



Wande Okunoren-Meadows

Little Ones Learning Center

Atlanta, GA

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Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski

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Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Great. Today is December 28th, 2020. This is Diana Dombrowski with the Southern Foodways Alliance with Wande Okunoren-Meadows. We're interviewing virtually over Zoom for the COVID-19 oral history project. And Wande, if you could, please start off by telling us where and when you were born.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Hi. I was born in Nashville, Tennessee, November 7 of 1975.

Diana Dombrowski: All right. And did you grow up in Nashville?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I did, just for a very, very brief period. Then I moved around to Mississippi for a few years, and then settled in Germantown, which is right on the outskirts of Memphis.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, great. I have family there, actually.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: In Germantown?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: Small world.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah, I guess.

Diana Dombrowski: And what brings you to work in Georgia?

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Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So as I said, I lived in Germantown for several years and then I went to high school at East High School, which is right outside of Germantown. And then I got accepted to a great school in Atlanta, and I thought I was gonna have the great college experience and move away from home. And then my parents were, like, oh, we're gonna start a business in Atlanta. I was, like, oh, s-h-i-t. No, you're messing up the college experience! And so, they came here and then I saw how awesome it was not to have to pay for laundry and just go home to get my laundry.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: It was great. I was, like, oh, my God, this is awesome! So my mother, she started an early childhood center-- or not started, but she purchased an early childhood center from somebody else here, and I started working at her early childhood center. And here I am twenty-six years later still working at my college job.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Oh, that's amazing. And working with your family, too.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: They're still my family.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [Laughing]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: We can talk about that another time, yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: There's still some challenges.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. Well, I am talking to you today about COVID and its impact on your work and the community that you serve. Wholesome Wave recommended speaking with

you in particular because they focus on food access and security issues. And I'm really curious about how those unite in your work in an early childhood education center. So during a regular-- outside of COVID, I've seen that you're connected to the Farm to School Network and other different types of programs that bring kids into understanding and accessing good food that's healthy for them.

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So could you tell me a little bit about what motivated you to bring that into early childhood education, just to maybe start off?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. So I have sensory issues. I'm hearing other sounds.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So I come from a middle-class family. I went to Emory University, so I was fortunate enough-- and I don't want to take that-- I don't know if it's fortunate or unfortunate, but I had the perspective to see or I had the opportunity to see what access, opportunity, and choice look like.

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So my dad said, "Well, you can either live a life of comfort and follow my footsteps--" my father is a physician-- "You can follow my path and become a physician, or you can follow your mother's footsteps and be broke." I followed my mother's footsteps, but I'm happy. I'm so happy. But I'm fulfilled. My mother is here at this center in the worst metro Atlanta county out of all of the metro Atlanta counties in Atlanta. So when you look at the Child Well-Being index, if you go to the United Way-- I think it's the United Way Child Well-Being Map, there's-- I don't know if

it's 8 or 9 or 11 metro Atlanta counties-- we are in Clayton County. Clayton County has the worst Child Well-Being index of all of the metro Atlanta counties. This is where her center is located.

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So for us to be here, and for me to have the upbringing and the experience and the exposure that I had, and not to share some of these rich experiences with the demographics and the population that I have, just doesn't-- how could you not, I guess? I don't even know another word-- I don't even know how else to describe what I'm trying to say. Yes, Mom could have started her center where my parents moved. We moved to Roswell when we came from Germantown. Well, you're very familiar with Germantown and the demographics of Germantown. So Roswell, where my parents moved, has the same kind of demographics, upper, affluent, whatever you want to call it. That's not where my mother started her center. We're in the total opposite. So where is the impact gonna be felt most, with that demographics or with this demographics?

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This is where we are. So this is why we're here, and it's really important for my mother and I to make sure that there is exposure, and these children, our children, our community has the same access and opportunities that our friends in Roswell and other places have, from education to food. I don't want our kids having big tomatoes that are this big, even if they are complimentary. It drives me insane when people say, oh, well, it's free, it's complimentary. Don't y'all want it? Like, no. If y'all don't want the GMO tomatoes don't bring them over here. I don't want those GMO tomatoes either. Let me have the organic good stuff. That's what we want. So even when we're doing food drives and COVID drives and those kind of distributions, that's what we're giving out over here.

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We're giving out organic food, not shelf-stable stuff that's going to put my community right back in the hospital that they're trying to get out of. We're giving out organic, sustainably grown food.

