



**Sally Latimer and Jennifer Austin  
Monacan Indian Nation Food Bank  
Amherst, VA**

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Location: Remote Interview byway of Amherst, VA

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor & Emily Griffith

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Length: Twenty-seven minutes

Project: COVID-19

**Jessica Taylor:** This is Jessica Taylor, Emily Griffith, and Jordan Rosin interviewing Sally Latimer and Jennifer Austin, correct?

[00:00:10]

**Jennifer Austin:** Yes.

[00:00:12]

**Jessica Taylor:** On August 20, 2020, and we're here to talk about the Monacan Indian Nation Food Bank. Would you mind introducing yourselves and just talking about where you're from?

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**Jennifer Austin:** I'm Jennifer. Actually, most of our history is kind of the same because we are cousins, so we kind of have most of the same background. So, we were born and raised in Maryland. Sally moved back down here a little earlier than I did, but I started coming around when I was about sixteen, is when I really started coming down and staying with family members, learning our history, dancing, and getting involved in the tribe. I permanently moved here in 2014, after I had my babies, because I wanted to make sure that my kids had the opportunity to be able to grow up in their Native community.

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**Sally Latimer:** So, pretty much the same. My son's older, so we started coming down early 2000s. And he's been a dancer since he was two, so he's been involved. We've always been involved, always knew who we were; we just didn't live here at the time. So in about 2006, we decided we wanted a house here, we wanted to be closer to the community, we wanted to be a part of all of the things that were going on. So in 2008, I moved down full-time and I love it. Now we are fully into everything. [laughs] Anything Monacan, we're in it. So, good, bad, and ugly, we do it all.

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**Jessica Taylor:** Can you talk a little bit about the s and how it got started?

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**Sally Latimer:** Well, the food bank has actually been trying to—we've tried to do the food bank three or four times over the last twenty-five years, and people come, people go, they get involved, they walk away. So, a couple of years ago, it was my mother and I were running the food bank with a couple of other ladies. They left. We were not on the back end to know how to do the USDA reports or any of those things. So for months we tried to save it, and it just wouldn't work. So we had to close the food bank, and I think that was at our fourth try.

So in 2018, the assistant chief at the time came to me during a meeting and she had her hands full of all of this stuff, and she said to me, "Sally, I want you to do this." And she said, "I want you to take over the food bank."

And I said, “Only if we can make it sustainable.” And I said, “I want to make sure that this time we do it, it works and it works for years and it actually does the good that we’ve all wanted it to do for so many years.”

So my mother and Jennifer and I took about eight months and we studied with other food banks, we met with different programs to see, what was the best way? How was everybody else making this work? And we learned a lot of things. We did our grand opening in June of 2019, and we have been steadily going strong since then. We keep including new programs, so we’re building fast. This time around, it is completely sustainable, which was our big goal. So that’s where it all came from. But, actually, years ago, some of the elders of the tribe are the ones that originally started it. And then, like I said, it’s just been many people since then that have tried to keep it going, and now it’s become a passion.

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**Jessica Taylor:** Do you have a sense of who started it before? You mentioned the elders of the tribe had the original idea. Like, when was that and what was the kind of need that they recognized?

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**Sally Latimer:** So it was started back in the early nineties, was the first time, and there was a lady by the name of Diane Shields, Betty Hicks, Phyllis Hicks. There was a group of women, and they made up our Women’s Circle. They started by doing hot meals, and that’s where it started. So once or twice a week, we have a huge tribal hall, so they would

get together, they would make hot meals, they would go out, pick people up. And that's just to come in to make sure that not only were people getting fed, but they were also getting the social aspect of hanging out together, because we are a community, and in an Indian tribe, we're a family.

So that was when it first started, and then it kind of evolved into where we opened the food bank a few years later, a lady by the name of Sharon Bryant [phonetic], she was our first female chief—she has since passed away, but she and a lady by the name of Pam Thompson decided to do a food bank, which is what we're doing now. So they partnered up with Blue Ridge. Like I said, we came into that, but when their life started taking different turns, we couldn't keep it going because we didn't know how to do the reports, and USDA does have a lot of reports. So it kind of went downhill from there.

So it's been a group of different women of different generations since about the late eighties, early nineties. Then, like I said, it fell in our lap about two years ago and we've been running with it ever since.

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**Jessica Taylor:** That's really wonderful. What is the need that you feel like you're meeting in the community since 2018? What is the gap that you're filling?

