

Interview of: Ed Seiber
Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski
Interview Date: August 6, 2021



Ed Seiber
Seiber Design
Atlanta, GA

Date: August 6, 2021

Location: Remote Interview byway of Atlanta, GA

Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcripts

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Project: COVID-19

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Diana Dombrowski: All right. So today is Friday, August 6, 2021. We're here with the Southern Foodways Alliance recording a follow-up interview with Ed Seiber for the COVID-19 Project, focusing on foodways in Georgia.

We were just talking about how operations and staffing have changed for you and how the format of working and working from home has changed a lot about the landscape of professional life.

[00:00:33]

Ed Seiber: Yes, yes, yeah, quite a bit, quite a bit, and, you know, since we spoke back on New Year's Eve, we've had a couple colleagues decide to go out on their own and form their own small firm, and we've brought on three new colleagues, so it's been a transition for us and it's also been a very busy time for us as well. Work has picked up quite strongly. So those factors, you know, have led to a lot of new energy in the office, but it's also changed my and my business partners' roles quite a bit. We're more involved directly in projects now and also in training. So, it's been refreshing in a lot of ways.

We've also been dealing with supply-chain issues for our projects. We've transitioned to Zoom meetings, back out of Zoom meetings, to in-person client meetings and presentations, which, you know, is very important in terms of some of the tactical things we need to share with each other, like samples and things like that. So, it's been interesting, to say the least, but challenging and rewarding at the same time.

We've also had two restaurant projects open recently, and they've been received very well. I know our restaurant clients have had challenges of their own with staffing and operation, and now it appears that we may be diving back into, you know, mask

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mandates and maybe people not going out as they had been during earlier in the summer.

I think people are starting to have second thoughts about going to events and going to restaurants. As a matter of fact, our business manager has decided she can no longer go out to restaurants anymore. She lives with her 91-year-old father and she's got unvaccinated grandchildren, so she's just being cautious, as I would if I were in her situation.

[00:03:08]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, and I know when at the state level the governor wants one thing to happen and folks like the mayor of Atlanta want another thing to happen—

[00:03:23]

Ed Seiber: Yeah, funny how that works. You know, I see the same thing in Florida. We went to school in Florida, so it's that dynamic tension between local government and state government and federal government.

On the other hand, Wholesome Wave Georgia, on whose board I serve, has had a pretty good year. Obviously, demand for EBT has gone up quite a bit, and our farmers' markets and farm stands and CSAs have been seeing increasing business and demand, so it's been a good year for the Wholesome Wave Georgia in that regard. We still face challenges, I guess, with growing demand and things like that, but I think probably I'm more optimistic than I was when you and I spoke last, although now with a bit of caution sort of coming up behind us. We'll see.

[00:04:40]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah, I know even if we maybe sat down for this interview three weeks earlier, expectations and hope for the future, you know, might—you know, a lot of things have changed and things are still changing on a daily basis, which for me has been surprising, but I wonder, you know, what your experience is like, trying to plan for months and years ahead with your clients. I guess, certainly you're successful and you've had an uptick in business, as you mentioned, and more projects, but personally, what has it been like for you to lead during that time?

[00:05:30]

Ed Seiber: I think it's been a matter of—I mean, to have a long-term view right now, it's challenging, but you have to, you know. You have to look ahead two to three to five years and at least set goals for the firm and for ourselves professionally, at least what we would like to see happen, but still maintaining flexibility to pivot when you need to as circumstances dictate.

I think, you know, a lot of our clients are—and it's interesting because of rising construction costs, construction labor shortages, supply-chain disruptions, some our restaurant clients have just been forging ahead no matter what. Several of them, I mentioned a couple of restaurants that we saw completed recently and opened, some of them were, back in the winter, considering when they should open, when is a good time to open. Is May too early? Is June too early? But so far, they have had strong business and strong demand. One of them will probably have pretty significant pickup business

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because it's the kind of restaurant. The other one will not, and it's a much smaller venue. But we've got several other clients who have abandoned projects and who are just saying, "No. The construction cost is too high. We're going to wait."

It's very challenging to be a restaurateur who's entrepreneurial at all because of the cost of construction and the cost of design, those sorts of things, and the competition is still pretty strong here, in spite of all the restaurants that have closed. This tells you the demand is high because people have cabin fever and really wanting to get out among friends and other people, you know, and I think now we're going to have a little bit of a retrenchment. We'll just have to see what happens over the next few weeks or the next couple of months.

