



**Kristie Abney**  
**Full Plate Real Estate**  
**Atlanta, GA**

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Diana Dombrowski: Today is December 28th, 2020. My name is Diana Dombrowski. I'm here at the Southern Foodways Alliance and Kristie Abney. Kristie, if you would, please tell us when and where you were born.

Kristie Abney: I was born in Athens, Georgia where my parents-- my dad was in undergraduate school, my mom was a student at the University of Georgia, in 1968.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. And is Athens where you grew up?

Kristie Abney: No. As soon as my parents graduated, they moved to Atlanta and I've lived here-- with the exception of a short stint in Texas when I was very, very young, I've lived in Atlanta, Suburban Atlanta and Intown Atlanta my entire life.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. All right. We're here today to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on Foodways in Georgia.

Kristie Abney: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: So I'm curious if you could let us know how your career has come to bring you in connection with Foodways?

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Kristie Abney: Sure. Well, I am involved in Foodways in every aspect of my life, professionally, philanthropically, personally. So about six years ago I started my own small company, Full Plate Real Estate. I've been in commercial real estate my entire professional career, always working for very large companies and mostly doing office brokerage, so helping tenants find office space for the most part, or helping landlords find tenants to fill their large

buildings. And that had been my career until about six years ago. I decided to sort of marry my passion, which is food and restaurants and chefs and everything about that life with my professional work in brokerage.

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And so I started my own company, Full Plate Real Estate, which I specialize in tenant representation for mostly chef-owned restaurants and food-related retailers, like Cook's Warehouse would be an example of a client of mine. And so that has been going extremely well. It's a lot of fun. I get to work with mostly small restauranteurs, many of whom are embarking on kind of their first bricks and mortar experience. But, needless to say, **at** 2020 that all came to a pretty much screeching halt. As you might imagine, there are not a whole lot of restaurant-- I think the Jimmy John's of the world are doing just fine. Those aren't my clients, unfortunately. Some days I think that would be a good client to have.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

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Kristie Abney: But the larger national chains in the quick-serve arena, I think many of them are doing just fine through COVID, but it's the smaller mom and pop, chef-driven local concepts that have really, I think, suffered more than just about any other industry that you could find. Perhaps the hotel industry would be another that's all but vanished during COVID, or the need for it. So it has impacted my professional life in a tremendous way during 2020. And particularly the first few months of the pandemic, I would say March, April, May, all of my time was spent trying to help my clients wade through PPP and the unemployment laws and trying to educate myself. It's not anything that I know anything about, either. So educating myself and

trying to educate my clients on the best moves to make and what to do; and should they close? Should they cut it to takeout? What should they do?

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And then, also helping them try to negotiate some rent forgiveness, rent deferral with their landlords. So I would say for the first few months of the pandemic I was a psychiatrist/lawyer, way in over my head, employment advisor, you name it. And then, towards the end of 2020, though, I will say that people are starting to think about how COVID will impact them forever, and how that might change what they do forever, in terms of restaurants and just really how restaurants work, how we think of restaurants as working. Particularly being a southerner and growing up in an area where it's hot and we believe that it is our God-given right to be in cool air when it's hot outside, which is most of the year, and to be in warm air when it's cold outside, which is less often.

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But I think we're all starting to recognize that maybe that's not such a smart way to live. I think we're all sort of recognizing the wonder of fresh air and the importance of it, and perhaps not climate controlling ourselves to the point where we're only breathing recycled air 100 percent of the time, so . . . Sorry, I get off on tangents.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: But restaurants are-- I'm finding every client that I have is now, as they look to 2021 and what they want to do, it's all about patio space. We need outdoor space, we need patio space, we need operable windows, we need doors we can prop open. Because those are the things that have become wildly important to people that were not things that people

thought about so much before. I think particularly in the South, we-- you know, it's funny, I worked in Chicago for a time, and in Chicago for those handful of months out of the year where you have great outdoor weather, it is every single restaurant is putting tables out on sidewalks and everybody is, like, we gotta be outside, we gotta be outside; it's warm!

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And the South we just so take for granted our great weather and the fact that we can be outside almost year-round. And I think that's one of the permanent changes that's going to come out of all of this, is I think people are recognizing not only is it good for us because we don't need to be breathing each other's exhaled air all the time, but it's maybe just healthier for us as humans to get more fresh air and get more air that hasn't been recirculated for us through a lot of machinery to then have us inhale it and exhale it for all of our neighbors to enjoy. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Okay. That's really interesting. I'm curious about a lot of things regarding that, but just a quick question.

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Are you finding that a lot of buildings like those people are looking for right now are set up in the way that you're seeking or is there a lot of retrofitting and renovation going on?

Kristie Abney: There's a lot of retrofitting going on. It's interesting. I think that the winners in all of this are going to be some of the adaptive reuse building that maybe hadn't been adapted yet. So some older buildings that maybe have leaky windows and operable windows and things like that that, as recently as a year ago, when somebody was thinking about an adaptive reuse of an old building, you'd want to seal that stuff up tight and you don't want any air getting in. And operable windows aren't necessarily your friend. Doors that can be propped open aren't

necessarily your friend. All that is changing. And the newer buildings that do have everything sealed up tight are all figuring out ways to make their windows operable, to cut out huge holes in the sides of buildings and create garage doors that can be opened and to let fresh air in.

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I'm sure you've heard that there's been a massive shortage of outdoor heating lamps. And as soon as Walmart or Home Depot or any of those companies get them in, they are flying out the door. They've got a waiting list two years long for heat lamps now because everybody is going to try to use every bit of their available space. The municipalities are also playing well with the restaurant operators. And whereas before to get permission to seat people outside was a massive headache, and incredibly difficult to get permission to do, and if you sold alcohol, alcohol couldn't be outside unless it was X number of feet away-- yeah, there were just ridiculous myriad complicated rules and laws about being able to serve food and drink outside.

