Okay. Well, I guess good news, as far as availability, is that there have been very few interruptions in supply. I think the primary concern, particularly for producers, for small producers, is that getting their coffee to market was harder just because the markets, the demand side, slowed down to much with so many things being shut down. So where people ended up in a problem was having too much coffee in warehouses or in transit and those kinds of things, with no end destination for them. So what we found is that we've had shippers, growers, suppliers that were looking for roasters that would be able to take more coffee than they could possibly use, so that they could get it out of their warehouses and make sure it was still available to people before it started to really degrade in terms of quality, which would make it even harder for them to be able to move that, is probably kind of where we ended up over the last year, was trying to help out some smaller producers that we worked with in the past, just get their coffee

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

kind of into our facility, where we would know we would have some customers for it, as opposed to them getting stuck with it.

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Jessica Taylor: How has that affected you over the last year? Have there been, like, big changes in business on your side?

[00:02:49]

Russell Chisholm: There have been, but it's been an interesting change in the way, kind of how we do things. So once we linked up with the Interfaith Food Pantry in Blacksburg, we developed a really good relationship with them to have a local roaster to produce specialty-grade coffee for a kind of a unique clientele there, people who were relying on the food bank. Some of the feedback that we've gotten from people has just been incredible. Ordinarily, they would get kind of grocery store-grade coffee, and they're grateful for what they do get, what is provided there by the Pantry, by the volunteers and that kind of thing. So, they kind of have a local roaster step in and say, "Why not have something carefully crafted just for you?" I think this was interesting.

As we were talking about some of this overstock, I guess, oversupply coffee that we were trying to find a home for, that turned out to be a perfect place to use a lot of that coffee. What it meant for us as a small roaster, though, was bringing in a lot more inventory than we're normally comfortable with. But knowing that it does have this home because of this relationship with the pantry and other stuff that we're doing, just donations to different things or whatever, allowed us to kind of make that work

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

somehow, that it's not a profit-driven venture. That is a labor-of-love kind of operation there. [laughs]

[00:04:42]

Jessica Taylor: So, how much coffee were you able to supply to the Interfaith Food Pantry in the last—gosh, I mean, when did that start and then how much has there been?

[00:04:57]

Russell Chisholm: I am not certain on the numbers. Brian actually handles most of those arrangements. I am not sure total pounds, how much we're sending over to them right now. But what it turned into, it started out with an effort that was basically driven by our existing mail-order and home delivery. Customers would purchase coffee that we would then send over to the Pantry, and the Pantry liked that community-driven effort so much, they said, "Well, we are buying coffee from grocery store chains or from these other suppliers in order to stock the Pantry, provide that for people, so why don't we just get it from you guys?" And I'm not certain on how much pounds per month we are at this point, but it is a lot more than what we were doing when it was generously being donated by customers. So we're in this kind of weird sort of—we were in the middle of that transaction, then it just became just dealing directly with the Pantry to send it to them based on their orders.

I feel like—I don't want to say a number, because I'll probably get it wrong, but there was hundreds of families that they were serving through that location, sometimes picking up a couple of times a month.

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

[00:06:18]

Jessica Taylor: That’s great. In terms of your customer base, how you were doing business before, how have your relationships with your customers changed since we talked last, since last summer?

[00:06:32]

Russell Chisholm: I think that after a couple of rough months there, particularly with the restaurant side, this specialty shop side being completely shut down. I think we talked last time, we were all adhering to stay-at-home orders and things like that. So people who had income or could work remotely and those kinds of things shifted over more to home delivery and home subscription types of purchases of coffee, started making coffee more at home, started getting more interested in what they were making at home, as opposed to just popping in somewhere and getting whatever the coffee of the day was. So it was just really encouraging to see how people responded in a direct—like an intentional support of our tiny little coffee roasting business, like “What do you guys need? What helps you the most? Is it ordering through the website? Is it home delivery?” So there was more direct communication, as opposed to just kind of seeing orders come into the website and sending them out.

People would contact us, like email, and say, “Can I pick it up here?” or, “Can you leave it here and we can leave you a check?” or, “Can I use my own containers?” Just a lot of—it just had a real community sense to it, even though we weren’t necessarily seeing people. We don’t have a retail shop. They weren’t coming in, they weren’t

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

interacting with us that way. We would sneak up to their house with our masks on and leave the coffee on the porch or whatever. [laughs]

Then it reached a level, I just think, of kind of a sustainable and consistent demand in production that has been really encouraging. Between that and the way that people stepped up to support the Pantry, it was phenomenal.

[00:08:56]

Jessica Taylor: The other thing we talked about last time was the Virtual Tip Jar. How have you seen interaction with the Virtual Tip Jar change in the last year or six months?

