



Jeffery Heard
Heard Dat Kitchen
New Orleans, LA

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Justin Nystrom: I'm going to go ahead and introduce myself. Hello. It is August 20th, in the very bizarre year 2020. I'm here with Chef Jeff Heard of the Heard Dat Kitchen, 2520 Felicitey Street here in Central City in New Orleans. I'm interviewing him for the Southern Foodways Alliance's COVID-19 Oral History Project. If you're tuning in to SFA interviews, you know it seems like a very different time. I was here about a year ago and interviewed Chef Jeff about his career coming up as a server and a lot of back-breaking stuff he did that working in New Orleans. So now Chef has his own restaurant and, of course, like all the other restauranteurs and cooks and everybody here in New Orleans, he's dealing with COVID-19.

Jeff, thank you so much for taking a little time out this morning to be with me.

[00:00:57]

Jeffery Heard: My pleasure, my pleasure.

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Justin Nystrom: So I have sort of a chronological thing I want to make sure I cover in this sort of relatively short interview, but please feel free to interject or stop me and say, "Hey, you're missing something important here," and we'll do that. So I've got to ask, when were you first aware that coronavirus was a thing?

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Jeffery Heard: It was actually early February when I actually realized.

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Justin Nystrom: Oh, wow. Pretty early.

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, yes, yes. But I didn't realize—no one realized the magnitude of what it was going to turn to. We really didn't. But I realized it, and then it really came to my mind when Carnival season started, and that really—I know that's a very international traveling event, and I kind of got word about that. I went out to the parades once. Actually, I didn't go out till Mardi Gras day, and it was really on my mind about it as I was walking through the crowds.

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Justin Nystrom: So were you, like me, listening to the BBC in the morning? Because they were reporting on it in January, and I was flipping out.

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, you know, really that's my main entertainment now. I would never thought it would be, but I run home at night and all I watch is CNN.

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Justin Nystrom: Oh, wow.

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Jeffery Heard: I'm very into the news now. I couldn't tell you the last time I sat down and watched a movie. But, yeah, we would never thought we would be where we are today, because really, I was telling my daughter, her kids just started back to school, and I was like, "Wow!" They got out of school early and now just it dragged on all this time, now they back in school and having to deal with this distance learning and thing, the challenge from that.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, it's bad.

[00:03:08]

Jeffery Heard: Right.

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Justin Nystrom: So when here did you start to feel it?

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Jeffery Heard: Well, I started to feel it the moment when right after Mardi Gras when they say the traveling stop. That was my biggest worry, because, you know, about 75 percent of my business was tourists. So that really had me worried when that happened. I was like, "Wow. What am I going to do?" Because, you know, locally I really didn't have

too many customers. So I start feeling it, I would say, in mid-March, far as, you know, the foot traffic with tourists and all.

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Justin Nystrom: Because you're a destination. People seek your food out.

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, yes, and that was actually always my goal, because when I was working downtown, guests would always ask me that, you know. When I was managing the banquet department at Restaurant August, I had a different group of people every night, and they was always someone asking me about neighborhood. They wanted to go in the neighborhood and eat. Some small authentic New Orleans food is what they was looking for, so when I came here, that was my [unclear] market, and that's what I wanted to make sure that I do, was go after tourists.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, because we talked a year ago that you had really—people had always—because this is not what we would consider a walking tourist neighborhood, right where you're at. People want to find what they think of as authentic New Orleans, and you knew that there was a market for a place that they could go and say, "Oh, wow!" People come here, they feel like they're in the know.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, right, definitely. And that's a great feeling for people, especially when they want to recommend it to someone else. "Man, how'd you know about that place? How you heard about that?"

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Justin Nystrom: And it's a harder thing to find in New Orleans nowadays, because I remember twenty years ago, you'd be like, oh, you know, when you went to Lola's on Esplanade, you felt like, "Wow! This is really out in the corner." Now it's in the middle of everything, you know.

