

Interview of: Sally Latimer & Jennifer Austin  
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor  
Interview Date: May 21, 2021

Blacksburg, VA | 1



**Sally Latimer & Jennifer Austin**  
**Monacan Nation Food Bank**

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Date: May 21, 2021  
Location: Remote Interview (Amherst, VA)  
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor  
Transcription: Technitype Transcript  
Length: Thirty minutes  
Project: COVID-19 Foodways Oral History Project Phase II

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**Jessica T:** Oh my gosh. This is Jessica Taylor and Savannah Flanagan interviewing the leaders of the Monacan Food Bank. This is our second of two interviews related to COVID-19 and mutual aid, and last time we talked was almost a year ago at this point. It was August of last year. What is your sense of how things have developed since then?

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**Sally L:** We've had so much going on. We have been slammed because of COVID and we are still seeing the same increase. Of course, November and December was the busiest because of the holidays, but our numbers are still higher than they were last year at this time. So definitely we're just staying busy. We have a lot of new programs going on now. We've started a whole slew of new things, so we've had a lot of good stuff going on.

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**Jessica T:** That's great. And can you talk about some of the [coughs]—sorry, getting' over some stuff. Can you talk about some of the programs that you've started since August?

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**Sally L:** So, for one, we got a grant for No Child Left Hungry. So, under that grant, we're actually doing a gardening program, so I've got most of the garden up and running right now. It's actually still a work in progress, but I have lots of things planted. Everything's starting to come up good. I actually have to meet with a gentleman on Monday about getting our greenhouse installed, but

the program—definitely it's too late to get everything implemented this year, so the main focus is gonna be basically getting like fresh vegetables, fresh produce to our tribal members and the community through the Food Bank. And then next year hopefully, we'll be able to start the seedling program where I wanna basically teach the youth how to basically start growing things, and then once they get to where they can be transplanted, be able to hand them out to our elders and our community members to be able to grow their own gardens. And if need be, if the elders need help or anything like that, basically going out and helping them get everything planted if they need containers to grow in, if they're constricted on space. So that way they're still able to have their fresh vegetables no matter what their circumstances are and healthy snacks for the kids. That was another thing that we were aiming for, especially with all the kids being home during COVID, trying to get them to choose a little bit healthier. So that's the big program that we've done. We've also started back up our monthly elder center for our elders to come in and have a hot meal. We have another grant, fingers crossed, by the end of the month we should have, which if all goes well, we'll be able to start our hot program which will allow us to take a food truck into the low-income areas and have hot meals to hand out. So, we've got a lot going on. This past year has been a complete blessing, but it's been very busy.

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**Jessica T:** That's amazing. What kind of stuff are you looking to grow in the greenhouse, or with like the seed program next year?

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**Sally L:** Next year, I want to mainly focus on a lot of the different vegetables, like lettuces and cabbages, like most of your vegetables actually. This year, I already have like a slew of different vegetables already planted. We have Tutelo corn, we have squash, we have green beans which is of course three sisters. We have Cherokee purple tomatoes, we have Amish based tomatoes, I have Cherokee wax beans, bell peppers, jalapeño peppers, eggplants, asparagus, romaine, basil, zucchini, cabbage...what else do I have out there?

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**Jennifer A:** I have no idea-

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**Sally L:** -Kale, cucumbers. I think that's about my list right this second, but I know there's more out there. [laughs]

[00:04:44]

**Jennifer A:** You should see the amount of space that she's doing this in. It's absolutely amazing and yeah—so, it's been good.

[00:04:57]

**Jessica T:** That's awesome, and I bet—I was wondering how the elders felt about the garden and the seeds.

[00:05:07]

**Sally L:** Oh, all of them that have come through have been so amazed, especially with the amount of space that I'm working with. It's a smaller area and everything that I've used pretty much so far have been refurbished, like old lumber, palettes, old tires. So basically, kinda keep that as a recycle thing, so I'm not having to go out and buy new stuff or do any more damage. I'm using basically leftover things. And like I said, the amount of space that I'm working with is actually pretty small that you would think for a garden. So, they're all so proud of me being able to do this in the amount of space. And they're all looking forward—every time they come in, they're like, “We can't wait to be tasting them vegetables.” You know what I'm saying? “We can't wait for this” or “We can't wait for that.” So that's what makes me really excited, because hopefully along with this also, not only with our youth, but with our elders also maybe kind of bringing them together to work on a project. And just in that, exchanging knowledge and different things to pair them up, to kind of get things going also.

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**Jessica T:** How do the kids feel about it?

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**Sally L:** The kids that I've talked to so far about it—'cause we really haven't been able to get all of our youth together yet because of COVID still—but the kids that I have talked to about are super excited about it.