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**Sally Latimer:** Well, when we first started it, in this area there's quite a few food banks, but for our people it's very hard for them to go outside of the community to ask. Over the years, our people have been discriminated against, and so asking for help from somebody

that isn't us is always a hard thing to do. So we immediately found a need, especially with our older group, with our elders, where their Social Security check just wasn't doing it. Then that was where we first started addressing things, was with the elders. Then we started realizing some of our kids—because my husband actually runs the youth program, and Jennifer and I help him—we started noticing that sometimes during class our kids would come in and they would make comments, and we started noticing that maybe there was some food shortage within their homes as well.

So for us, it started out with the elders and the young, and now it has grown into the community. So we touch all of Amherst County, no matter what, Monacan or not, and we also help any Monacan worldwide. So, we have Monacans that are in Colorado that have a need and they contact us, and we do what we can to help them even there.

So, since COVID [-19], it has grown quite a bit, but the food shortage, I think, worldwide is a huge issue, but within the Indian communities, it is also a huge issue. So I think—not to downplay one or the other—I just think food insecurity is a problem that needs to be addressed.

[00:08:47]

**Jessica Taylor:** Absolutely. I'm going to turn it over to Emily so that she can ask you some questions about COVID specifically.

[00:08:57]

**Emily Griffith:** So kind of our first question is when did you first realize that COVID was going to affect the food bank and create a greater need for the food bank?

[00:09:09]

**Jennifer Austin:** I would say almost immediately in March [2020], especially during the two-week quarantine when it first started, because that's when a lot of people, especially our elders who are afraid to go out to even get food—so then we did start doing a lot of deliveries just to make sure that people were still getting the food that they needed, and taking extra precautions. Whereas instead of them coming whenever they needed to get it, we started having to make appointments, we started having to put in more precautions. We would actually start almost like a drop-and-go, where we would just set it on their porch and then let them know that it was there so that there wouldn't be any contact, because they were fearful to even go out. So I would definitely say almost immediately during that first quarantine. And after that, our numbers just skyrocketed because of the need and because of people getting laid off and didn't have a job to go to. So it was almost instantly with that first quarantine.

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**Sally Latimer:** And the school.

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**Jennifer Austin:** Yes.

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**Sally Latimer:** When the schools finally went virtual, a lot of kids, a lot more kids than what we even realized, get breakfast at school, lunch at school, so they weren't having that same thing. So we started noticing a need then, that that was going to be a huge thing. So we started carrying more cereals or things like that for breakfast, and started trying to get things in that were easy, Lunchables and stuff like that for the children, that were as healthy as we could get. We have a vision for healthier. That's one of the next programs we're working on, but it was immediate. I would say it was immediate with COVID. And we had a young lady run our analysis, and we have gone up a thousand percent in the amount of people that we help. I mean, our numbers increased that much.

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**Emily Griffith:** Wow! So how would you say technology or technological limitation has influenced this type of work that is different now during COVID?

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**Sally Latimer:** A lot. [laughs] A lot of the people that come to the food bank are not technology—they don't do computers. We try to get the word out. We do have a Facebook page and we get the word out there. We call people.

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**Jennifer Austin:** Not having access.

[00:11:53]



**Sally Latimer:** Yeah, but not having access to the Facebook and things like that has been a big issue. The other issue is that where—and I hope you guys can visit it at some point—where our food bank is located, we are in what we call a holler, so we have no Internet service. So we go there and we do all of the packing and we do as much paperwork as we can, and then her and I have to bring it home. Even I, like our Internet here is even spotty because I live about five minutes away from it. She lives closer to town, so hers is a little better.

But technology, it's been a problem. [laughs] It was much easier when someone could come into the food bank, fill out their paperwork, we could have a conversation. But trying to have them either fill it out online or even us calling and filling it out over the phone and things like that, all of those things has been a bit of a problem, but we're working through them.

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**Emily Griffith:** Yeah, so you kind of just touched on this next question that I wanted to ask, but how does communication typically work with your patrons and partners, and has that changed a lot with COVID?

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**Sally Latimer:** Yes. So before COVID, we had set hours. So we were down there certain days all day. You can come and go. If you needed a pickup, you just came, signed your name, we got you a box, off you went. Now you have to have appointments because we are as contactless as we possibly can be, because we want to be as safe as we can. So

everything is done by appointments. We spend a lot of time making phone calls to people to see if they want an appointment. We try really hard to encourage them to contact us, but, again, a lot of times—

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**Jennifer Austin:** [unclear].