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Jeffery Heard: Right. [laughter]

[00:05:27]

Justin Nystrom: It's different. Sure is different. So you started feeling it pretty right away. How did you adjust in that first week or two?

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Jeffery Heard: Well, another great thing about it was that everyone in this situation wanted to look to help the next person, so I was working with a Red Bean Parade organization. We had a red bean contest that was going to be during the March Madness, so it wound up being canceled, so Devon [De Wulf], the gentleman in charge of it, he came up with the idea to feed the frontline workers because his wife is a doctor and he

just brought over some cookies one evening and he seen how it just boosted the morale down at the hospital just over some nice fresh cookies. So the concept hit him later on that evening, what if we treat them to a nice meal, you know. So it hit him, so he came to all of us that was in the contest and said he's working on the idea of feeding the frontline.

So when he put that together, when he got all the contest people together that wanted to be in it, so we start doing that. So that kind of gave us motivation and a feel of being needed to do this, and at the same time, we was able to stay afloat and make a little income at the same time. So it slowly, gradually grew into something big when we was putting out over 1,000 meals a week, you know. So we did that for like thirty days, and it really brought in more acknowledgement of who we were as well. So then at the same time, we doing advertising on news station and all about feeding the frontlines, so more of our name and things were getting out, so more local people started finding out about me.

So then at the same time, we, as locals, was looking for something that we can grab and go, so that was another way of we being found out about that. I already was a grab-and-go spot, you know, so that kind of helped them come as well when we started that.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, and that was all funded through local charity?

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, it was all through local charities and personal donations all to the parade.

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Justin Nystrom: The Krewe of Red Beans.

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Jeffery Heard: The Krewe of Red Beans, yes.

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Justin Nystrom: So you're the third person I've talked to and you're the third person that's mentioned Devon and his efforts in all this. I've noticed you've got a World Central Kitchen van outside your door here.

[00:08:30]

Jeffery Heard: Yes.

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Justin Nystrom: Are you affiliated with them now?

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, actually I would say it was June the 1st that we started a relationship with them as well. They started feeding different organizations like that. For a couple of

weeks, I fed the homeless. I was feeding them 300 plates twice a week down at the homeless shelters not far from here. Then there's another organization, a private organization, that World Central Kitchen got me into contact with, so we're feeding them right now seven days a week. We feed them about 60 plates seven days a week. So World Central Kitchen is a great organization that, you know, they came to town and they goal is to put out—actually, we just reached on the 17th a million meals. They put out a million meals since we started this. I think, if I'm not mistaken, they're in four major cities right now. But it's a real great organization and they doing great things. So three different spots we drop our food right now. It's a very organized organization, I must say.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, we're used to them doing things like disaster relief in the Caribbean or they've recently done a lot in Puerto Rico.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, in Puerto Rico when the hurricane was in Puerto Rico. Right, right.

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Justin Nystrom: But here we are right here stateside in major American cities.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, yes. They are there for the community, and I can't say nothing but great things about them.

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Justin Nystrom: So have you been kind of talking to other people in the restaurant business, I guess? What are people telling you about their futures right now?

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Jeffery Heard: Everybody is—a lot of people is in very limbo, especially the bigger restaurants that may have 100 seats, 200 seats, you know. It's kind of like they can't actually maneuver enough to stay afloat because of the overhead and all, you know, the high insurance and the rental or whatever it might be. Putting out so many to-go plates just can't cover the income. What they're really hurting about is not being able to keep they staff. They so many people that's in this industry that's suffering right now. They are whole families that works in restaurants, husband and wife and kids that works in restaurants or the hotel, you know.

For me, I'm going to always be a server at heart, so I empathize for the servers today, you know. Restaurants is just a camaraderie place. You look for festive, you know. You want to be energized, you want to go to a nice restaurant, you want to see the energy, so now in the way restaurants are set up, spaced out and all, there's no energy in them, so it's like you can't even get motivated, enthusiastic about having a great meal. So the whole environment of a restaurant is really just totally broken up at this point.