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And now the municipalities are all working with the restaurants and basically saying, keep it safe. Don't set up a table in the middle of a busy road kind of thing, but we're gonna work with you, and we're gonna help you, and we're gonna allow you to maximize your outdoor 'cause it's the safest way for people to dine out right now. So there's millions of moving pieces, and I think some of them, at least the critical time-sensitive nature of them, will dissipate as we get into warm weather, spring, and more and more people are getting vaccinated. The time-sensitive nature of it will let up, but I think the overall sentiment will not. I think that there's gonna be a lot of these changes that have come with COVID that will remain long after COVID is a hopefully distant horrible memory.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. I would like to walk through the timeline of what you remember.

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But prior, I'm a little curious about your role as a landlord, a real estate agent, coordinating that relationship. You've mentioned the different hats that you've needed to wear over the last couple of months, and I'm just curious about what prepared you to kind of be in that role, 'cause I'm not sure that everyone who's helped people find space or that sort of thing has really been willing to step in to provide so much support. So would you mind speaking a little about that?

Kristie Abney: Sure. I think that that is one of the huge advantage, for lack of better way of putting it, of deciding a few years ago to start my own company. And my company is just me. I don't have anybody else. So I wear every hat when it comes to helping people find office-- I mean-- find office space. I went back in--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

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Kristie Abney: --to find restaurant space. And so already I was much more ingrained in my clients' lives than I might otherwise have been. I would say almost in every situation I know every one of my clients' families, I know their kids, I know about their lives outside of their restaurant world. My business is referral and word of mouth only. I don't advertise. I don't market myself. It's all just friends and friends of friends and people that I've met through the SFA, through Wholesome Wave, through a lifetime of living in Atlanta. And so already my relationship with my clients, I would say, is much more intimate than a just traditional brokerage

kind of relationship. Go back to the Jimmy John's example, that's a very different skillset and a different kind of brokerage than what I do.

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And, for instance, the week before-- when we were all just hearing "coronavirus," "COVID," "COVID-19," all this-- when we were just starting to hear those words, I had a coffee meeting with Sarah O'Brien, who owns Little Tart Bakeshop and Big Softie ice cream. Her husband is Paul Calvert. He's on the board of Wholesome Wave with me. He and his partners own Ticonderoga Club. They live in Grant Park. Their family couldn't be more in the restaurant business. And Sarah and I were having a coffee one morning to talk about her recent expansion of Little Tart. And Little Tart was pretty empty. It was like a Tuesday morning in March and it was a beautiful day outside, but it was pretty empty.

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And we were sitting there, and Sarah made the comment-- and it was, like, the Friday before the wheels fell off that following week. And Sarah was, like, "Man, I don't know where this coronavirus thing is headed, but I feel like my business has already dropped off this week just with people feeling like they need to be more careful and not hang out in spaces like they would normally." Little Tart, which is a coffee shop, bakery, the kind of places people would normally take their laptop and hang out annoyingly but for hours and hours on end, and that business was sort of the first thing that kind of dried up in Atlanta. It was the first thing people kind of stopped doing, was, well, I'm still going to go get a cup of coffee, but I think I'm gonna go get my cup of coffee and take it back home with me. I'm not going to go sit in a coffee shop 'cause we're



unclear about where this is going and where it's headed. And it was within five days after that that basically kind of the world shut down. But it was that fast.

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It went from this sort of amorphous thing that was just floating around that nobody was sure what to make of it. It seemed like a big deal, but at the same time, it seemed like one of those things like SARS or these kinds of-- these coronaviruses that have been floating around for hundreds of years. It just seemed like maybe it's another one of those. This one kept coming a little bit closer to home, it's a little bit scary how close to home it's getting, but hopefully it's one of those things-- it doesn't really touch us. It's sort of this-- it's come from China, for crying out loud. That seemed so far and so foreign to anything that we are. Nobody knew anybody that had it or that had been affected by it yet. And I realize I'm going wildly off track here, but anyway--

Diana Dombrowski: **That's fine. No.**

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Kristie Abney: It was just sort of the beginning of the therapy sessions that would be to come, which was, I don't know, I don't think this is going to be that big of a deal. And I remember Sarah saying, "Oh, my gosh. We're supposed to go to Paris in May. I really hope it doesn't change those plans. We desperately--" They had at that point a three-month-old baby and a three-year-old son, and they had been planning this trip that the whole family was gonna go to Paris, which is where Sarah studied to become a pastry chef. Yeah, and we were both just, like, oh, my God, by May it's gonna be fine. This **will** be a month or two of having to change our behavior, but certainly by May everything's going to be fine. [Laughter] Oh, boy, were we

wrong. Here we are sitting here in almost 2021 and it's raging more ferocious than ever, unfortunately.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. And that actually anticipates my first question, which was when you realized it was going to impact your work.

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So you're seeing it impact your clients, and is it that instantaneous for you where you're, like, I'm gonna need to help them figure this out or . . . ? Yeah.

Kristie Abney: Yeah, it was instantaneous. I would say that meeting-- which didn't feel all that consequential at the time, but I've replayed the conversation back in my head so many times

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Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: --that was the beginning, I think, of the wheels starting to turn for me, like, wow, this is really gonna impact my clients' businesses, hopefully very, very, very short term, thinking weeks, maybe a couple of months at the most. Certainly not thinking for the entire rest of 2020 and well into 2021. But it was at the very beginning that I thought, this is gonna require some conversation-- at that time I was just thinking, wow, I'm gonna need to talk to Sarah's landlord because she's just taken on this massive expansion at exactly the wrong time.

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And she may have a really bad March and April, so we need to talk to them about possibly some rent deferral, some-- the wheels started turning that it's gonna impact my clients really quickly.

Restaurants all-- it's no secret, restaurants, all of them, operate on the thinnest of margins

anyway. So one bad month can sink a restaurant. It seems like a scary, terrifying way to live, and it's why restaurateurs, I would argue, are the bravest people on the planet. Because they literally can work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week realizing a dream, and have it implode on them in one bad month. Certainly in one bad quarter will take down almost any successful restaurant if they don't figure out a way to decrease their expenses and somehow shore up revenue, whether it's takeout or figuring out some way to shore up their revenue and quickly.