[00:14:02]

**Sally Latimer:** Yeah, it's a pride thing. A lot of times we have to reach out to them and say, you know, "Do you want a box this week? Can you pick up? Do you want us to drop off?" Because we try to make it as easy as possible. Yeah, so definitely the communication. Not to mention I think one of the greatest things about the food bank was when they were coming in and we were talking and sitting and having conversations, because, like I said, most of the people that come are family, are Monacan, whether they're directly related or related down the line. And we're not getting that same contact and closeness that we had before, and I miss that a tremendous amount. I can't wait to be able to get back to that. But, yeah, so the communication has basically been a lot of calls, and, like I said, we do have Facebook.

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**Emily Griffith:** Oh, okay.

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**Sally Latimer:** We do have a—I'm sorry?

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**Emily Griffith:** No, go ahead. You do have—

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**Sally Latimer:** We do have a Facebook page that's directly for the food bank, and I was going to pull it up and give it to you just in case you guys wanted to go check it out, and I'll do that before we end, but that we just try to keep it updated and things like that about what's going on, because we are under—we have to follow federal guidelines, USDA guidelines and state regulations. So we have an action plan and things like that, so all of that information gets compiled there as well.

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**Emily Griffith:** Awesome. Dr. Taylor, Jordan, you have any questions, any follow-up questions?

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**Jessica Taylor:** I can continue, if you'd like, Emily.

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**Emily Griffith:** Sure.

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**Jessica Taylor:** So I also wanted to ask about how you anticipate things moving forward in the coming months after everything that's happened since March. How do you anticipate needs evolving, especially with the thousand percent increase that you're talking about?

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**Sally Latimer:** Well, we've been lucky enough to get a couple grants, which has been great. We are actually looking into buying a van to where we can do more deliveries, which will be great...Everything seems to point to COVID isn't going away anytime soon, so, as much as I hate to say that, we're going to keep working in the mind-frame of how to keep everybody safe and how to keep the food insecurities at the lowest that we can.

So, like I said, we are establishing new programs. We have various programs, and I can tell you we do not just the food pantry. We have an emergency food program which is where if somebody contacts us and they have a need now and can't get to the food bank, we can supply them with a gift card or whatever's necessary at the time. We're coming into the holiday months. Thanksgiving and Christmas boxes are always huge, so I'm sure our numbers are going to go up then as well, especially with the food insecurity and the fact that people have lost so many jobs. Like I said, kids are home, they're eating more. So we anticipate that those programs are probably going to grow as well. Like I said, we just started an out-of-state program for Monacans.

I'm trying to think what other ones that we've done lately. So we're constantly evolving new programs that are going to hopefully decrease the impact that people are feeling. We don't want them—and as long as the funds keep coming in, then that won't be a problem. We're going to keep pushing it out there as much as we can. But I do anticipate this is going to be a little while longer. I don't think that the numbers are going to start decreasing, or at least not from what we've seen so far. I don't think the numbers are going to start decreasing anytime soon.

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**Jessica Taylor:** Okay. Let me ask you a few big-picture questions. So this project is about mutual aid in the region, and why is mutual aid so important in this region specifically? It's sort of famous historically. From your perspective, why is it so important in Appalachia?

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**Jennifer Austin:** I think because of almost like a community working together, bringing closeness. That's kind of my aspect on it, is the biggest thing, is basically just coming together and working—you know what I'm saying—just to help each other.

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**Sally Latimer:** And it is important and we are working with other food banks, we're working with other organizations, trying to strike—

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**Jennifer Austin:** Build.

[00:19:37]

**Sally Latimer:** Yeah, to build. That's a good word, to build.

[00:19:43]

**Jessica Taylor:** And I had a follow-up question about the history of the food bank that's more meta. [laughs] You mentioned that it's a group of women that started this in the nineties, and it's a group of women that run it now. Emily and I have interviewed a range of people, and the common denominator is that it's women. And I'm wondering what your opinions are about why the work of mutual aid, at least in your experience, not just generally, but in your experience, why is the work of mutual aid done by women?

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**Sally Latimer:** Well, for us—

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**Jennifer Austin:** Tradition.