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Justin Nystrom: That's a really good observation, as somebody who knows his dining room.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, and it's like, you know, you look around, say you want to try a new restaurant, you walk in and there's really nothing going on, it's kind of like, "I don't know if I want to stay," because you looking for—

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Justin Nystrom: Because your whole life, your whole life you've been doing that. "Wow, this place is dead. I don't know if the food's any good."

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Jeffery Heard: Yeah, yeah, and then even if you go dine early—like I love my favorite restaurant right now is Pêche. I would go early just where you can get comfortable. I like to eat. If I'm going to eat, I'm going to be a while. [laughter] Before I leave, the restaurant be filled up, you know, and it gets festive, gets louder and louder, and you just start feeling better, you know. Your whole spirit just get lifted, like, "Wow, this is nice," you know, and you just feel so great about it, you know. And that's what a dining experience is, you know. But all of us, it's something different, you know, our expectation is something different, but all at the end, you know, you're looking to leave with energy, feeling great. Like I say, I don't know if I mentioned to you once, I like to

feel like I was hit with a knock-out punch when I leave off a restaurant. When I feel that way, that was a great experience. I'm staggering. [laughs]

You know, even my wife and I, our anniversary was back in July, and we went to [unclear], had a beautiful meal, but, again, everybody spaced out, it wasn't that many tables in it, so we had to make it ourself. We had to look in each other's eyes, you know, and just make the experience great off of each other. Sometime, you know, you can have someone sitting next to you and you're enjoying the conversation with them, and say, "Oh, them was some real nice people." That's part of our experience. At the end of the night, say, "That was great. The table next to us was real nice, the server was [unclear]." But now everything, you know, is so—I don't even have no clue why, with the server, how you get [unclear] when you can't see nothing in someone's eyes, you know. You can't see they smile. [laughs]

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Justin Nystrom: It's hard doing this, because I use facial expressions.

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Jeffery Heard: You be like, "Wow." It's just like—

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I guess the eyes have to do the talking now.

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Jeffery Heard: Talking. Right.

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Justin Nystrom: So did you apply for any PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] here?

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Jeffery Heard: No, I actually didn't. No, it's just my family and I. I don't have any employees. Right now it's my two daughters and my son and myself, so, no, I didn't apply for anything. Again, with the Red Bean Parade, that kind of lifted my income, you know, that helped me out, and then when the World Central Kitchen is helping me as well, so everything is—I'm not really hurting. I'm not where I was before, but with everything going on, at this point I can't complain. I'm not suffering.

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Justin Nystrom: So you feel like you can maybe hang on for a bit?

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Jeffery Heard: Yes, I definitely can hang on for a bit, again, but I'm not in the situation like a lot of people. I have a real low overhead by being in this small kitchen, and then to-go, for the most part, anyway, so I really didn't have to make too many adjustments at all. I didn't have to buy new furniture to sit outside and stuff like that, because I was already in that mode.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, you've got quite a bit of sidewalk.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, yes, yes, yes. So my whole thing is, you know, I empathize for my fellow people that's in this business as well and what are they doing. That's really, again, like I say, I could be in tears for servers at this point, you know, because I know even just being a coffee server, you know, they make great income. You have these hotels with no one in them, you know, that was used to serving thousands of people in meetings and things like that, seminars every day.

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Justin Nystrom: It's gone.

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Jeffery Heard: It's gone, you know, and, I mean, matter of fact, the last hotel I worked at, they just called the staff last week and told them they all not coming back.

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Justin Nystrom: Wow.

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Jeffery Heard: The whole hotel.

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Justin Nystrom: What hotel was that?

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Jeffery Heard: That was the Méridien Hotel, the Le Méridien. I worked there. It was the W. That's when I left, when the Marriott took over, a new company bought it and they changed it to a Méridien, and it didn't do too well. Now, you know, it's Marriott. They in the cost-cutting right now.