Diana Dombrowski: When your mom opened that center, was that a focus that she knew she wanted to prioritize or was that something you would say that you brought to the organization?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: What do you mean that-- which part is what--

Diana Dombrowski: Focusing on organic food.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Oh, no. Oh, no.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: That just came within the last five or six years.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Okay. Yeah. Got it.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Just serving this community was a priority from the get-go in whatever way, like as far as providing quality stuff. We've always done quality food. My mother has always said whatever her kids eat is what she wants to serve other people's children.

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So just having quality whatever was always a focus.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Gotcha.. So when we think about COVID's impact on the kids who are at the center and the families who are served by the center, it's pretty clear that they're likely the most impacted, as opposed to other communities that are more sheltered and have different types of economic buffers in terms of scheduling childcare, in terms of food access and getting to

the grocery store. So knowing how strained these resources were gonna be for your families, when would you say that you started to understand--I don't know-- when did COVID's impact really start to hit your workplace and your community?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Immediately. It was immediately. COVID hit immediately.

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When we were labeled "essential workers" I was, like, oh, but we weren't essential last week before COVID hit. We weren't essential a week ago or two weeks ago or three weeks ago when we were disposable. All of a sudden now educators-- now we're essential. So now we have to get a pass to be able to come to work. I remember clearly when the governor put those stay-at-home orders in place, and everybody was scrambling. But childcare is an essential workforce, so you-all can go to work. You-all have to make it so that emergency responders, city government could run because people need us to be able to keep those people's children.

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So I just remember clearly how frightful I was trying to figure out how I was gonna make it so that our teachers could get to work. So I remember typing up the letter for our staff stating-- for the police officers, because I was worried about what happens if us black folks get stopped by the police in the South, being caught on the streets during a stay-at-home order. And I could not think of anything other than I'm typing up our slave papers. Like, this is really reminiscent of back in the slave days where you had to carry your freedom papers, be caught walking-- you know, your freedom papers. And so I was caught between, do you want to give your staff these papers or do you want to just tell your staff, you have rights, you don't need to have these freedom papers with you? Just tell the cops that you're essential workers.

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I shouldn't have to type freedom papers for the staff. But then, do you want to argue? 'Cause this is all going on during the same time of Breonna, of George Floyd. All this stuff is going on. And I know how my temper is, 'cause I'll get into an argument in a second with a cop trying to explain to them my rights and go to work because I want to give my papers and keep moving. So all this stuff-- like, oh, my God, this is disparity right here. Would a white person have to go through typing up freedom papers? They don't have to go through that. So it's, like, immediately that was just one impact of COVID, like the separation and the divide. And then, of course, the educational divide. We saw-- I don't know if you had it where you are, like, the pod living where some families were able to form their own pods of education where-- and they were exclusive, right?

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Like, they started excluding some families from joining their pods. There were so many. I can't even-- all of the ways that COVID impacted. And then you have situations where even women were impacted. I had friends who were on the track for promotions and had to stop right then and there because they had to make a decision, who was going to continue their career path, the men or the woman stay home with the kids? Somebody has to stay home maybe with the kids. And a lot of times the woman stayed home and gave up her career path so that the husband-- 'cause he was a higher income earner in some cases, so that he could continue his path.

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So I think a lot of times women-- we suffered in some ways, if that makes sense.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it definitely does. It definitely does. When I think about the first time that COVID was in the news, that term, it was something like January. And then, around March, all these restrictions hit, and people started to realize what an explosively big problem that was gonna be with people needing to stay at home, places closing down, schools figuring out how the rest of spring semester was gonna look like. How did you all grapple with these mandates that were coming down and how that was impacting your families? As an essential business, you're gonna stay open, but how did it change staffing for you guys and that sort of thing?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: It was a catastrophe.

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It was nothing short of a catastrophe. So we are very fortunate. Here in Georgia, we had a governor who said we will support childcare centers who decide to stay open and we will support you-all if you decide to close. We will not mandate that you close. We will give you all the autonomy to make the best decision for you. You all figure it out. We received a lot of backlash here, childcare owners, because some people thought that we were money hungry, this, that, and the other. For our center in particular, we only stayed open to essential workers, so we were not just gonna have a free-for-all and say, yeah, everybody just keep on-- we were trying to figure this mess out ourselves. We were like, oh, heck, no. So I sent out an email the next day to all of our parents and said-- when the governor shut the state down-- sent an email out to all of our parents, we will only be open to those of you who are essential workers, period.