As a matter of fact, our executive committee meeting for Wholesome Wave was about a fall fundraiser, and last year we did a virtual online event and we thought it was successful, given the limitations. This year we were so excited about having an in-person fundraising event up to 300 people. We had indicated a date of early to mid-October, and we were talking this morning about should we postpone it another month, should we consider a hybrid event, should we consider another virtual event and those sorts of thing. So I think a lot of that's going to be going on, those discussions are going to be taking place.

It's going to be interesting, you know, having lived in the South and how important football is, let's see what happens with football season.

[00:08:57]

Diana Dombrowski: I know.

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[00:08:57]

Ed Seiber: Hundreds of thousands of people going back to stadiums and tailgate parties and things like that.

[00:09:05]

Diana Dombrowski: Traveling all over, hundreds of miles, yeah, yeah.

[00:09:10]

Ed Seiber: So the renewed questions about what are we going to do, and I think people are questioning how they're going to behave and respond and how they're going to travel. I'm supposed to go to New Orleans next weekend, and I'm thinking, "Should I do that?" It's a very high infection rate right now. So we'll see. But it's actually one of the few trips I've made over the last year and a half or so. I think I'll probably still go with a small group of friends, but I'll be much more cautious than we were planning on when we first made the plans for the trip.

[00:09:55]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I've similarly—I mean, concerts that I'd like to go to and events, and really decided against it, even though it's allowed and safe and I'm vaccinated, because there's so much unknown, and each day, you know, is bringing more reasons to pause or just to evaluate carefully, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

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[00:10:26]

Ed Seiber: I agree. I agree. So, you know, it's a challenge. We've had restaurants here you've probably read about that had breakthrough infections with vaccinated employees, and have now mandated that everybody coming in be vaccinated. Now, I don't think anybody is checking vaccine cards or anything like that, but, you know, that's what they're asking. At least they're getting the word out there. Of course, they've been attacked by some of our political people here in Georgia. I think you know who I mean. But it's just put more of a burden on people trying to operate restaurants and people trying to take care of their staff and trying to protect themselves and their patrons. So here we go again, right?

[00:11:26]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, and it really—with those conflicts going on, it becomes so up to an individual to decide, because the guidance just still isn't clear [laughs], you know? Depending on, you know—I'm really surprised, and I say that because I'm surprised at the level of doubt that some, you know, friends and coworkers I have, who were very solidly, you know, like, "We're going to follow science. We're going to follow—," whatever, now some of that opposite side has really kind of seeped in, you know, and you see it in unexpected ways just influencing behavior, and I'm curious how you personally have navigated the boundaries of other people. Maybe that's when you go out to eat or maybe it's when you're working with clients, maybe it's working with other folks, but there's such a wide variety of people you come into contact with, maybe you know if they're vaccinated, maybe you know where they stand, but we're opening up.

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The public, you know, the public's everywhere. So what's that been like for you to judge and make decisions about your safety and the safety of other people right now?

[00:12:49]

Ed Seiber: Well, you know, like you said, three weeks ago, I had a different opinion about it and I was starting to feel somewhat back to normal in terms of my socializing and going out to restaurants and things like that. You know, one of my favorite restaurants and bars that opened back up to in-person seating maybe, I don't know, six weeks, eight weeks ago, that you could actually pull up a barstool and sit there and have a bartender right across from you, you could see them smile and talk and everything else, but I will say that I have not been going out as much as I used to pre-COVID even now.

There are a limited number of places that I go on a regular basis, one of which has covered patio space, a sunroom with French doors that open. I'll frequently sit there and feel pretty confident that it's enough airflow and social distancing that I don't feel uncomfortable. Most of the people there are still wearing masks when they come into the restaurant.

It's been interesting to see the staff changes. I went to a fast-casual restaurant maybe a month ago or a bit longer, and staff had stopped wearing masks. Now they've started wearing them again. I think that individual bartenders and servers and kitchen staff have, you know, felt they could be flexible. If they wanted to wear the mask, they did. Most patrons at places where I go would not think twice about it. Maybe they do in other parts of the metro area. The further away from, you know, Fulton and De Kalb

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County you go, the different attitudes you have about COVID and vaccinations and social distancing and things like that.