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Justin Nystrom: And that was last week, so here we are, August, that people sustained a certain amount of time and then it's gotten to the point where other things are starting to fall.

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Jeffery Heard: To fall, yes. A good friend of mine, he worked in accounting and he's been there over thirty years. I say, "Oh, they bless you. You wasn't never going to leave out this building. They had to put you out. You blessed." [laughter] But, again, you look at people just like, "Where are we going from here?" But in the restaurant industry itself, it's really—especially the high-end restaurants, I really think they in for—I think the high-end restaurants going to get a lot more high end, because the less volume you do,

the more higher that price per person you need. The less covers, you need that one person that do come in to spend more.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah, and will they. I read an article where Gabrielle Hamilton in *The New York Times* was saying, “Can I charge \$27 for a martini?” [laughter]

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Jeffery Heard: Right.

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Justin Nystrom: Well they pay it? Because that’s what it’s going to take.

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Jeffery Heard: I know the Houston restaurant right down here, they broke they menu down to a la carte. You used to get a French dip with a side of coleslaw for that one price, but now you get your French dip, and if you want coleslaw, that’s a totally different price added to it. And I had said that, too, at some point you’re going to have to charge more. That’s the only way. If you’re used to doing 200 customers a day, now you’re doing 75, you’re going to have to change your price point to stay afloat.

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Justin Nystrom: And Houston strikes me as—I mean, I don't know what their books look like, but as a fairly profitable model of a restaurant.

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Jeffery Heard: Right.

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Justin Nystrom: Used to be a big volume.

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Jeffery Heard: Right, right, and they consistent. They known for they kind of being consistent, and that's the number one thing in the restaurant business, is whatever you do, to do it well and be consistent with it.

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Justin Nystrom: Yeah. What's keeping you awake at night, other than CNN?

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Jeffery Heard: [laughs] Really, lately it's been this heat. But, no, I'm a type of person where I try not to let anything keep me awake, you know. I have a couple of brothers with this situation that has them in a real tight spot, and I kind of worry about them and they family. But for the most part, again, I'm a pretty laid-back person. I try not to worry about too many things. My wife can do that for both of us, you know. So my whole thing

is, you know, where are we going to go from here, you know. I just want to see, you know, the business go back to normal, because for myself as well, you know, at least once a month I like to go and have me a great dining experience, you know, and that's my thing. Will we get back to that? And will we be actually able to afford to get back to that?

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Justin Nystrom: Will there be anything to get back to?

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Jeffery Heard: And that, too, as well, you know. But, again, I want to say I'm very enthusiastic, but I'm thinking about other people miseries or faults or failures because right now I'm saying, when this is all said and done, there's going to be a lot of empty restaurant spots, you know, and I'll probably have a lot of picking to where I may want to move to, so I'm saying when it's all said and done, it's probably going to be a lot of great opportunities for me. So I guess for the most part, I'm very enthused about my future here at Heard Dat Kitchen, and my kids are so supportive, and you need that. So we are very enthused about our future, which is kind of sad for me to see other people that's not, that's hurting, you know. That's my part. So I don't want to say I'm going to come up off of other people sorrows or they disappointments, but I do feel great about the amount of opportunities that I know that's going to be out when this is all over with.

[00:22:49]

Justin Nystrom: That's very interesting. So I've asked people what they felt about the local, state, and federal response to coronavirus, and I do want to ask you that, but also—yeah, I'll ask you that first, but I always want to ask you what do you think restaurants need right now from the government.