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So we went from having 173-- about 160 or 170 kids on that Thursday or Friday to between 8 and 20 for the next six weeks. So our enrollment dipped. That was our enrollment. So it was absolutely not about being money hungry at all, zero. We can't survive on that. The hardest part was waking up in the morning-- I remember one of our staff, she came to me one morning with tears in her eyes as I sit in this office and she said, "Ms. Wande, I'm scared." And I said, "What's wrong?" And she said, "Is everything going to be okay?" Because she was worried about catching COVID. So how do you, as a business owner, because you're running your business-- you're caught in this very weird position of running your business and knowing you have staff that are needed to run your business but also having that human element that needs to connect to support your staff. And she just had tears flowing down her eyes. And I remember telling her, "If you need time off, you take your time off. You do what you have to do." And that was really hard because what she didn't know, and none of the staff here know this, but I would get up every single morning and look at myself in the mirror and say, "Wande, be bold, be brave, and be courageous," every single morning that I was getting up to come to work. And I did that because there's just no way in hell I could not come to work. I can't send my team out to work and they not see their captain at work.

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Just because I'm the administrator just-- I mean, yes, I had enough team members to run the center, but I had to project that-- I think it does something very different for your team to see that you're in the thick of it with them as opposed to shielded at home in safety. So my mother is also here, but my mother and I made a very intentional decision. Mom is 70, high-risk group, has other preexisting conditions. And I said, "Mom, both of us can't get COVID. If one of us gets COVID, I probably have a better chance of fighting it off than you do, Mom." So we were very

intentional. "Mom, you stay home. You will not be allowed at the center period, zero. You cannot." So she ran the ship from home. She was on the computer.

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We connected on the phones and stuck together. But there's just no reason for both of us to be here and for her to potentially catch it. So that was the way that we strategized it. Yeah, it was pretty frustrating. So it impacted our workforce immediately. The feds are great. They probably thought that they were helping by doing that pandemic unemployment insurance by giving everybody-- it amounted to, like, \$900 a week here in Georgia, \$600 for the feds, \$300-and-something for the Georgia unemployment, so that's about \$900-and-something. Well, in early childcare, that's more than what you make in some cases if you're here.

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So that's almost like \$4500 a month-- almost. Right. \$4000-- that's almost \$50,000 a year, I guess. So for somebody that doesn't have a degree, you make more on that pandemic unemployment than you would coming to work. For the early childcare industry, that decimated our industry. It knocked us off of our feet. It was a nightmare for many of us. Many people took it and ran. And I know there is a lot of say-so or a lot of discussion, well, they're protecting themselves. And they absolutely-- I think it was set up for with very, very good intents, but you also had a lot of people who, I feel, took advantage of the situation.

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I had people that were filing unemployment on my account that I had not seen in two and three years, that were doing fraudulent filings. And what happens is, when those people were able to get those benefits, they would call, they would post on social media how they were able to scam

and game the system. So it starts a trickle-down effect, a trickle-down effect. So you have people at my center and at other centers and at other people, all of them are saying, oh, well, so-and-so, they haven't worked there in all these years. Let me try. Let me try. Let me try. And it just overflowed the system. And so what you have is a system of people that really, really, really did not need to be working and people that really, really did have preexisting conditions and had COVID exposure that really needed unemployment benefits that could not get unemployment benefits because you had all these other people that were backlogging the system.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: The unemployment system here in Georgia-- I can't speak on any other state, just what happened here in Georgia-- was backlogged.

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So the news media contacted me and asked me to do a news media on it, and I was so happy to do that, I was so, so happy to do that. And I just told them exactly what had happened. I shared with them that I had tried to fight-- not fight, that's not the good word-- had tried to contact on multiple occasions the Department of Labor to share with them the loopholes in their system, and they had not been able to make headway on any of my multiple claims, this, that, and the other. It was just a nightmare. It was a mess. So, yeah, you saw how we had invested many, many, many thousands of dollars in our staff with professional development, with training.

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Every time a staff person that we hired comes in, that's my time to do an orientation, that's my time to train them, that's my time to onboard. It's a lot. And so to see this pandemic unemployment just come and swoop them up out of here, it just decimated it. So even right now

I have a good portion of brand-new staff. You see teachers even within the whole industry that have just done a flee out of teaching. They said they don't even want to teach anymore. So it's a mess.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. And that's on top of trying to make sure that the staff who are coming to work are safe and have equipment to protect themselves. What was that like? I can't imagine that was easy, either. Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I'd be happy to share. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

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Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So the Democratic National Planning Committee had reached out to me and I was happy to-- if you give me a microphone, I'm happy to share.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Most of the time, it's because they know I'm gonna say something that's like a lightning rod.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And my mom will always fire me and probably usually around 48 hours later I'll get my job back.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I always get my job back. [Inaudible 0:23:27.5] awful, awful things, but I'm getting better about not naming people on air, because that's what normally happens. I'll usually call people out on air, so I get in trouble.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: But I'm getting better about using my filter. Yeah, so I did a thing with the Democratic National Planning Committee and shared exactly what COVID had done. Like, yes, I love that our governor gave us the autonomy to choose whether or not we stayed open or closed, but the issue is there was not a plan put in place on how to protect our employees.