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**Sally Latimer:** A lot of traditional things like this would fall back on women, but I will say that my husband, her significant other, they are our muscle. [laughs] So it's not that

we're doing this all by ourselves. We do have men that volunteer, but the bulk of the programs, the designing the programs, getting the programs out there do kind of fall back on women, and I think maybe that's tradition. Maybe that's—

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**Jennifer Austin:** Matrilineal.

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**Sally Latimer:** Yeah, society. I think that would probably be the best answer, is just tradition. But like I said, we do—and the other side, and maybe this is a little old-fashioned of me, my husband works full-time. I hadn't worked in years until I started working with the food bank again. So I think that might be some of it. I know that with some of the churches and stuff that we've talked to with other food banks, a lot of the women do those as well, although we have a great food bank in Madison Heights and it's a gentleman that runs it all. But I do believe that, yes, it seems to be more so.

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**Jennifer Austin:** I also think also that women are kind of more intuitive—you know what I'm saying—on others' needs, and that just caring, that drive to be able to help and care for others, I think, is another big aspect on that. I think that's a lot of why women end up stepping up and doing it, is just because of the motherly instinct, almost.

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**Sally Latimer:** Yeah.

[00:22:33]

**Jessica Taylor:** So, my last main question that I had listed here was, what kind of food are you making during the pandemic at home for your families, and like, what brings you comfort and fulfillment?

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**Sally Latimer:** Well, if I'm going to be completely honest with you, I have been extremely busy with the food bank and other things. [laughs] So I haven't done nearly the amount of cooking that I normally do during the pandemic. But, we're getting ready to start our hot program again, and I think one of the very first things that we're going to do is do a fry bread dinner, and we're all looking forward to that, get some Indian tacos. We missed the pow-wow this year, so I think we're all missing that.

But as far as what we're cooking here at home, really, like I said, I've been busy. It's been quick meals for us, because there for a while, we were doing twelve-hour days at the food bank, very easy. You know what I mean? I know a lot of people had said during the pandemic that they had slowed down, they were working from home, they were kind of enjoying the—we were not. We didn't have that, because the increase had become so much, we were at the food bank quite a—we've been at the food bank quite a bit.

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**Jennifer Austin:** And when you come home to hungry children, there needs to be something quick and easy.

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**Sally Latimer:** Quick and easy. Right. [laughs] Quick and easy, yeah. But, like I said, we are getting ready to start out hot meals program again, and I do believe the very first thing that we will be doing will be Indian tacos, definitely. So, we're going to go traditional, Three Sisters, that kind of thing. We're going to do a traditional one the first time out, because I think we're all missing that.

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**Jennifer Austin:** Yes.

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**Jessica Taylor:** Do you have a particular way you like to make it, particularly at that scale?

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**Sally Latimer:** The Indian tacos?

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**Jessica Taylor:** Mm-hmm.

[00:24:41]

**Sally Latimer:** Yeah. Okay, so, yeah, we have our own recipe. I mean, there's lot of recipes out there and things like that. The recipe that we got, I got off of, like I said to you, the late Chief Sharon Bryant, and I have always followed hers. And I think most of the women in the tribe follow that same recipe. Different tribes do it different ways, but for us, I think we kind of—and I'm not even sure where she came up with her version of it, but we all kind of follow the same recipe traditionally. And then like I said, if you go to a Navajo reservation, their Indian tacos are different than ours. Does that help? Does that answer? [laughs]

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**Jessica Taylor:** Sure, yeah, no problem. Is there anything, Emily, that you wanted to ask, or Jordan? Okay. Is there anything that we haven't asked that we should have, Sally and Jennifer?

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**Sally Latimer:** No, I think—

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**Jessica Taylor:** I think everything was pretty much touched on.

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**Sally Latimer:** I think we touched on everything. We're going to get back together in a couple of months, is that what you said, for a follow-up? Is that what you told me?

[00:26:07]

**Jessica Taylor:** Yes.

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**Jennifer Austin:** Wonderful. Well, hopefully by then, like I said, we'll have some more programs to report on and things like that. I think we're all hoping that the COVID just disappears—

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**Jennifer Austin:** Right.

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**Sally Latimer:** —and we can go back to normal, but I keep saying that we go back to a better version of normal.

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**Jennifer Austin:** Yes.

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**Sally Latimer:** And so we're just going to keep doing what we're doing and pushing along. But we're at the food bank every day, so, tell everybody. And you don't have to be Monacan. We will help the community just alike.

[00:26:46]

**Jessica Taylor:** So wonderful. Well, I'm going to stop recording, but hold on just a second.

[End of interview]