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And a lot of them do it. The tenacity and ingenuity of my clients never ceases to amaze me.

Diana Dombrowski: I agree. When I've spoken to people over the course of this project alone, just the resiliency and creativity that people have shown, they're used to finding the silver lining in something and hanging in there--

Kristie Abney: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: --figuring out how to make it work. Obviously, for some people, it hasn't been possible despite their best efforts.

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: But I'm curious if you could maybe walk me through some of the changes to your daily routine, maybe your regular tasks, just to kind of start off there, because I know that a lot of different regulations came down, a lot of people were trying to understand conflicting things, especially in restaurants which have been a really hot-button topic as a public space.

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So could you maybe speak about that a little bit?

Kristie Abney: Sure. I'm very fortunate in that, because I've been doing this for a long time, I've been in commercial real estate for 30 years, I have a lot of friends who are attorneys and who are real estate attorneys. And they were all a tremendous resource out of the gate, because real estate attorneys were-- in a lot of ways, they were sort of the first interpreters of the changes and regulations and the opportunities that were coming through the government to try to help businesses survive this.

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And, like, the most recent stimulus bill that just got passed finally late last night-- I'm sure you don't want to get on a political rant, but I could do that for a really long time, and my husband would come around this corner and be, like, no!

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: You can't go there. You always go there. But, anyway, the bill that finally got signed last night, I mean, it's over 5,000 pages of stuff to wade through. So no civilian, no normal human can do that. So I rely on a lot of my friends who work in these big law firms that they're taking the 5,000 pages and giving each partner 100 pages to digest and try to put it into two or three paragraphs what it means. And, thankfully, I had a lot of resources that I could call on that I could then help my clients with. But in terms of just sort of the mundane day-to-day changes, my job is meeting with my clients and going in and out of spaces all day long every day. And that's just what I do. I go into vacant spaces, I go into occupied spaces, I meet with my clients in their restaurants, I go look at other restaurants with my clients.

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And because I have an underlying health issue, I'm one of the people with a dreaded comorbidity, I really-- in the very early days, it became if you have underlying health conditions you are so vulnerable, you are not gonna survive if you get this. I mean, it was terrifying. And so I went into full-blown seclusion, quarantine. I mean, I stopped going out really period. And those first couple months were terrifying because nobody-- if you remember, we were, like, lysoling our mail as it came through the door. Everybody thought that it was, like, contact, touching things and then touching your face. So we were really paranoid in the beginning about, you could argue, kind of all the wrong things.

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It's really not so much about what you touch. I mean, yes, we should wash our hands a lot. but we should be washing our hands a lot anyway. But people were really fixated on that, and where you go and touching surfaces in places and then getting back in your car and touching your steering wheel. And then, oh, my God, we need to sanitize our steering wheel 'cause we touched something at Whole Foods. So the first few months, my life became phone calls and then eventually Zoom. It sort of morphed more into that, which I think Zoom is-- I've heard a lot of people, like, I'm never gonna get on Zoom again when this is all over. But I think Zoom has been an absolute lifesaver, lifeline, or Google Meet, or whatever your preferred platform is.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

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Kristie Abney: But to be able to see people and to not have-- especially if you've got four or five people, which a lot of my calls involved. You know, you've got a landlord, you've got your client, you've got sometimes your client holding their baby 'cause they couldn't send their

kid to daycare that day. It's important to be able to see people, and I think it's important to be able to see people where they are. Like, we're all working out of our dining rooms or out of our kitchens, and it's important for the landlord to see that Sarah's holding her three-month-old while her three-year-old can't go to school anymore. And he's nagging at her about something, and her three dogs are running around. I think it's important for people that-- you develop more empathy when you can actually see a face and you can see an environment. And sometimes I think you can see the chaos that we're all trying to live through and get through and work through. And I think those were and those continue to be really important parts of the conversation, is just being able to kind of better understand, gosh, a month from now when I still can see your nutcracker on the dining room table or your sideboard and I'll be, like, wow, she still hasn't gotten around to taking down her Christmas decorations. [Laughter]

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Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: [Inaudible 0:24:10.7] still very festive and fun. But you just learn about people and you learn about their lives because seeing a little bit of what's going on around them, or a kid screaming, or a dog barking, or a husband making a bowl of cereal when you told him to be quiet, or those things. So I would say my life became my computer and my phone for the first couple of months, and then since then I venture out and I meet people, but only outside. It's been bitterly cold the last week, so I really haven't-- and it's the holidays, so I haven't really met that much with people. But certainly through the later part of summer and into the fall I had a lot of outside meetings, six feet apart, masks on, fresh air. That all feels very fine and feels completely safe.

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And as people have pivoted, I'm really busy again. Restaurants are figuring out the next thing, and they're figuring out what 2021 is gonna look like, what 2022 is gonna look like, and I'm happy to be part of that. It's exciting to see people's wheels are turning. And it's not all just reactive to the pandemic, now it's proactive, and how can we make this work for us? And, as restauranteurs do, like we said in the beginning, they're resourceful and resilient. And, for the most part, they're gonna survive and figure out the way that they were doing business will continue to work or it's not gonna work and they've got a new plan. And it's fun to help be a part of that.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It definitely sounds like that would require all of your energy, a lot.

Kristie Abney: **Yes.**

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And drawing on everything that you can think of.

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So I'm curious if we could maybe talk a little bit about, what I imagine for existing customers or clients of yours who are in a physical space is one thing, but for people who were maybe looking for a new space or trying to land in a new space, or open a new business altogether around the time that this-- what was it like to work with them and try to figure that out?

Kristie Abney: Well, interestingly, I have a great example of that, and she is very involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance. So Erika Council who is Bomb Biscuits, her grandmother was Mama Dip, who was kind of in that same pantheon of Edna Lewis. Erika is Black and she comes from a long line of women chefs and restaurant owners descended through

slaves. Much like Edna Lewis was in Virginia, Erika Council's family was all in kind of the Chapel Hill area of North Carolina.