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I shouldn't have to go on my Facebook page and post, hey, if anybody knows how I can get a thermometer so I can temperature check my staff, well, let me know. But people actually responded and I'm meeting people up on the highway getting thermometers. That's a problem. And I actually posted on my Facebook page, okay, nobody has responded. I'm getting ready to walk into Grady Hospital and pretend I'm sick and steal a thermometer. That's what I actually posted. And one of the doctors is, like, we're looking out for people like you. It got to be that desperate. [Laughter] I was that desperate. I was just going to fake like I'm sick and steal a thermometer. And I'm posting pictures of alcohol being-- it was something crazy. It was like \$70 an ounce or something. I don't know.

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I posted it on my Facebook page of how expensive Amazon was, just the black market or the price hikes they were doing. There was just not a plan put in place for us essential workers to

keep everybody-- there was just not a plan that was put in place for how we were supposed to keep everybody safe. So that was very, very, very frustrating.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. So you're looking at the guidance or recommendations from somebody, even though you're not-- no one's actually communicating with you or making recommendations specific to your industry. You're trying to figure this out on your own, and supplies are running low of thermometers. Was it the same with masks? And I think you said hand sanitizer, as well? Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. It was all of that.

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So our business is located in Clayton County, but I live in DeKalb County, so I was crossing counties trying to get resources from one county to another county. And I almost got resources from DeKalb County, but they were, like, oh, no, we can't help your business because your business is in Clayton County. It was just a nonstop nightmare. It was just bad.

Diana Dombrowski: That's terrible. And that's all just to get the doors open--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: --while you're receiving these claims, trying to make sure at least when things start that y'all are prepared, and knowing that the kids are going to be impacted who you're working with.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Hold on one second. I'm sorry. Okay. Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Diana Dombrowski: I was curious about how you all geared up to help take care of kids and shepherd them through this time that involves so much changing and involves so much disruption for them while y'all [inaudible 0:27:03.5].

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Wande Okunoren-Meadows: What was the question? What was the question? Say it again.

Diana Dombrowski: Sure. I'm curious how you-all prepared to shepherd and take care of kids who were experiencing so much disruption at the same time that you're dealing with these other factors.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: We didn't. It was honestly just a do the best you can. And just like I told my parents, I think there was one time where one of the parents was looking for a hair bow, and I was, like, looking for a hair-- I'm trying to keep your kid safe from COVID. I don't know where your child's hair bow is. [Laughter] I don't know where your hair bow is. But I get it, because part of what it-- so parents aren't allowed to come inside the building at all. The government put that in place-- at all, so not in any childcare center. And I don't know if every childcare center is following that guidance, but we have not-- no parent has been in our center since February, period.

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And so parents really don't know what's going on, so I think that's part of the frustration. Parents have no clue. We don't have cameras in our building. This is a very, very old building. If you tried to put a hole in the wall to put a camera, I don't know, water might come out the other side the building. I don't know.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: It's just weird stuff. So they didn't know what was going on. So they're thinking things are still operating as normal and it's not. We have a lot of new teachers who don't have all the policies down pat. Yeah, so a lot of times our only goal was to make sure that these high-touch areas were wiped down. For a period, we had hired and adjusted schedules so that's all somebody was doing in the beginning was wiping down, wiping down, wiping down.

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Our payroll had increased, skyrocketed, because the first, like, month, month and half-- it might've been even two months-- I'm not saying this in a boastful way at all-- we didn't let anybody even go on break outside of our center. So if their shift was from eight to five, they stayed on our property from eight to five because we didn't want them to go out to Chick-Fil-A or wherever it was to go on break and bring COVID back into our building. Because COVID was just that new. We didn't know how you catch COVID, like, how you get it.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And so our thinking was, once an employee comes into our building, at least we know that they are here all day long, they're not going anywhere, they're gonna be here until the end of the day. We paid overtime-- so that's why our payroll skyrocketed because we paid overtime and all that stuff for them to stay here. We still let them go on break, but we just paid them overtime to stay on our property.