[00:09:10]

Russell Chisholm: We saw new arrivals onto that roster, as we call it, really drop off. There've only been a couple of people, like two, literally two people within the last six to eight months or so that enrolled in that, and then we also had a pool fund that we were collecting for folks that didn't want to kind of sift through the list and find someone to give to directly. They would give to the pool, and we would distribute that. That tapered off a lot, too. I think people thought that folks were getting back to work in larger numbers than they actually were, and then other folks—because, again, the tip jar was completely set up to try to help support people in the service industry in Southwest Virginia and New River Valley area. So as businesses shifted over to curbside, they were able to keep a couple people employed here and there, or they shifted over to delivery. They were able to keep a few people employed here and there.

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

A lot of folks, I think, found work outside of that industry, and that's why we started seeing such a dramatic dropoff in the number of people who were enrolling in the Virtual Tip Jar. Then I think just over time, it's sort of natural for the sense of urgency to taper off in terms of people donating to it for us to distribute those funds. So we distributed everything that was collected up to a point, and that fund is still open for people to contribute to, but I don't remember the last time. It's been several months since anybody has sent anything there. I can give you a total here. It's like—

[00:11:12]

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Do you have a sense of when donations started to drop off?

[00:11:21]

Russell Chisholm: Yeah, February of this year was probably the last time that we received anything into the pool. Because the tip jar itself is not set up for us to track what individuals might be sending to and from each other, because that goes directly to their pay apps, so we don't track any of that, I don't know if folks are still giving in that way. But I can tell you that over the life of the thing, we ended up collecting \$18,844 in tips, and we distributed all of that over the life of the thing. The last time I updated, because we had spent the entirety of everything that was donated, was back in February of this year, just to let folks know that, "Keep giving directly to people." But the fund itself has been completely distributed.

[00:12:26]

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

Jessica Taylor: Are you familiar with people that have gotten work outside of food recently?

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Russell Chisholm: I haven't had a whole lot of contact with folks that are listed in the tip jar spreadsheet over the last several months. But I did, particularly early this year, as we did receive a few more funds into the pool and I started sending those out in smaller amounts, because the roster itself, it reached 480 people. There were 480 people on the list of people who signed up to put their pay apps out there. So a few hundred dollars donated here and there into the pool doesn't go very far for almost 500 people, obviously, but we would try to distribute it as equitably as we could. And occasionally I would hear back from somebody, when we would send something out, saying, "Hey, really appreciate this, but I got a job out of the area. Just letting you know so you can take me off the list or whatever." It wasn't a huge number.

All of my contact information and everything is listed on the website page so that people can kind of, if they want to, keep me posted on what their situation is, how it's changed, improved, or gotten worse, and I haven't had much contact with folks there. So I'm thinking a lot of folks did just find a different work situation, hopefully improved work situation or moved away and don't necessarily need that kind of support from that project.

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Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

Jessica Taylor: One of the things we talked about last time was the feeling of community between people and food, and I'm wondering how you've seen that affected by how long this has taken and how hard it's been over the last six or nine months.

[00:14:46]

Russell Chisholm: Yeah, I think it's tough from the kind of view that we have as specialty coffee roasters who serve a couple of different locations in and around New River Valley. As things did start to open up again and people started ordering again, there was mostly just generally a sense of relief, but I don't think they were putting nearly the same number of people back to work that they might have liked, and even as things started opening up again, I think among some of the clientele, the public just wasn't necessarily ready to go right back to normal. I think it's getting better as the vaccine rolls out and people start feeling much safer in a vaccinated community, as opposed to just a masked or socially distant kind of community.

I think what's frustrating now from the outside looking in, though, is seeing the conversation that's happening around places that are unable to find workers and just kind of some of the shift in attitudes. Because I think it signifies to me, at least, that people have forgotten how quickly these people were jettisoned from the workforce as a result of COVID. They were working tip minimum wage or minimum wage-type jobs, with no tips in a lot of service jobs, minimum wage without tips, or server wages with tips, right? And then as everything shut down, of course it was going to be hard for those people to just keep staff on when you have no customers coming in, but that workforce was just—it's an industry, I think, that has been hit harder than probably anything else, and, that

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

quickly, more or less forgotten about, except for some good examples of people sticking together.

Now that in the minds of the public, things are somewhat returning to normal, I feel like there's this sense that these people should be grateful to have these low-wage jobs back, or to be fighting over shifts again or trying to subsist on tip wages, when the revenues for those restaurants are probably nowhere near back to normal. Meaning that they're not seeing the same number, they're not turning tables over as much, they're not seeing the kinds of tips that they would have in a normal situation. And that that workforce is somehow supposed to be grateful for that. [Taylor laughs] You know what I mean? Like, that's just very frustrating to me to watch the conversation that's happening around that.

If the low amount of unemployment help that's available to people is enough to keep them from returning to what could potentially be an unsafe or unhealthy work environment, that's a problem. That's not a failing on the part of the workers, I guess is what I'm getting at. It's a real problem with the way that the industry is compensating people and the expectations of them forced by the public. It's frustrating to me.

[00:18:33]

Jessica Taylor: One of the things that you had said at the very end of your interview last time was when I said, "What are your hopes for the future?" You said, "Well, we need a vaccine and then we just need to get people back to work." And I wanted to see if the vaccine lived up to your hopes.