But I haven't been going to a lot of in-person events. We have had clients, most of whom have been vaccinated, but not all of them, coming into the office for meetings. Fortunately, we have quite a bit of space in our office [unclear]. Is it enough? I don't know. We've been fortunate that we haven't had any breakthrough infections here, nor have any of our clients. Some of our clients have had COVID previously. You know, people working in the restaurant industry—

[00:15:48]

Diana Dombrowski: I'm so sorry. Just one moment. I think we're having a—sorry, sorry. [Laughter]

[00:15:57]

Ed Seiber: No problem. No problem.

[00:16:00]

Diana Dombrowski: Some of those work-from-home problems. [laughs]

[00:16:03]

Ed Seiber: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:16:05]

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Diana Dombrowski: Sorry!

[00:16:08]

Ed Seiber: We've experienced it all, you know. We've seen it all in Zoom calls, kids, dogs, cats, construction.

[00:16:17]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I'm going to make active use of that mute bottom. I just needed to make sure there wasn't an actual crisis. [Laughter]

[00:16:25]

Ed Seiber: Yeah. So, we were talking about how I responded and how my behavior has changed, gone back to normal or found middle ground between—you know, we will see how things go going forward. So far, we've had clients who are still coming into the office. We've continued to go to jobsites for, you know, regular construction-phase site visits for initial meetings, to take field dimensions and photographs and things like that. In those sorts of settings, you can spread out quite a bit, especially in construction [unclear], but I don't know that we are going to reevaluate that in the near future, but as I said, you have to stay flexible and figure out ways to adapt to changing circumstances.

You know, I'm a little disheartened, I think a lot of us are, at the events over the last several weeks and thinking that we were out of the woods and looking forward to a great holiday season in 2022. We still may. I mean, things could change again. It's been good to see that people are now maybe not flocking, but showing up for vaccinations in

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increasing numbers. But I do have a relative who's fairly young, who's resisted. His wife has been all over him about it because they have two young children and she works in healthcare. His reasons are just mystifying to me and to my siblings, so whatever. I don't know if he's changed over the last few weeks or not. We'll see. He likes to go to Louisiana to go fishing. Maybe that will change his mind. So, anyway.

[00:18:27]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, that's—yeah, I definitely relate to that. You know, there's a big difference between avoiding casual acquaintances who have made certain decisions and wanting to stay close to family members, you know, who've made different decisions for themselves. Would you mind sharing whether or not you've decided—you know, what your vaccination story is and what it was like to schedule and to receive the vaccine?

[00:19:06]

Ed Seiber: Yeah, sure, not a problem. Maybe two weeks or a little bit less than two weeks after we talked, Georgia opened vaccinations for anyone older than 65, so I immediately started going online to schedule one, and at first it was difficult to get through. The website was not available when I first did it, but I kept trying. Then it was a Sunday morning at home, and I thought, "Well, I'll try it one more time," and I got through and I could schedule a vaccination. I talked to several friends. They said, "How did you do that?" I said, "Well, I think I just got lucky. You choose a time and you keep

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trying and it says ‘vaccination appointment already taken, appointment already taken, appointment already taken.’” So, I got lucky and scheduled it.

The way they did it here is that it was through the De Kalb County Department of Health, and I live in De Kalb County, so I drove out to—I think it was a former Best Buy that had closed and had a huge parking lot, was just inside the perimeter interstate. I don’t know, it was a 30-minute drive, 20-minute, 30-minute drive from my house, and I got there and there was a line of cars all over the place. I think it took me—I had an appointment at a certain time, but it took me about an hour and a half of waiting and moving up, waiting and moving up, waiting and moving up, and I finally got the vaccination. No aftereffects for me, just a little sore arm, you know, for a couple of days.

And at the time, as soon as you got through in your car, there was one woman who was walking around scheduling your next appointment. Of course, she was in high demand. You’d raise your hand and she’d go here, go here, go here, and she finally got my name and scheduled my second vaccination for four weeks later. It was Moderna vaccination.

So, you know, I was looking forward to the second jab and arrived out there probably an hour and a half or two hours ahead of time, based on my past experience, and there was no one there. I said, “What’s up? What’s up with that?” And it didn’t matter. You just had to have an appointment. It didn’t matter a particular time. As I got up to the little tent where you go through, I said, “What’s so different about this time versus last time?” And they said, “We just have our act together this time.” I think, you know, they had figured it out, figured the logistics out, and there was a rush at the time, especially for my cohort.