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So, yeah, that was hard, and I hated it because I know they just wanted to get off the property. But we were, like, no, because then if you go off the property, you're probably going to need to take a shower and then come back here. I don't know. It was just weird thinking that we had, but we didn't want them to go out, expose themselves to other people, touch this, that, and the other. It was just all very new.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. You're just trying to keep them in as contained environment possible, of course. Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yep.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's so stressful. It's so incredibly stressful on top of a job that I think is already [laughter] quite stressful in the first place. How were you able to manage that; just taking one day at a time? What motivated you to keep going?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: We didn't. We didn't. And I tell people this all the time. 2020 was my most stressful year ever in life. And people said, oh, well, you didn't have that many kids to worry about.

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And I'm, like-- people not being able to grasp the intense level of stress that we were under was one of the most stressful things because not only are most people working from home while the rest of us are in an essential industry working every day here, then you have people that are, oh, well, we can go ahead and have eight Zoom calls in a day. No, you can't. Some of us are still working on top of having four and five Zoom meetings a day. And then you get mad because I'm zoned out. Like, I can't-- I'm sorry. There's only so many Zoom meetings I can have in a day and still retain any of the knowledge. And so one of the things that people started doing with

educators is they-- oh, well, we'll be able to have a higher attendance rate because teachers don't have to travel and take off work.

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Well, yeah, that's true, but they're not going to retain the information 'cause all they do is block off the screen and hit the-- I don't even know-- what's that thing they block off the video?

Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And half the time they're not even there. They're not retaining the information, 'cause there's only so many Zoom meetings you can go to in a day and retain the knowledge. So, yeah, that was probably one of my most frustrating things. So I tell people this all the time; it's a quote by **Dr. Rashida Walker**-- and she refers to it-- and a friend gave me the book. It's called-- it's on my bedside table. I forgot-- I started reading it a few months ago, and it's called-- I forgot the name of the book. Anyway, one of the pages, it talks about the stuff that I used to-- I was able to deal with in January of 2020, December 2019.

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If the same situation happened in February of 2020, March of 2020, the same exact situation, I melted, I cracked, could not deal with it because of COVID. It's like SPF sunscreen. I needed a totally different type of sunscreen in that kind of sun. Totally different level, a higher degree of protection just because you're dealing with the social unrest, you're dealing with the racism, you're dealing with the COVID, the health, the education, and you've got your own kids that you're dealing with trying to figure out their schooling situation. And then I'm involved with the protests and then work. It was just different. It was just very, very different. And then you want to make sure that your own staff are protected and safe. It's a lot.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That sounds incredibly draining. Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Very draining.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

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I'm curious, when it comes to connecting with Wholesome Wave, whether or not there was any kind of programming or work that you-all did together during this time? Like, what was that kind of interaction and collaboration like?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. So Wholesome Wave, they've always been a great partner. During this whole time were always-- so the City of Forest Park, we were in the process of trying to get our farm stand permit back. I don't know if you're familiar with our farm stand battle.

Diana Dombrowski: No.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Oh, okay.

Diana Dombrowski: Sorry, I'm not. [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: No. It's not a bad thing. It's not a bad thing. It's just I have so many stories.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: [Laughter] I have so many stories.

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And I don't want to bore you and take you down these rabbit holes.

Diana Dombrowski: Please do.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Okay. So I'm gonna make a note to share with you a couple of the-- I'll send you the DNC thing that I did with COVID.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And then, what was the other thing that I-- I'll send you the Georgia Department of Labor thing that I did with COVID. And then I will send you the thing about the farm stand thing.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So about a year and a half ago, we were doing our farm stand selling food outside. And our city, the City of Forest Park, decided to shut us down and say, oh, you don't have a permit for your farm stand. And I was, like, what in the world? We've been selling food out here for I don't know how long.

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And so they said, you need a permit; just like you need a permit to do a garage sale, you need a permit to sell food. I was, like, oh, okay. So I decided to look into it. The zoning officer, he let us keep up our farm stand for the rest of the day. And later on we did some research, and I did not feel that he was interpreting their ordinance correctly. I felt their ordinance was outdated. And so I contacted the mayor, contacted city council, contacted everybody. They ignored me. I just wanted a simple answer. So I emailed them, and they still ignored me. So I asked my parents at the center-- this is 2019-- I asked my parents to help me by calling. And apparently the city didn't like that.

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The city didn't like that because apparently it tied up their phone lines quite a bit. But when you ignore me, I need help to try to make some headway. So they still did not answer my question. So it ticked me off because then Mom and I had to retain an attorney. That really ticked me off because we don't have funds for an attorney to deal with this nonsense. And so that started like a whole big movement. So that's how all these people from all over the United States, all these organizations-- there's people from Australia. The Texas agriculture-- who is the biggest Republican, was, like, what the heck? Even he weighed in on the issue. He was posting on his Facebook page saying, what's going on with those backwards people in Georgia?