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I started working with Erika a little over a year ago. And we were working towards getting her-- she's an engineer by education. She was, like, I am not getting into the restaurant business. I am escaping those ties and that temptation. But it's pulled her back in gradually, and she's this amazing biscuit baker. I mean, just a truly God-given talent. And she's done biscuits for lots of Southern Foodways events, including the symposium a few years ago. She did breakfast for everybody. And she decided about a year and a half ago-- she's been doing pop-ups in other people's restaurants of her biscuits, and they've been wildly successful. And so I was helping her find her first sort of bricks and mortar space. And we had found a space. We were moving right along. COVID came.

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This space was one that would not have really-- it didn't lend itself well to outdoor seating and it just didn't feel right for the COVID time. So we sort of put everything on hold with that for a couple months and then restarted looking again towards the end of the summer and found another location that we felt very good about-- excuse me. I gotta get a sip of water-- found another location that we thought could work for her. And, to make a very long story short, we just kind of put that on hold for a couple of months because there's just-- with a brand-new startup business and [inaudible 0:28:50.6] the tremendous capital costs that come with opening a restaurant, it just still feels like we're-- there's definitely the light at the end of the tunnel, the vaccine.



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And that's feeling more and more real by the minute, which is great, but you're still getting really conflicting reports on when enough of it will be available to get the United States to the point of herd immunity, where people are kind of acting like their old selves again, in terms of eating out and going and hanging out in restaurants and all that. Some people kind of never stopped. Some people have never restarted. Some people like me really probably won't really restart other than the places where I can sit outside and be a long ways away from other people, which, candidly, is not that much fun anyway.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: I mean, it sort of sucks the joy out of it when you're sitting there terrified that somebody is gonna cough or sneeze or their gonna get seated too close to you. It kind of defeats the purpose of the fun of the whole thing anyway.

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But, anyway, the uncertainty of it and the uncertainty of when it's gonna end has stalled her progress on two different locations two different times. And I think that's a pretty-- honestly, that's a pretty accurate feeling of how-- I think, a lot of the people who were looking to open a restaurant when COVID came along, kind of where they are. There are lots of examples of businesses that opened just before COVID or opened just after COVID, and it's been a nightmare. It's been a nightmare for people, for the restaurant owners who've done that. A client, Little Bear, who's down in Summerhill, they opened two weeks before the pandemic came. It's a tiny little restaurant, 10 tables, meant to be this great sort of tasting-menu experience but affordable. But it's a tiny little place where all the tables are right next to each other.

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They immediately had to pivot to takeout because there's no way they could socially distance their tables. They would only have room for, like, two tables if they put them the requisite number of feet apart. So they immediately pivoted to an all-take-out situation. And they're breaking even, I think, but not much more than that. And I think it's really hard to work that hard to not make any money, just to try to stay alive, and just to try to stay alive for what will end up being probably a full calendar year by the time they can actually reopen. I think March, April is probably a realistic timeframe to think that a restaurant like that could actually open for in-house dining again, so . . .

Diana Dombrowski: That sounds brutally hard. Yeah.

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And so hard to watch your clients go through that and try to grapple with that.

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So we've talked, as they realized the obstacles in front of them, about you relying on friends of yours, including in the legal community. And could you talk also about what you did as far as PPP and maybe discussing rent deferral? I know that came up a little bit when we were talking--

Kristie Abney: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: --**about the group** Zoom calls. Yeah. What was that like?

Kristie Abney: On the rent front, it's been alternately incredibly heartwarming and encouraging, and, on the other hand, it's been incredibly discouraging and infuriating. And it really all comes down to who the landlord is and how they own the property.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: I deal a lot with a local commercial real estate landlord/developer by the name of Carter, and they've been phenomenal to work with and deal with.

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Jamestown is a very large New York-based company. They've been terrific to deal with. The thing that both of those developers have in common is that they pretty much control-- in Jamestown's case, they outright own all their real estate. In Carter's case, they own their real estate in partnership with other people, but they're the managing partner. So you have local people that you can talk to who actually are empowered to make decisions. And so, in those cases, I've had great luck and experience with talking to them with my clients and saying, this is what's happening. They just flat can't out-- if you want them to survive, you're going to have to work with them. You're going to have to forgive rent. Forget about getting full rent until probably second quarter of 2021.

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And they've been as pleasant and easy to work with as they could possibly be in those situations. Then you have other situations where you've got landlords that they own their properties through some giant commercial-mortgage-backed security loan, so it's really like a thousand different lenders own tiny little pieces of it. So there's not even a person to go talk to if you wanted to. I mean, there's somebody who acts as sort of the spokesperson, but they don't really have any

decision-making authority. And those have been the situations that have been incredibly frustrating and difficult, and those are the types of landlords that are gonna see the most failures. There's no question, they're gonna see the most restaurants close. And in some cases, that sounds hard-hearted, but they don't care. I mean, they really don't care.

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They'll backfill it. It's not so much of a problem in Atlanta because our supply/demand situation for quality potential restaurant spaces is fairly evenly matched. The amount of chefs who want it and the amount of landlords who have it are pretty equally matched over time. But in cities like New York or Los Angeles or San Francisco where that can get really out of whack and there's a lot more demand than there is supply for the really premium restaurant locations, what you're seeing is that, as the businesses fold, the-- I don't mean to name names, but the Chipotles the Jimmy John's, the huge, deep-pocketed vultures can come in and sweep in, and they're happy to pay the rent.

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To get the premium corner locations that landlords historically would turn up their nose at that kind of use and would say, I don't want to give this premium corner of Madison and 72nd-- I'm not gonna let a Chipotles open there. Now, they're, like, hell, yeah, if Chipotle can pay the rent and they're not looking for any sort of forgiveness and their business is doing just fine, I'm gonna let that go in there. Or I'm gonna let another Wells Fargo bank branch open in there, or I'm gonna let another Duane Reade or Walgreens or whatever it is that-- the businesses who are doing just fine. So a lot of the really great restaurant spaces are going away, and I don't know that they'll ever go back to being the more chef-driven type concept restaurant spaces ever again, or it's

gonna take a long time. So it varies widely from building to building, from project to project, from landlord to landlord how easy or difficult the landlord has been to work with through this process.