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Jeffery Heard: Well, far as our state, I was very impressed with our governor [John Bel Edwards]. I mean, I was amazed with our government, how he handled everything, his self, the media, you know, all the naysayers, you know. He just strictly put it down, say, “This is how it's going to be, and we need to follow these protocols. If we all want to make it to the other side, we need to follow these protocols and make certain sacrifices for the future. Yes, things are tough right now, but it's certain things that we need to make sure that we accomplish now and be disciplined about now, where in the future we can still grow or we can still come out on the other side of this as winners.” So I was very impressed with him about that.

Now, our mayor [LaToya Cantrell], you know, she kind of comes off a little too stern to some people and do that make you want to rebel, and that's one thing that people have no problem doing, rebelling, even though it's going to hurt you. They rebel at you. That's not good, you know, and you wind up hurting just because you want to go against the grain. So, to me, everyone needs to think about the fellow man and stay positive and look to be motivated for the future, because any hard times, any suffering and pain, the lord tells you that it's for your good. When you come out on the other side, if you look at it in the right light, it's going to all turn out well and it's going to be a victory at the end.

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Justin Nystrom: Do you think that is testing society right now?

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Jeffery Heard: Most definitely, I really do, and the whole thing is, though, is you have to be able to look within yourself and figure out what can you do to make things better, what can you do to make it work, you know, to fix things, anything you can do to help the next man and realize that it's not in our control, it's all in the hands of the lord, you know.

I watched just the other day a truck trying to maneuver a hole in the street, so he got on the wrong side of the street and a motorbike was coming and it had just finished ramming. The motorbike hit his brakes and he slid right into the truck, and I had to close my eyes and run inside for not seeing this truck crush this man. And when I came back outside, the tire was like literally a half an inch off this man's head, and his arm was broke, his shoulder was broke. But that's just how fast life can change. This gentleman was on the motorbike one second, and a second later, he was on a stretcher. So we need to realize that life can change in a moment and we all need to be trying to fix things for the better instead of looking for the negatives.

So, you know, again, for the restaurant industry, we all need to put our heads together and look for the future of how we can make it better, because there's nothing more intimate than dining, you know. When everybody say, "Let's get together. We're going to enjoy. Let's sit down and have a meal together," it's always about the meal.

Jesus' last supper. Let's enjoy. Let's break bread together, you know. Let's be at peace. So that's what I want to see the restaurant industry. I want to see it just come back, I mean, in full force and even more celebrated than what it is now, because, again, it is what we do.

I say that about kids all the time. I have two three-year-old grandsons, and it's nothing more exciting to them when you say, "Let's eat," and the energy that comes upon them when it's time to sit down at the table. Again, that's what we do. I say I ran the banquet department for ten years and I served big dinners every night, and everyone would praise me about how I put it together. It was flawless. Everything went great. I had a gentleman one evening call his dining experience the experience of fishing, where you go and you limit out on the trout, then you limit out on your redfish. He said it was just mind-blowing to him how well the experience went, you know, and that's just one gentleman, you know, and that's what he was expecting. Fishing is something that I guess he liked. That's why he equated it to fishing, you know.

But that is the challenge that you have in the restaurant business, you know. You have a meeting planner come in and say, "I want this dinner to be immaculate for my clients. I want these clients to just be totally blown away." So then that's a mission that we have to do, so every night, you know, we have to make memories for these guests that will last a lifetime. So that's a great challenge as a server for you to be able to put together something that makes memories for someone that's going to last a lifetime. You can think about your twentieth wedding anniversary or just situations where they just stuck with you because of wherever you went, they made sure that every "t" was crossed and every "i" was dotted and it was just mesmerizing.

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Justin Nystrom: So I aim to come back in December or January and come talk to you again. What are your hopes for the world, New Orleans, in that time?

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Jeffery Heard: Again, I just want things to get back to normal. I want people to be able to feel free to hug each other, you know. We didn't realize that as well, you know, how we would be all over each other, on top of each other in an airport corridor or whatever. You don't realize how much something can jump from me to you, and we never gave it much thought, you know. We had a football game or whatever, we would look at each other and grab each other and hug each other, you know.

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Justin Nystrom: Chest bump.