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Why don't they understand that there should be a farm stand for-- I mean, it was just the most bizarre stuff that was happening. So, to make a long story short, this is going on for about a year and a half of our farm stand battle. Wholesome Wave gave us, like, two cycles of funding to help fund us for a outreach coordinator to spread the word about farm stands, Wholesome Wave, just a lot of good stuff. And apparently what caught the eye of the zoning officer was because our outreach coordinator was doing such a good job of spreading the word about our farm stand, that's what caught the eye. [Laughter] Because they had all of our fliers and yard signs in the back of their squad cars or whatever. So we were going through these--

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: What'd you say?

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. That's just-- wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I believe you. I believe you.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: But yeah.

0:39:00.5

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So we were going through all these city council meetings, all this crazy stuff. And so one of the council people said, "I just don't understand what a farm stand has to do with education at a daycare center." And I was just sitting there, like-- nobody could believe, like, what we were hearing. We were just, like, oh, my God, do you hear this? Like, what the . . . And so we were saying to him-- we already have parents that are here at the center. We have our farm stand. We're growing food in the back yard. It just makes sense. The people are here. The parents are here. They can pick up their food. And he was, like, well, the main farmer's market is three miles up the road. They can just go up there. And we're, like, but some of our parents don't have transportation. Their apartment is right across the-- why are we making it harder? Access, it's all about access. So it was just beyond us. It was just a nightmare, a nightmare.

0:40:00.3

So Wholesome Wave, they've always been a great partner with us. They've done the Two for One. They helped sign up our families for EBT, all this stuff. They built this through the entire process-- before it was **Alex** it was **Alisa** who helped us. They worked with us through the Captain Planet Foundation. So it's a really good network of foodie people here in Atlanta that

supported us through this farm stand thing. So just in August, the ordinance passed where they finally granted us this thing. But what was most absurd was we have him on tape where he said, one of the council members-- they asked him, "Why don't you want a farm stand here at the center?" And he said, "It could attract pedophiles." And of all the reasons why not to have a farm stand at a childcare center, pedophiles coming.

0:41:03.6

So the newspapers caught that, like, pedophile seeking apple-- I don't know.

Diana Dombrowski: Vegetables, yes.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yes. [Laughter] It was just a nightmare. For me to wake up the next morning and see that this made it on *Forbes* magazine. When has *Forbes* cared about a farm stand at a childcare center? *Forbes* magazine, *Chicago Tribune*, it was on all these newspapers. It was just crazy stuff. Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So is it over or . . . ?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. It's finally over.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, okay. Okay. [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So now that it's over-- but it ended in August, like, three, four months ago during COVID. So we still haven't really had a chance to sell like we wanted to.

Diana Dombrowski: This is so frustrating! It just sounds like you're in these constant battles with bureaucracy.

0:42:03.3

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Constant, nonstop.

Diana Dombrowski: All the time, yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: All the time.

Diana Dombrowski: I imagine that the tools that you have, you're honing them, you're getting sharp, you're winning, you're doing what you need to do. But it just takes up so much time, so much time.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: It was. And I think during this, even with the farm stand battle, it was frustrating because you saw people that normally support our center-- we normally have politicians and stuff that will come and read-- or not-- but elected officials that would come and read to our children during the school year. We would call them and say, hey, it's your month. You normally come and read to our children during the month of October. Can you come and read to us? They just stopped answering our calls. They would not come and read. And it's because, I came to understand, they did not want to get caught in the middle of a political battle.

0:43:05.7

They did not want to be seen as taking a side or being caught up-- their name associated with Little Ones Learning Center. Oh, that's that center that challenged the system. And I was very, very disappointed in some of those elected officials. They didn't want to go against the city versus-- it was very disheartening to see that, and I was very hurt.

Diana Dombrowski: Over the farm stand or over COVID being real?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: No, over the farm stand.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow!

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, gosh.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. So this was before COVID, before the COVID situation.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood. Okay. Okay. Gotcha.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. They did not want to come to the center at all during the-- 'cause they always come. It's in our calendar. They know when to come. We call them, about three different legislators or elected officials.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And they just decided they didn't want to get caught up in it.

0:44:03.5

So it was bad. It was pretty bad.

Diana Dombrowski: It is terrible. I would imagine it would be hard to not feel targeted in the middle of being creative and successful and productive so needlessly. Yeah. I'm sorry that that happened. I'm glad that you won, but I am sorry that you had to spend your time fighting that battle when all you're trying to do is address some needs and build something up. Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yep. Yeah. But somebody told me, they said, well, Wande, the city council, they're just used to telling people what to do and people saying--

Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: --okay, fine.

Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: But yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Okay. All right. So fresh off the heels of that win, we go into the fall--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Um-hm.

0:45:01.1

Diana Dombrowski: --when COVID really-- we're starting to understand more about it. We've never really come down from accelerating case numbers, so by fall it's pretty scary.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: It was scary when it started. It remains scary. You don't get a break. What is it like at that time when it's been a couple months and this isn't over? Have you guys got a routine in place that you feel safe about now? Do you feel like you have a routine developed or is it still getting shaken up by different things every couple weeks?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: No. I think we have a routine. We're glad that we've had zero transmission here at our school.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Zero. So we're very thankful for that.

0:46:00.1

And I do think that's part of our obsessive compulsion with how we do our—like, during the summer when a kid is saying, "I went to Disney World"—

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Say it one more time. Okay. So that's a two-week quarantine for you. Bye-bye. Like, bye. We'll see you in a couple weeks. And the parents would be, like-- you could tell the parents were, like, okay.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: But leave it to the kids, they will always tell the truth.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So we just really had zero, zero, zero tolerance for that. Normally, we will work and work and work, we are so, so, so supportive of our parents. But this time we were very clear with our parents, sending out multiple communications, like, parents, I have children at home and I also have staff here that have children at home.

0:47:01.5

I gotta make sure that they are protected, as well, just like you-all may get to go home and work from home and you need us to take care of your kids while you-all are working at home, I need to make sure that I am well, and our staff are well. So if your child has a runny nose, I'm so sorry. I know it's probably not COVID, but it might be COVID, I don't know. So if your child has a runny nose they don't need to stay here. We also instituted children that are three and up must have COVID tests. All new staff have to have COVID tests. And a lot of people thought that we were being a little bit overboard. And then, even people that call now-- like I had a lady that called last week that wanted to enroll her child, but she just didn't want to do a COVID test. And I had to tell her, well, we might not be the center for you. That's your prerogative, but there are other centers that you can go to.

0:47:59.1

We just are not gonna be hungry for a dollar to the point where we would wave our protocol.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: We told parents last week, or for Thanksgiving last month, if you choose not to follow our requests and you want to keep celebrating Thanksgiving, we're gonna ask that you please keep your kid out for a week. Don't bring your child here for the next week. So just really making sure that parents understand how serious we are with that I think has helped us keep everyone here safe.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Are you still open only to the essential worker children?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Unh-uh.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, okay. Okay. Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yep. We've opened it up.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Gotcha. Gotcha. Around when did that happen? When did you decide to do that?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: So probably around-- let's see, it's February, March, April-- probably right around May.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: By May.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Gotcha. Gotcha.

0:49:00.8

Okay. So I think I'm starting to get an accurate picture of what it's like to confront COVID on different fronts in the center that you're working at. We've covered safety, working on the budget, bringing kids back, communicating with parents, winning the farm stand-- winning it back. Is there anything that I'm missing when it comes to understanding support that you're giving to your employees and to kids' families?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: The only thing I would say is while people are happy that a vaccine is here, I'm grateful that our gardener has always had the vaccine here for our center and for our parents and for our children and for our staff. She's been giving the vaccine since day one.

0:50:03.4

So our gardener, who has a master's degree, has been giving us weekly shots of whatever's in our garden. And I also think that that's something that's probably not-- I don't have any scientific proof behind it, but, again, we know what the comorbidity rates are. We know that the black community is more susceptible. So she made sure that we were eating as much plant-based stuff-- she would make some concoctions from the garden. My mother was really investing in wholesome, organic stuff that we could build our immune systems up. And so, like I said, I don't have any scientific data to back up any of this, but I do think between my mother's investments in food, wholesome, nutrient-dense food, and whatever the gardener was giving us from that garden, I do think it helped fortify our immune systems.

0:51:09.2

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I don't know how to quantify that.

Diana Dombrowski: So, when you talk about that, do you mean the food that kids are getting there and eating there, or the food they're taking home or both?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I mean the foods that they're getting here and the potions. The gardener, she makes some weird, like, shots of stuff.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, great.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I don't know. Yeah. It's like shots of stuff. She's just, like, here. Like, here.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow. Oh, wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Like, a Whole Foods would never build here in this neighborhood--

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: --but we have whole foods growing in our garden, and the gardener is making shots of something-- I don't know what she was doing-- early in the pandemic.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: She was just doing stuff.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. That's amazing.