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**Jennifer A:** And we also have a teen that's coming in for some community service hours for school.

He's gonna come in and volunteer some help with the garden. So, I think he starts as soon as school ends so that'll be good too.

[00:07:01]

**Jessica T:** Awesome, that's amazing. I also wanted to follow up about the elder lunch because I know that that was—I actually heard independently that was a really beautiful big moment and I wanted to get your recounting of the day.

[00:07:19]

**Jennifer A:** So it was a much bigger turnout than we thought it was gonna be because it was the first big gathering since COVID. So that was pretty incredible just to see everybody to be able to come together again, talk, enjoy a meal. We've been pushing within the Indian community the vaccine, so a lot of our elders were a little bit more comfortable coming out because so many of us had been vaccinated already and so many of them had already been vaccinated. So, it kinda eased everybody's mind a little bit, but it was just incredible to see everybody interact again, to be able to just sit down, enjoy some good food and just talk. So, it was a good day and like I said, it was a much bigger turnout than what we expected.

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**Jessica T:** So, what was the food that you all served for elder lunch?

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**Jennifer A:** Oh goodness, so much.

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**Sally L:** So, Mr. Don Branham and Bertha Branham were the ones who did all of the cooking and literally there was so many different things. I couldn't even recount all the different dishes we had. I know we had chicken potatoes, we had squash, we had baked beans—

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**Jennifer A:** Cabbage there.

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**Sally L:** Cabbage, corn, the different meats. I know that they had some type of pork. I can't remember what all meat they had. I know they had chicken, they had—

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**Jennifer A:** There was just a whole line—

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**Sally L:** It was a whole buffet.

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**Jennifer A:** A whole buffet of food. And the fact that Don and Bertha did all of it. They love to cook, and they had hosted these before, so I think they were excited to get back into the kitchen and do that much cooking. So, I think they really were excited about that too.

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**Jessica T:** What was the atmosphere and the discussion like during elder lunch?

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**Sally L:** They were all so happy. There was a lot of tears, you know what I'm saying? Because they were finally able to come back together. That's hard on, especially I think Native communities, when you can't have that closeness because we are so close. So, when you're separated for that long, it really takes its toll especially for our elders. They mainly sat around, reminisced about old days and just some of those things that they used to do, fishing, just hiking in the woods, just the different things they all did growing up. And then I think trying to just catch up on things where everyone was kind of to themselves, so just kind of discussing what they did, what they haven't done, what they miss doing, what they're excited about getting back to. So, it was a really, really joyous, really upbeat, happy. Lots of pictures were being taken from everybody just 'cause they were so happy just to be around each other again.

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**Jennifer A:** I think one of the things that stands out to me—and I'm not exactly sure if, I'm gonna be honest with you, the conversation took place that day or afterwards—but we had an elder, Diane Shields, she's actually head of our 501, and she was going to, I think she said Charlottesville.



She was going to go see her grandkids, she had not seen them in quite a long time because of COVID, and just she was so happy at the thought of, “Oh I’m getting to go see my grandkids.” So that was the big thing. I see a lot of people finally coming back together. It’s just a good thing. I can’t remember if she said it that day or after, but needless to say it stands out to me about how excited she was to be able to go see them.

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**Jessica T:** Absolutely. So, people are looking forward to getting back together?

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**Sally L and Jennifer A:** [In unison] Yeah.

[00:11:22]

**Jessica T:** What role do you see the lunches playing in that in the future, especially considering all the different kinds of food you all serve?

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**Jennifer A:** Well, it’s gonna be a monthly thing again. We’re starting it back up again and every month we’ll do this. We’re hoping as the months go out, we’ll even include—the older men used to get together and play cards and stuff like that. And I’m hoping that eventually we’ll be able recreate some of that. So not just are we having meals and the women can sit around and eat, although some of the women do get in the card games but let the men kinda play their games and all of that good stuff. So, I see that—I think it’s gonna bringing us all closer, that’s what I’m seeing,

that's what I'm hoping for. But the truth is that whenever you sit around a table and you eat, it always, that meal always brings you closer, at least it's supposed to.

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**Jessica T:** The last time we talked you were overcoming a lot of, just like, infrastructure issues like transportation, internet, and also in light of the volume of requests increasing. How did you address those issues over the last six months to a year?

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**Jennifer A:** Well, in January we were moved to a new building. So that was a huge thing. Senator Kaine came out and did our grand opening and all of that good stuff. It was absolutely an emotional day, but I think everybody was so happy. So now we're in a building that's got quite a bit more space, although some days I think we're already outgrowing it just 'cause of the clientele. But we now have internet that's reliable, which we never had before. So that was a huge thing, was the move and it helped us—there were so many problems like we had before that we don't have anymore. It's just easier, makes our job a lot easier.