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You know, got it, got the jab, was home again, you know, within an hour and a half or even less than that than the time I left, and out of an abundance of caution, I went home and worked from there to monitor any side effects or things like that, and felt fine. I really did not have any side effects at all from either one, other than a pretty sore arm for three or four days, and went to work the next day and felt fine, and counted down the days until the vaccine took effect. What is it, two weeks, ten days? And went on with things and, you know, felt good that I got that out of the way. That was early February.

So, you know, I read this morning that Moderna is pushing booster shots. Whether they're completely necessary or not, it's probably a good thing to get it when they become available, so [glitch in recording]. I'm not worried about any nanobots in my brain through the booster shot vaccine or the previous [glitch in recording].

[00:23:39]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I saw a funny joke on the Internet, said, you know, "There are chips in the vaccine. I hope I get Doritos," you know. [laughter]

[00:23:52]

Ed Seiber: That's a good one.

[00:23:55]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah, speaking to that experience you had with the crowd and the line, the bottleneck to get scheduled was *so* intense, and in my experience, for sure I was like, "When is this—is this going to take months? Like, we're going to have

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such a huge demand.” And I was shocked at how there was that incredibly high demand where one group really wanted it a lot, and now, you know, we can’t just give them away, you know, in the community. Yeah. I thought—I really thought there might be some initial resistance and then folks would come around, but were you surprised by that at all, by the public—that kind of stall at a certain level of vaccination or—

[00:24:51]

Ed Seiber: I was, and, you know, things have gotten so politicized in one way, but just a lot of doubt that people have. And, of course, there are media sources and individuals that promulgate that doubt and exploit it as much as possible, but I was surprised, because, you know, I’m a kid of the fifties who went through the polio vaccine and smallpox vaccine and all those other things, and, you know, my siblings and I all had chickenpox, all had mumps, all had measles, and, you know, most kids don’t have to experience that these days.

I do know there are friends with children who have had experiences with some of the vaccines, their children had side effects, presumably directly related to the vaccines, but nobody knows for sure [glitch in recording] about having their kids take the vaccine, you know. Maybe they’re eligible now, but they’re just saying, “Well, we don’t know,” because of their experience, previous experience with the vaccines. But most people I know here have not hesitated and have jumped at the chance to get it when they could. Now you’re starting to see a lot of businesses and institutions and universities, even sports teams, requiring it. So I think there will be people that will probably reluctantly get

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it, or maybe procrastinating and say, “Hey, we’re going to do this. We’re going to do this now.”

There’s such a difference now. It’s so easy to get. I had friends that drove to Alabama from here because they [unclear] small counties in Alabama to get the vaccination because they could schedule it when they had such scheduling problems here [unclear] drive an hour and a half to a small town in Georgia to get the vaccine when they could. And those bottlenecks went away pretty quickly. You can go to a pharmacy and get a vaccination or go to Mercedes-Benz Stadium and get a vaccination and a lot of other places, so you didn’t have to wait in an hour-and-a-half-long line out in a suburban parking lot.

But, you know, there will be some people that never get vaccinated. Maybe they have a robust immune system and are very healthy and they never have any symptoms, no discernible symptoms, but I think getting to herd immunity is very [glitch in recording]. The delta, the lambda, whatever variations coming down the pike [glitch in recording].

[00:28:08]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I agree, and I really—I don’t know, you know. I wonder if there—when school opens up and delta spreads some more, maybe there’ll be a surge, maybe there’ll be a change in opinion, maybe COVID’s something we might live with for a few years as people slowly get vaccinated, you know. It’s recognized as something that we live with, you know. So much of that remains open-ended right now.

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[00:28:42]

Ed Seiber: Schools have already started here, so, you know, we will see. There was a charter school that had to quarantine 100 students and staff last week, so—

[00:28:55]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[00:28:55]

Ed Seiber: —I don't know. We'll see over the coming week or so, because I think almost all the counties and cities have started in-person classes, although some are offering options for at-home classes. I've met a few people who said, "No, we're doing in-home school. We're not going to go back to in-person classes." [glitch in recording], that sort of thing.