0:51:58.3

I can imagine how fortifying that would be biologically, sure, but also mentally during that time--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: Knowing that, while everything else is so unstable and changing, you've got this rooted **resource** right there.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah. Wow. Gosh. And it just continues. What are you thinking when it comes to 2021? What does that look like for you guys?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: It looks like I want to invest in just getting some rest for our staff on some kind of level. Just rest.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: And everybody keeps saying, oh, you gotta do self-care, self-care. What the hell? What does self-care look like in-- as essential workers, we're underpaid, there's little investments made in our mental health, in our social, emotional well-being.

0:53:01.4

We're constantly being the caretakers and the nurturers for others without taking care of ourselves, so I really want to make sure that-- I don't know if it's healthcare, like, figure it out, what kind of organizations and agencies can make sure that the healthcare of our staff is taken

care of, is a priority. I don't know. 'Cause we, as women, we're constantly applauded and celebrated for being superheroes, and I want them to take off their capes. That stuff is so 1980s. We're not going to be so-- I don't want to be a superhero. I want there to be a rest.

Diana Dombrowski: Right. And, of course, that image means doing it all is happening and there's no need to support underneath it or take away. Right. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. I'm sorry that this has been so difficult. I can only imagine, truly.

0:54:02.6

And thank you for sharing so much of it so honestly with me.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: All right.

Diana Dombrowski: I really hope that you get the rest that you need and that your staff does next year. 'Cause we've answered my questions, which were, like, how does COVID impact your work? How has it impacted the community that you're serving in financially, economically? Are you accessing food differently? That kind of things. Those are the main themes that I've talked to all kinds of people about, organic farmers and other nonprofits and that kind of thing. And even speaking to people in the restaurant business who are trying to manage this instability. Yeah. But they still have closed the restaurant for--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --like, two weeks or something when someone gets it or a positive comes up.

0:55:03.7

And you've just been going full speed to try to confront this and do your job really well. It sounds like monumental and herculean, so . . .

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah. I'll send you the links to these other ones to sort of give you some background.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, please do. Please do. I don't have any further questions. I can imagine that when I ask this question there is gonna be something, though. For someone who's listening, what else would you like someone to know about what your experience of COVID has been like during this time? Is there something we haven't talked about that's been a really significant part of your experience of working?

0:56:01.9

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Could you repeat that question again? What--

Diana Dombrowski: Sure. Is there anything we haven't talked about that's been significant to your experience of COVID, working and supporting other people, maybe something significant that happened in addition to the farm stand? Was there an event or some aspect of this that we didn't touch on yet?

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: No. I think it's probably just the same thing that you heard from everybody, just the crazy-- the disparities, the way this thing has just-- 'cause the disparities have always been there, but just the way it's been. COVID has just exposed so many things with our human nature. It's made all the things that were invisible visible with how we take care of not only ourselves but each other.

0:57:01.8

How we stay silent while we see-- yeah, just so many things. And I think how we've just become-- I don't ever want us to get so-- I hope that COVID has not made us, not immune, but has not normalized things that should not be normal. Like, I hope that we never get used to Zoom weddings, Zoom funerals, and grieving in unnatural ways. I don't think it's natural for us to get used to not laying somebody to rest in a way that's whole. That's not normal.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

0:58:00.2

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: I hope people don't get used to that.

Diana Dombrowski: I do, too. Thank you. I know that the interviews that we're doing here aren't gonna be public until something like 2022 'cause we really want to be able to contextualize what's going on, not only what life looks like afterwards but the tragedy of everything that's happened, coming to grips with and understanding the scope of that. So it is gonna take us some time just only to grapple with these materials and try to understand that a little bit more. But the next steps are gonna be just transcribing this, sending that document to you, sending that audio to you. Wholesome Wave is also gonna get a copy.

0:58:55.3

And then, hopefully, when this is over, which is nebulous and hard to predict, and who knows what that will look like, et cetera, we'll be able to conduct a second interview together and reflect--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Reflect on what's changed and what's remained and all of that, so that's the plan. And, in the meantime, I'd like to stay connected with you and give you updates on how the project is going, what kind of themes everyone is talking about, and the geographic scope that we're looking at and all these kind of different information so you know what's going on and what that picture looks like of where your interview is this important piece, so . . .

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Okay. That sounds good.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Thank you for your time. Thanks.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: Okay. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Take care. [Inaudible 0:59:44.3]--

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: All right.

Diana Dombrowski: You'll be hearing from me.

Wande Okunoren-Meadows: All right. Bye-bye.

Diana Dombrowski: Bye.

[End]