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**Sally L:** And I think it's a lot more accessible to more people also, our location.

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**Jennifer A:** Yes, definitely.

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**Sally L:** It's kind of right off of the main road so it's a lot easier to get to. So hopefully—I also think that's what's helping drive our numbers up also, is 'cause it's wider known now also since we are more in town. So, the word of mouth is definitely spreading, and I keep seeing signs and stuff for it now. It's definitely help rise in those numbers also, and our community base has definitely grown just because our location is so much better. So, a lot of community members can get to us easier, so.

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**Jessica T:** What was it like to try to move everything and then set up again during COVID?

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**Jennifer A:** [Laughs] So when we made the plan, it was a two-week plan. We had it all worked out, everything was gonna be moved, back up and running, we were closing for two weeks. We made arrangements with another food bank for our clients. We really thought we had it completely together and everything was gonna reopen in two weeks and everything was gonna be good. It did not work out that well. With COVID, construction, and all of those things are so much harder right now [phone rings], I'm sorry about that. So, it ended up taking almost a month to get completely moved and to reopen. It was around a month [voicemail recording plays] so what should've only been a short time—

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**Sally L:** Definitely took a lot longer.

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**Jennifer A:** Definitely took a lot longer. So, we were all very frustrated by the time it reopened.

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**Jessica T:** That sounds like a lot. How did the stakeholders and community members interact with the move? Were they helpful? Was there a lot of pressure?

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**Jennifer A:** With the community?

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**Jessica T:** Mh-hmm.

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**Jennifer A:** I think there was definitely some pressure because everybody was ready for us—and they had a need, they needed it. And us being closed, that left quite a few families without food, although like I said we did set it up with another food bank. We're pretty unique as far as food banks go in this area. We're open Tuesday to Friday pretty much all day, and most evenings one of us is here. Somebody normally comes in on Saturdays, we don't set hours for Saturday or Sunday, but somebody's always around. Mondays are the only day that we're really—and we make arrangements if we have to. So, our clients know that we are going to make sure that they get their food at whatever's good for them. And other food banks can't accommodate that. But

we're lucky to have a five person staff so we can accommodate that kind of schedule. So, it did, it put a little pressure on us to try to get reopened as quickly as we could.

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**Jessica T:** Beyond the central location, what else do you attribute the increase in the rise—the increase in demand to?

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**Jennifer A:** Of course, I mean COVID. A lot of people lost their jobs or hours were cut back because they were teleworking or any of those—there were so many factors that went into it. Community outreach, kids being home. When you're trying to feed a kid three meals a day plus snacks when before you were doing dinner because they were eating breakfast and lunch at school, that's a huge thing. That's a huge—I mean, and groceries aren't cheap. So definitely I think that was a big factor too.

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**Jessica T:** Absolutely. I will turn it over to Savannah who has a few questions as well.

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**Savannah F:** Yeah, so one question I had was how was the holiday season for the food bank, how was it different this year in comparison to others?

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**Jennifer A:** The amount of clients. I think that was a huge one. We normally did around a hundred, I would say. And Thanksgiving and Christmas this year was over three hundred both times of clients that we served. We couldn't do the turkeys and the hams like we normally do. We had to do gift cards instead because there was no way to store that amount of turkeys and hams, so we had to come up with a different way. So, we did gift cards so they could go buy their own. The other part was that everything was still contactless at that time. So, we had to figure out a way to make sure our clients were getting everything that they needed without causing any unnecessary contact, so that was definitely different, too.

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**Savannah F:** Yeah, so kind of looking at what's happened so far and looking forward, are you seeing a change in need after the new year and the release of vaccinations?

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**Sally L:** I mean it's pretty much remained the same so far. I really think a lot of that has to do also with a lot of the lower income neighborhoods and populations haven't gotten their vaccine yet. So I think that is still driving our numbers just because they haven't been able to do it or choose not to or whatever the choice may be, I really think that's what's driving—'cause they just haven't been reached yet.

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**Savannah F:** Absolutely. And then the last question I had was, in what ways have other tribal members contributed to the efforts of the food bank this year?

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**Jennifer A:** So we've had some volunteers which is nice, tribal members that have just an hour here, couple hours there that have given their time, which is always good. We've also been— donations for those that could give did give online and there's still—I have to say that with COVID I've seen two things, one is you have the people that are really really struggling cause they've lost their jobs and things like that. But on the other hand, those that are still working and able to are giving more than they've ever given before. And I've seen that a lot which is kind of inspiring to think that just because they don't feel the need themselves, they recognize it, which is a good thing. So definitely, we've had a lot of support in that way from tribal members as well as community.