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Diana Dombrowski: I can only imagine the headaches that that would ask of you, because I wonder if the type of landlord or the type of ownership situation really figured into the decisions that restaurant owners made when they signed that initial lease?

Kristie Abney: Well, I'm going to sound like I'm just completely patting myself on the back right now.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughing]

Kristie Abney: One of the things that I have, in my short time of owning my own company, but that I have really stood behind and preached to my clients, is don't go into buildings-- no matter how great the space seems, no matter how great the deal seems, if you think the landlord's a jerk now, just wait. Just wait till there's a problem that you've got to deal with them, and if the landlord was a jerk when we were trying to negotiate the deal or you just know that they're a jerk because of the way that they behave in the world, that is not going to improve.

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After you move into their building and you open your restaurant, that kind of relationship is only gonna get worse. And COVID has proven me right at every single turn. And I mentioned earlier Carter being a landlord that I've done a tremendous amount of work with, in part because I love

the people there. I love everything about them, I love what they stand for, I love that they've been in Atlanta for a long, long time and they're not going anywhere. I love that you can always get somebody on the phone or on a text or on an email when there's an issue or a problem. And through COVID they have proven themselves to warrant and deserve every bit of the business I have pushed in their direction over the last five or six years, because they've just been standup at every turn. They've stood up on behalf of their clients. They've helped them.

0:39:00.0

To my knowledge, I don't think a single one of the businesses that are under the Carter umbrella have folded yet. That's not to say that they won't, but they certainly won't without Carter having done everything that they can to help them. And, yeah, I think that's another of the really-- fresh air is one positive thing that's going to come out of this, and I think another is know your landlord and like your landlord and have conversations with your landlord. And your relationship with your landlord-- you're putting so much blood, sweat, and tears into their building, into their space, you better know who you're dealing with and you better know that they care about you and that they care about your success. And I know that sounds kind of pollyannaish, but I really believe that's the case, and I think that's proven itself to be true, particular in the last nine months.

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Diana Dombrowski: That's really interesting, 'cause I'm seeing this, the kind of environment that you're working in where you're helping people work with the physical structure that they have, maybe look for the best kind of physical structure to have in the future, the type of landlord, the type of legal restrictions or opportunities that are available, and all of that is operating within this unique market in Georgia and in Atlanta. And so I'm curious about how

you've seen your clients navigate the other side of that, working with the people that they're selling to, and how the nature of this divisive politicized sort of pandemic, where people believe or don't believe in it, what has it been like for them to do that outward-facing work after they're taking care of this internal kind of structure stuff with you? How have you seen them navigate those other challenges?

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Is that something that you know much about?

Kristie Abney: Do you mean, like, navigating the challenges of their customers, like getting their customers back in the restaurants, kind of thing?

Diana Dombrowski: Back in the restaurants, yeah, understanding how safe the kitchen is or isn't and that sort of thing. As people are starting to seat again, but also takeout, restrictions are changing a lot, people are putting up a lot of resistance to wearing masks and maybe to the kind of policies that restaurants need to enforce to stay open.

Kristie Abney: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: I don't know, do they speak about that very much with you?

Kristie Abney: They don't look to me for advice **typically** on that kind of thing, 'cause that definitely is something they know way more about than I do.

Diana Dombrowski: **Okay.**

Kristie Abney: But I have those conversations with them more just because I'm interested, and because I'm also-- I've been a great customer of restaurants for many, many, many years.

I've had a little hiatus for the last nine months, but I will be again. So I'm very interested in it from both sides.

0:42:02.1

I'm interested in it from the brokerage side and how can I help you, but also in the consumer side of it, like, I want to come back to your restaurant and I want to know that you're doing everything right. I have heard very interesting stories, disturbing stories about people going to restaurants and refusing to wear a mask and fighting with the person at the host stand about that. But for the most part, because of the type of work that I do, it is mostly intown, chef driven. I would say all of my clients are probably Democrats. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: I can't think of one Republican in the crowd, so . . .

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Kristie Abney: Or if they are, they're deeply closeted. And I think they all sort of wear that on their sleeves in terms of the types of businesses they operate, their social media. It's very apparent.

0:42:59.0

So I think that, for the most part, their clientele are of a type that are going to be the ones that are the mask wearers, that are concerned about other people's well being and safety, that are concerned about the people serving their food. That they're understanding the fact that they're taking a huge risk to be out in a public space trying to earn a living and they need to do their part and wear their mask when they're not eating or drinking, and not go out to eat if you don't feel



well and all that good stuff. So I haven't seen that as much with my clients, but I hear stories out of just the same ridiculousness we're all hearing of fights in the Home Depot about somebody that refuses to wear a mask because it's my God-given right to infect everybody I come in contact with if I so choose. But I feel like they've all-- every single one of my clients has, at some point, closed because they had an employee test positive.

0:44:04.4

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: But that has been, I think, pretty much across the board. All of my clients have just sort of had a policy that if they have an employee that's tested positive, they close, everybody gets tested, and they don't reopen until everybody has a negative test, and then they reopen. And that's obviously incredibly expensive and incredibly disruptive, but they've figured it out. And you hear less and less about that now because I think we are all very much understanding how it gets transmitted and the restaurants are being very, very careful about keeping people as distanced as they possibly can, and everybody wears masks all the time.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah.

Kristie Abney: Which is hands-down the best way to prevent the transmission of this disease.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely.

0:45:00.4

And it's caused a lot of a perspective shift, I guess, for business owners, but also for consumers going into those spaces thinking, like, was this such a contagious setting in the first place?

Kristie Abney: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: And I wonder what you're thinking about when you look to 2021 and ways that you're planning on supporting the people that you work with? What do you see when you think about that future short term?