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Jeffery Heard: Chest bump and all. We never say, "Don't touch me," no this and that, you know. So my main thing I want to see again is normalcy. I want to see things, you know—because here that's another thing about New Orleans, you know. We about family, we about love, you know, friendliness. You really don't want even just walk up and have a conversation with someone now. You know what I mean? Like, "Don't get that close to me. You're a little too close."

[00:31:32]

Justin Nystrom: So all these predictions people are making about, oh, you know, this is a pivot, we're going to be a more distanced society, people are going to be less reticent to go out, you think we're all just waiting to come back, right?

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Jeffery Heard: I think we all waiting to come back, but then at the same time, we need to take note of what really is going to change. Like I think the movies, for instance, I think that's something that's really going to change. It's really going to be like, wow. And even this distance learning might become a norm, you know. We really don't know. But it's a struggle for certain kids with the distance learning, you know. To me, it would make it even harder to figure out is they taking in the material that they need to with the distance learning.

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Justin Nystrom: How do you evaluate it. Yeah.

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Jeffery Heard: So that's a big, big challenge, you know, educating our kids. That's going to be a challenge. But, again, I'm hoping for love. I'm hoping to see everyone back hugging and kissing. [laughter]

But as far as the restaurant industry, I want to see, like I say, just the thought of it makes me energized. When something that's in you, a person knows it when you start speaking about it. Like one of my brothers, he into cars. When he go to speaking about his car knowledge, fixing something, he just get full of energy, you know. And the restaurant business, most people that's in it are in it because they love it. There's nothing like it, you know. And to be in it, you have to be 100 percent in it. There's no 99 percent. You have to be fully entrenched in what you do. Otherwise, you're not going to make it.

That's why I feel like some people, how they approach a server, why they wouldn't think a server is 100 percent into giving you everything you need, that's what a server does. He's going to meet your expectations. He want to be in your mind and give you every—he don't want you have to think about anything. Whatever he put in front you, he wants to be able to say, "I put this streak in front you. You should have a little bit of salt or some sauce or whatever. I know what you want with this, your expectations." And that's what I want. I want for everyone to be able to get in a good restaurant and enjoy they meal and leave with they spirit just soar.

It's like, say, for [Hurricane] Katrina, for instance, people didn't care if the food took two hours. They were just happy to be out and having a conversation and enjoying the camaraderie and all, the relationship with a friend. That's all it was about, you know, and I mean it lasted a long time, you know, the spirit. People's spirit, it just came out and you couldn't do anything to break they spirit. They just happy to be out, you know.

[00:35:09]

Justin Nystrom: I think there is going to be a lot of that coming back. That's great.

That's such a great articulation of why restaurants matter. That's great. That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add at the end of this? We're getting kind of towards the end. I promised you a short interview.

[00:35:25]

Jeffery Heard: No, like I say, again, it's to me—like I like the small-plate restaurants, you know. I like taking my grandkids to small-plate restaurants and we can just order and pass it around. “What y'all think of that?” “Oh, get some more of those.” “Let's get another round of this.” You know, there's nothing like it, you know. My grandson, he's eleven, and I feel great that he has an appetite, because when I was eleven, I was like, “Bring it on!” [laughs] So, again, you know, we walk out of restaurants skipping and just joyful, and there's no greater feeling, you know. There's no greater feeling to be able to break bread with someone, you know, with loved ones especially, you know.

Well, this is good, you know. Like I say, I went to all-inclusive places where you sit down at a dining room table with strangers that don't even know, but you get into conversations and the meal is just great. “Those were some great people at our table tonight, huh? Wow!” So that's what I'm really looking forward to, and I know a lot of other restauranteurs is always looking and hurrying for the same thing, to be able to get their patrons back and to enjoy life.

[00:36:57]

Justin Nystrom: Awesome. Thank you very much. I'm going to go ahead and stop this.

[End of interview]