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**Savannah F:** That's really great. Well, I'm gonna go ahead and pass it back over to Dr. Taylor, she has a few more questions.

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**Jessica T:** I think one of the other questions I had was the last time we talked you were supplying folks outside of the bounds of Virginia, like you were helping people in Colorado and things like that. Is that still the case?

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**Jennifer A:** We are, yep.

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**Sally L:** Colorado, Ohio—

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**Jennifer A:** Yeah.

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**Sally L:** Maryland, those are our three main places right now.

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**Jennifer A:** Yeah, right now, I think those are the three and we have a few in Maryland. So yeah, we definitely are still doing out of state program. Again, because due to grants and the kindness of donations, we've actually been able to increase that help a little bit. So, before we might've only been able to do a hundred dollars or so in food when we were helping because of the way the program ran, we were able to up that a little bit to give a little bit more help. So yeah, definitely we're still doing the out of state programs, we hope to continue that.

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**Jessica T:** Why is it important to continue that like for this particular mission?

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**Jennifer A:** Well, we have Monacans and tribal members all over the country and then some. Out of all of the programs that we have right now, it's the one program we can honestly say can help any Monacan, and that's important. Just because they don't live here doesn't mean they don't have roots and ties here. So, it's important that we can still offer some type of assistance. So yeah, so definitely we're gonna try to continue that as long as financially we can.

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**Jessica T:** Another thing that makes your program and your mission different is the focus on children and health of children. Why is it so important for you to establish kid specific programs moving forward?

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**Jennifer A:** Kids are the future. I know I think I said that last time too, but I'm gonna say it again. The kids are our future. The elders, they're there to guide us and to show us the wisdom and things like that, but it's the kids that are gonna lead us into the next generation and then on and so on and so on. So, if we don't reach them then—they're gonna be doing this job one day. I mean, we're gonna turn this over to them, and I want every child to know that the tribe cares. And if it's just by getting a toy at Christmas, just one, or making sure that the food bank has a snack pack bag for them, it just lets them know that we're here, we care. It's stressful time for everyone, but imagine the kid that's no longer in school, that no longer has that social aspect, or that teacher that can give that one on one. Their little lives are completely uprooted. So, it's good to make sure that they know that we see them, we understand what they're going through. And if it's just through a snack pack, then it's just through a snack pack, but at least they know.

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**Sally L:** And I think also it helps—especially because we do have some of the youth that do come in tend to volunteer and stuff. I think that that is another importance, is basically instilling in them that you need to make sure that you’re caring for others and not just yourself, because in Native ways we don’t honor—it’s not basically how much we have for ourselves, it’s how much we can give away. That’s a big teaching for us, you know what I’m saying? If we have extra, we don’t keep that, we give as much as we can. That’s what is riches to us: the more that we give away shows more I think honor than anything. I think that just installing that in our kids, to be like, “Hey, this is what you need to do, you need to make sure you’re taking care of others. You always make sure that your health and stuff is always good itself, but you always need to make sure that you’re looking out for others also.” And even if it’s just as simple as snacks, that’s still gonna show that person that you care.

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**Jessica T:** And that sounds like it works really well with your goals about teaching kids how to farm food, is that the case?

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**Sally L:** It is. Yeah. And that kind of shows them from the beginning. I think also getting like the youth and stuff involved in the gardening I think will actually help them make better food choices also, ‘cause I think its gonna make them more proud. “I grew this,” so they’re gonna be more willing to be like, “You know what? I grew this, I’m gonna take care of this, I’m gonna eat it.” So, I

think that'll kinda make them help make better food choices because they're gonna take more pride in that also.

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**Jessica T:** Absolutely. Is there anything else that you want on the record or any thoughts how this is gonna unfold this summer with everything reopening?

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**Sally L:** I think we're just kinda excited to kinda get back to some of the normal. Not necessarily all the normal, but I think some of the normal is definitely better. And I just get excited about it to where people can get together and be more social and get that close knit part of our community back.

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**Jennifer A:** And just checking in, now that some of the restrictions have lifted and things like that. When they come in to get their food, we can have a conversation face to face again.

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**Sally L:** We can actually have a hug again.

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**Jennifer A:** That's right. I mean, so I think we're all looking forward to that. Making the phone calls to check in worked great, but actually seeing everyone and being close with everyone and being

able to have that face to face, that's really gonna be good. I'm looking forward to, hopefully like I said fingers crossed, this grant comes through 'cause I'm really hoping we get this food truck to be able to go into the low income and just hand out food. I think that's going to be incredible.

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**Jessica T:** Yes, that will be amazing. Well, thank you again for your time so much and I look forward to following everything you all are doing. It's really wonderful.

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**Jennifer A:** Thank you guys.

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**Sally L:** We appreciate it.