Kristie Abney: We do a lot of takeout, and we have become-- I worked in restaurants before restaurants became my clients. I grew up working in restaurants. That was my first job when I turned 16. It was my job through college. It was my job through graduate school. I've always waited tables and worked in the restaurant world. So, as is anybody that's done that, we're all, like, crazy, ridiculous big tippers. But my big tipping has become gigantic tipping. And so I think that we order a lot of takeout and we tip really well.

0:46:03.2

We gave a lot of Christmas bonuses through big tips over the holidays. That's all I can do right now to try to keep-- at the employee level. I'm dealing with the chefs and owners on the one hand, but on the other hand, their employees are my friends, too. And so trying to help keep them afloat and motivated, quite frankly. My nephew is in college and his summer job and school job all through high school was working-- he lives in a suburb of Atlanta in kind of a smaller town. And he has worked at the Ace Hardware, but they don't really need him as much right now 'cause so much of their business has pivoted to, like, curbside. So they don't need, like, the 19-year-old trying to sell you a blower, trying to upgrade the level of blower you have as much anymore.

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So he wasn't getting enough hours at Ace Hardware over Christmas, so he's driving for DoorDash now to just make a little extra money over the holidays. And it's funny, he's saying

that tips are one or the other. They are either the people who tip nothing because they believe that drivers of DoorDash must be getting paid by DoorDash or must be getting paid by the restaurants and so they don't feel a need to tip, or he said they're the people who literally tip, like, 75 percent. It's like there's nothing in between. There's the people who don't tip and the people who tip huge. And I give him a hard time because his parents, my sister and brother-in-law, lean a bit more Republican. And I'm, like, and I bet you I can tell you 100 percent who they voted for based on that tip. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: **Um-hm, yeah.**

Kristie Abney: He's, like, "Yeah, I think you're probably right." So I'm turning him blue. [Laughter]

0:48:01.6

Diana Dombrowski: Yes. [inaudible 0:48:03.6] very exciting. That was a really special--

Kristie Abney: Aunt-nephew bonding. Yeah. Like, the good tippers all voted for Biden, mark my words. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Kristie Abney: And quite possibly have less money, but that's how they vote and they're more generous with their money. Anyway-- sorry. I couldn't get through this without a political--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Yeah. When we think more long term in terms of your business and your clients' business, you talked a little bit about retrofitting in some of the patio space, the outdoor space, more flexibility. Does that impact the kind of neighborhood that your clients are looking in or are [inaudible 0:48:50.6]--

Kristie Abney: Absolutely.

Diana Dombrowski: --in the future. I'm curious about that, yeah.

0:48:57.6

Kristie Abney: Well, I think one of the interesting things that we're going to-- there's been this real huge uptick in popularity-- it kind of like became really popular and then I think it already had sort of crested, was the idea of the food hall. Food halls-- starting about five or six years ago, we had two very large, wildly successful ones that opened in Atlanta, Krog Street Market and Ponce City Market. They opened pretty close to one another, both along the BeltLine, which is a pedestrian bike-friendly path that will eventually ring the entire city of Atlanta. And these two-- they were adaptive reuses of old industrial buildings. And, in both cases, they did a great job of rehabbing them and turning them into food halls with all sorts of interesting stalls of mostly local one-off kind of concepts.

0:49:58.8

And I think those types of projects-- I will be very surprised if we see any more of those for a while because I think anything where the owner of-- you can't go to a restaurant and know that that owner fully controls the environment inside that restaurant, so maybe you base your decision on where you're going to go out to eat-- let's fast-forward. Let's pretend it's, like, March, April. Maybe half of your household has been vaccinated, half of your household hasn't. You're feeling much better about the way the world is going, hospitalizations are way down, things are feeling like they're getting back to normal, but they're not quite back to normal. And when you're making your decision about where you're gonna go eat, are you gonna go to-- do you live in Oxford?

Diana Dombrowski: No. No. Actually, I'm currently in Central Pennsylvania, which is--

Kristie Abney: Oh.

Diana Dombrowski: --a whole other thing. Yeah. But--

Kristie Abney: Another important swing state.

Diana Dombrowski: Yes, it is. Yes.

0:51:00.3

But I do know Oxford, yes.

Kristie Abney: Okay. So I was just going to use **Oxford for** an example. Like, are you going to go to City Grocery where you know that John Currence is gonna be doing all the right things, he's taking great care, he's got his windows and doors open, he's got fresh air, or are you gonna go to the food court of the mall where you don't know anything about the people who own the greater food court or the greater food hall? You know the proprietors inside of there. You know that they're good people and they're doing everything they can, but they don't control the environment really at all.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: So for the foreseeable future, I think the more freestanding-type restaurants, or not even freestanding but restaurants that have their own independent space with an exterior door that you walk into and then you are in their space, or their outdoor patio area, I think those are gonna be-- for a while those are gonna be the direction that everybody wants to have with opening new restaurants and frequenting the restaurants that are already open.

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I think food halls are gonna suffer for a while. I think malls and food courts are gonna suffer for a while. I think the really tiny restaurants that have tables really close together are gonna have a harder time for a while. Anybody that can open windows and doors and have outdoor space and that has the luxury of space, I think they're gonna come back a whole lot faster. I also think the places that have managed to stay open and have remained-- that COVID has not become a part of their story in terms of, we had to shut down for three months because we couldn't get things under control in our kitchen and we kept having outbreaks and that kind of thing, I think those battle scars are probably gonna last in people's memories for a while.

0:53:01.1

But who knows? It's gonna be really interesting to see. We should put December 28th, 2021 on the calendar and have this conversation again, 'cause sometimes people's memories are way longer than you think they will be, and sometimes they're way shorter than you think they will be. And it would be really interesting to see where COVID-19 fits in all that. Is this something that we all will never forget 2020, and that if you were alive during 2020, you're gonna be telling your grandkids about this, and, oh, that baby was born in 2020? I mean, is it gonna be like that or is it gonna be like, yeah, it was a shitty year and we all had to-- oops, sorry for the expletive-- and we all had to be careful and quarantine and we wore masks, and then we got vaccinated and then it was all over?