[00:18:54]

Russell Chisholm: I think it was a good lesson in understanding that things were always going to take longer than we would have liked, and I guess that's what I'm getting at, too, with the returning-people-to-work part of that equation. I think getting people back to work when now we've had time to really think about what it was like for folks in that industry to try to subsist and survive on those types of wages, I think that it isn't even so much that people are not willing to return to necessarily restaurant work or service industry work because the wages were so low. I think they reassessed a lot of things. Maybe they just have decided to look outside of that industry and they've had an opportunity to understand that something was definitely not working there.

So I think my desire to see people get back to work was because that was the work that they had and that's what they were relying on, and that was kind of pulled out from under them. I think I wanted something that would restore that and restore them as quickly as possible by getting people vaccinated, being able to open up safely again, but I don't think the workers feel like we're at that point. I don't think they feel like they're at a point of safety that would justify going back to a low-wage job that is oftentimes underappreciated, and risking their health to do that.

So I'm not completely convinced that the vaccine had been sort of the answer to all of our prayers. It certainly is for people who want to go out and dine in restaurants and go back to their coffee shops and have that community. We talked a little bit about that, too, because there's that sense of being able to go into some place where people recognize you and they know what you order and they know what's going on with you and your classes, whatever. That's another piece that people were missing. But it is also a

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

difficult job dealing with the public, and now dealing with a public that has been sequestered [laughs], in a really weird, isolating way, that are now coming out almost with an overwhelming sense of entitlement. Like we should get back to normal as fast as possible, all the ways that things were normal to them. I just think it has made us all reassess a lot of how we were doing things.

[00:21:49]

Jessica Brabble: One of the things—sorry. Really quick.

[00:21:53]

Jessica Taylor: No, go ahead. Do it!

[00:21:55]

Jessica Brabble: One of the things you said last time as well when talking about the vaccine and hoping people could get back to work was that you would hope that people would over-tip once we got into restaurants. Have you witnessed that people are more willing to be generous, the tips that they're giving, or is it more of that same attitude of, "Well, you should just be grateful you're back to work"?

[00:22:16]

Russell Chisholm: I think you see the latter part of that popping up a lot on social media. Social media can be a very unreliable source of what is happening everywhere, obviously. So I have only been into primarily takeout and curbside places still. I am

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

still—I'm one shot away from being fully vaccinated myself, and I don't know when I'll personally be comfortable going back out as a patron to a lot of those places. So I continue to over-tip. [laughs] I'll give you that anecdotal example, but that's all I have to really rely on.

I will say in the places where I have gone in for takeout, one of the things I have noticed particularly from the staff is a deep sense of gratitude in any of the places that I've tried to go to just as a patron, deep sense of gratitude, expressed fully. And I think it's sincere. I think that businesses, the people behind those bars and counters are saying, "Hey, I see you. Thank you for coming in. Thank you for supporting us. We're still here, still trying to make it work." But I don't have any—I haven't gotten together with a group of people that I used to work with on the other side of the counter to see how things are going. It would be well worth exploring, particularly in and around Blacksburg and the New River Valley, just connect with a few people that are back to work and see if that is happening.

[00:24:12]

Jessica Brabble: We talked about the larger theme of this project, which is mutual aid. How do you feel like COVID is going to affect how mutual aid is done in this region moving forward?

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Russell Chisholm: I think that people who were already drawn to that kind of self-reliance, mutual care, sense of community, will continue on and do that important work.

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

Hopefully through that they've also reached other people who may have been unfamiliar with what that concept is, what it represents, how it's not a charity-driven idea, but an actual sense of community, that we lift each other up, we care for each other through a crisis like this. But beyond that crisis, that we can actually do this all the time. I hope that those will be the conversations that people start having.

I think in looking at the tapering off in participation and also in monetary support of the tip jar, I hope that's not an indicator that we typically see people reacting to crisis and then kind of fading again into neglect. But that was a specific piece of this whole effort that was driven by online donations and money apps, as opposed to that in-person type of mutual aid that, like, the Future Economy Collective and the Southpaw operation are doing, where there is a relationship that has been built there, you know what I mean, with the people who come in to receive, but also with the donors and also with the volunteers, that there is more community to that. That I think is a sustainable thing. I hope that is a sustainable thing, and I would love to see that be the case for our area, that is, a long-lasting change in the way we view response to crisis. We can be here for each other all the time, I hope.

[00:26:59]

Jessica Taylor: Jessica, do you have any more questions?

[00:27:03]

Jessica Brabble: I don't.

Interview of: Russell Chisholm
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Jessica Brabble
Interview Date: May 7, 2021

[00:27:04]

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Russell, is there anything that we should have talked about that we haven't talked about yet?

[00:27:20]

Russell Chisholm: I don't think so.

[00:27:22]

Jessica Taylor: Okay, okay. Well, great. So I will go ahead and stop this. Thank you so much, Mr. Chisholm and Jessica.

[End of interview]