0:54:01.9

It's hard to know. Right now, because we're still in the thick of it, it certainly feels like it's gonna be one of those things that's life changing for several generations, especially since a lot of scientists are saying, now that we've had this first one, get ready. This is not a blip. It's kind of

amazing that it's been a hundred years between pandemics that have been on our soil. That's really the miracle is that it's been a hundred years. It's probably gonna be something that, in normal places, these things pop up every five or six or ten years or whatever it is. And now we know. My husband and I went to Southeast Asia, to Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos a year and a half ago. And it was fascinating; everybody in that part of the world wears masks.

0:55:01.6

Diana Dombrowski: **Right**, um-hm.

Kristie Abney: And particularly the slightly more affluent people, and particularly in airports. We were, like, two of the few people in the airports in the various places in Vietnam that we were that were not wearing masks. People, when they travel in those parts-- and I think that's gonna be-- I don't know; I think it makes sense. Especially like big international airports like Atlanta which we go through for everything that we do where you've got people coming in from all over the world bringing all of their crazy germs with them that we don't have any immunity to. Doesn't it make sense that you would-- it's so easy now. Now that we've kind of gotten used to the whole mask thing, it's really not that big of a deal. I look forward to not wearing a mask every time I need to run in the grocery store. That would be nice, to not have to think about that, but certainly traveling like internationally or that kind of thing, I think we're all gonna think about it differently forever.

0:56:05.6

Those of us, especially, that have embraced the whole idea of, by wearing a mask, you protect yourself, but you also protect everybody around you, maybe I should be wearing a mask in an airport in Hanoi, not because I'm so much worried about catching something so much as my dirty

American germs that they've never been exposed to, perhaps I can keep those to myself and not spread them among people who don't have the same immunity that I do.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. And masks are so much more readily available. It's not like--

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --[inaudible 0:56:41.9] go to Home Depot and buy, like, the construction worker kind of regular stuff here. It's ubiquitous.

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So--

Kristie Abney: And in the next year when I have Invisalign and rubber bands and a lisp, I'm gonna be wearing a mask. Once I get vaccinated, I don't care. I'm still going to be wearing a mask for at least another year. [Laughter]

0:57:01.3

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. **That's exciting.** (That's good timing.) It [inaudible 0:57:04.2].

Kristie Abney: It really is. I really wish I'd gotten it, like, this time last year, but I didn't know.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: I didn't know what was coming. I could've been almost done.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I hear you. I hear you. And that's part of the reason that we do want to have a second interview when-- we're not really sure how to gauge it yet.



Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Like when major restrictions are lifted, but that's kind of nebulous. I will say that the project is planning to be released publicly in 2022 after we're able to contextualize how transformative the moment has been, but also how tragic and how difficult it's really been. And we're working, at least the SFA is, in partnering with other universities and research centers to try to get everything, as far as documenting goes at least, a little more centralized so that it's sharing rather than having little pockets that are highlighted or recorded in some way.

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Kristie Abney: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: So that is the hope, is that we'll stay in touch and we'll be able to do this again in the future. Before we wrap up, I wanted to know--

Kristie Abney: I think it's a great idea, by the way.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Oh, I'm really excited about the possibility of this, because I definitely prefer interviewing in person, I'll say that.

Kristie Abney: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: So we will hopefully have the second interview in person where I will be in Georgia. But being able to at least stay in touch and get the really specific details of what's going on in the moment is unique for oral history, and it's gonna be exciting to have that, as well as a retrospective where people can remember the most significant moments rather than what every single week has been like. So circling back, though, wanted to mention at least Wholesome Wave and your work there.

Kristie Abney: **Um-hm**, yeah.

0:58:58.3

Diana Dombrowski: While you're working with your clients, you're also very aware of food access and food security issues within this community that you're a part of. And I'm curious about what your work has been in like in that advisory kind of capacity over the last year?

Kristie Abney: Sure. So I've been the board chair of Wholesome Wave Georgia for the last two years. I'm in my last four days, and then I'll be turning the reigns over. And it has been an action-packed two years. And we've had a couple of executive director changes, which, prior to that, we had had the same executive director for the entirety of the history of the organization, and then a global pandemic. So I would say with Wholesome Wave I'm so proud of our tiny, mighty group of people who-- the demands on our little organization have quintupled over the course of the last nine months.

1:00:07.7

Our primary work is with SNAP recipients. And I would venture to say there are hundreds of thousand of Georgians who we serve who are now on SNAP who, if you had asked them a year ago if they ever thought they would be utilizing SNAP benefits, they would've-- that would've never entered their minds. So the population that we serve has never been greater. But I will say that the generosity of the people who we go to as funding sources, both individuals and larger funding sources via family grants and stuff like that, the generosity has surpassed the demand, which is amazing.

1:01:00.9

That in this difficult time fundraising has been challenging only because the needs are so great, but the generosity of people, it's just heartwarming. Right at the end of the year, we got a couple of-- for our size organization, which is very, very small, we got a couple of huge grants that we were not expecting to get that are just absolute lifelines, and just enable us to meet the incredible demand that is being placed on us and all food insecure-- all of the organizations that help fight food insecurity. There are so many people that are dependent now on SNAP, on food banks, on the generosity of others to feed themselves, to feed their kids, to feed the elderly.

1:02:03.5

And like I said, people that would've never in a million years dreamt that they would find themselves in these situations. But, thankfully, the need has been surpassed by incredible generosity of the people who are able to give. 'Cause that's one thing that COVID has really done, and this isn't something that I've come up with. It's well documented on the news, too, is that our country was so bifurcated before this in terms of the haves and have nots and this dwindling middle class and people that are very, very comfortable and want for very little and people who have nothing and are working class poor, and who are having a really hard time feeding themselves and feeding their families.

1:03:01.6

And COVID has just-- that gulf is so much wider than it was before. There are so many of us-- I'm able to work from home for the most part. My job is very different, but I can work from home. I can earn a living from home. My husband can work from home and earn a living from home. Most of the people that I know that aren't my clients that are in the restaurant business, people that have more normal white-collar jobs, if you'll call it that, have been able to pivot to,

you know, offices have closed, we're working from home, or we are alternating shifts going into work. But there is a huge part of the population for whom that's not an option, and they're getting decimated by COVID. And they are also losing their livelihoods as things close and businesses close and mom and pops close and Amazon gets bigger because people are more and more now-- Amazon already was putting all the mom and pops out of business.

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Now, between Amazon and Walmart, it's going to be really interesting to see what's left of the retail world when all this ends. And it's going to be interesting to see the long-term effect of that, of having such a polarized society. And I realize now I'm getting way bigger picture. But how is that-- that's just not a good thing. It's not a good thing when you've got part of the population that their portfolios are doing great, the stock market is going crazy, everything is fine with them, they're working from home. And then an ever-increasing part of the population that's literally starving. That's going to be what's really interesting when we talk again, to see how is that-- do we start to see that gap shrink hopefully, or does it just further divide us--

1:05:04.6

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: --politically, socioeconomically?

Diana Dombrowski: You have such a unique perspective because you see how people's livelihoods are really working out at these different levels in Atlanta and in Georgia as a whole, what people are able to do with them, how secure/insecure they are, what kind of obstacles are coming everyone's way, and having this really unique challenge impact people at these different segments but be inescapable. Although the impacts are different, it's inescapable. It's such a

challenging time. It's a very humbling time. And I'm really grateful for your sharing your perspective on that right now.

1:06:03.7

I wonder if, as we start concluding, is there anything additional, when you think about the significance of the moment with the different work that you do; is there anything additional that you think is important to have on the record?

Kristie Abney: Well, I think what's fascinating about this particular time that you and I are talking is that Georgia has turned blue for the first time--

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Kristie Abney: --in decades, and we also happen to be the center of the world politically with two senate races that have gone to runoffs that will determine the makeup of the senate, which impacts-- the broad-reaching impact of the election that we'll know the results in eight days, and that's going to be very telling, I think, about-- because, interesting, we are not hearing any polls.

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There are no polls because they've been so wrong that basically the poll business has put themselves out of business because they recognize how wildly inaccurate they've been the last two presidential elections. The blue waves that have been supposedly coming, according to pollsters-- because, as it turns out, a lot of the people who support Trump and who lean more red are not responding to polls. So the information is all wrong. So we have no idea where this is headed. I live right in the middle-- I live in a battleground neighborhood. I live in Midtown

Atlanta where, if you go two neighborhoods north of me it is all Loeffler and Perdue signs in every yard. If you go-- well, in my neighborhood and anywhere south of me, it is all Ossoff and Warnock.

1:07:59.2

So it's like kind of a fight for the soul of our country happening via yard signs. It's crazy. So it's a really wild time from a health standpoint, from a public policy standpoint, from an economy standpoint, from a political standpoint. But where is it gonna land in eight short days? It's gonna be really interesting to talk to you again when we talk and hear how all this has shaken out. 'Cause I don't think anybody's crystal ball is clear enough to say.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Kristie Abney: Certainly mine isn't.

Diana Dombrowski: It's such a unique moment of just quiet and waiting to see--

Kristie Abney: Yep.

Diana Dombrowski: --what the new year is gonna bring, what the vaccine is gonna bring, what the election turnout is. It's just holding on, right?

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So yeah, yeah. I'm so glad that you mentioned that because I don't know that that impacts necessarily, like, someone's lease or what customers are coming into the restaurant, but it's the atmosphere that everyone's living in right now.

1:09:08.3

Kristie Abney: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Kristie Abney: And I think that it does. I think it does have an impact on all of those things. I think the fact that Biden is gonna be our president in another few weeks I think has a tremendous impact on people's willingness to trust the government and to get vaccinated. Because I personally believe that Biden is going to do everything he can-- he's already doing it. He's resisting every urge to trample Trump except when Trump gives him no choice-- he's resisting every urge, and he really is trying to-- already; he's not even president-- but bring people together and unify and stop the hate.

1:09:55.7

And I really think that he is just going to engender trust in the government again, which I think has been sorely lacking for the last four years particularly, which I think impacts everything. It impacts people's belief in the CDC. It impacts belief in the World Health Organization. It impacts everything. And all of that eventually does trickle down to, will people go out to eat again, and how comfortable will they be doing that? And will people wear masks because the President of the United States is wearing a mask and everyone in his family is wearing a mask because it's the right thing to do, 'cause it's the selfless thing to do. It's not all about freedom of choice all the time. Sometimes you have to actually be a little less selfish.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Especially when it's such a truly painless action.

Kristie Abney: Exactly, exactly.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for your time.

Kristie Abney: Oh, my pleasure.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's been really great to talk with you and I'm looking forward to more of it on the other side of whatever this looks like.

Kristie Abney: Me, too.

1:11:00.3

Diana Dombrowski: The next steps are going to be transcribing this interview, sending you a copy of that document, as well as the audio. And my plan is to keep in touch as the Wholesome Wave segment of this project gets itself together and then, as the COVID-19 project that we have over several states evolves. So we're gonna stay in touch. I'm going to keep updating you on the content of what we're bringing in, as well as how it's gonna be used.

Kristie Abney: Awesome!

Diana Dombrowski: So thank you.

Kristie Abney: Awesome. Well, if you ever want any ideas of interview subjects, I have some in mind that I think would be interview subjects for you, but . . .

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Kristie Abney: I'm sure you've got a long list, but if you needed any ideas, I'd be happy to share some thoughts I have on that, too.

Diana Dombrowski: That's great. Yeah. I'll touch base with Annemarie and maybe be in touch about that separately. Yeah.

Kristie Abney: Okay. Sounds good. Thank you so much.



Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Take care.

Kristie Abney: Happy New Year!

Diana Dombrowski: Have a great holiday season.

Kristie Abney: Go blue!

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [Laughing]

Kristie Abney: All right. Bye-bye.

Diana Dombrowski: Bye.

[End]