You know, we have problems to solve relative to childcare, and one of our former colleagues has been struggling with that because of the daughter's compromised immune system and the upsurge in infections now. So how do you handle daycare? How do you handle kindergarten? How do you handle all these sorts of things that mothers and fathers, although it seems to impact mothers more, about going back to work and can't find good childcare? So that's a national problem, and that needs to be addressed not just in the context of the pandemic, but how it affects our daily lives. So I hope that we can, as a nation, address those sorts of things as well as our healthcare system and our foodways.

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[00:30:33]

Diana Dombrowski: [laughs] On the flip side of the labor shortage, you mentioned a physical supply shortage that developers are dealing with, builders of all kinds. Could you describe for us some of the obstacles that you're aware of right now or maybe have worked through yourself?

[00:30:56]

Ed Seiber: Well, the demand has surged, after having flatlined for a while, and it's sort of that—what did we call it—that shock effect, almost like a—first there was [glitch in recording], so production was slowed or shut down completely. Now all of a sudden, the demand has increased and production's going to take a while to catch up. Some of it had to do with international quarantines, some of it had to do with shortage of shipping containers, shortage of truck drivers, shortage of transportation means, the shifting of production, you know, from offshore back to the U.S., working with [glitch in recording]. We just weren't prepared for flexibility in the manufacturing and production chain.

So, you know, we've seen it in home building because of soaring lumber prices, a lot of people left the construction industry, a lot of labor left the construction industry, and have not been able to navigate that fine line between being exposed to the virus and being able to be onsite. There were a lot of construction workers that were impacted by the virus. We've had several projects in which one of the electrical crew was infected on another project, so they can't come in for a couple of weeks, so that slowed things down.

[00:32:38]

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[00:32:40]

Ed Seiber: We're still dealing with shortages of furniture, of upholstery, of appliances. I've heard that if you order a new stove or dishwasher for your house, it could take six months to get it. We've had reports from our contractors that if you wanted an electrical transformer, it's going to be at least 52 weeks before you can get one. Steel has been—certain types of steel, like bar joists, they're not available until next year. Then on the other hand, you've got contractors who are telling us—small contractors who are telling us, “We're not taking any more projects on until 2022 because [glitch in recording].” You know, that has a ripple effect on who we can recommend to our clients, people we've worked with before that are in high demand and have a limited ability to add people on. All the contractors that we have [glitch in recording] are still looking for project managers, field superintendents, things like that.

So that's going to work its way through the system, we think, whether it's 2022 or even later in 2023 that we start to see a return to normal. I don't know. We'll see. Manufacturing just can't change on a dime, so it's going to be a little bit of a catch-up period for a lot of those industries, and we will continue to make design selections with more readily available materials as we have to. We've got a project that's going to be starting at the airport here that already we know we need to reselect a number of materials and finishes, just based on the contract for verifying the lead time for this, you know, way beyond what our schedule is for [unclear].

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So, we make the best of the situation that we have, and we also try to counsel our clients on what they can expect on not only the construction schedules, but construction costs. We've had clients that came to us early on and they showed us their initial budget if they were willing to share that—some aren't—and we said, "That's not going to be adequate, based on our recent experiences." And they said, "Well, let's see. Let's push ahead and let's see."

Then you get the construction bids and it's pretty much what we had expected, were two times or more than what our client expected, and then all of a sudden, they're left with this financial quandary of "Do I cut out some of the components that we've designed in that I thought were important, or do I try to raise more funds?"

So it's been challenging. It's been fun, you know. We like to help people solve problems, and we're essentially an optimistic profession, so you try to look on the bright side of things and try to come up with solutions that we consider to be resourceful and still provide buildings and finished projects that are delightful and function well and upgrade well. That's what keeps me coming back day-in and day-out, [unclear].

[00:36:35]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, that's such a great attitude and a motivator to approach this, because there's so many levels where you have to be in such control of minute details like "Am I wearing a mask? What building are we meeting in?" and then other things that are totally out of control, like international trade, that just weren't issues, you know—they just weren't part of any calculus two years ago.

[00:37:06]

Ed Seiber: Yeah, that and for our restaurant projects, I'll give you two examples of things recently that we've dealt with. One has to do with air quality, interior air quality, which has become a big—and it should always have been, but it's becoming even more of a big consideration. When we were designing a small restaurant, actually a wine bar, the client said, "What can you do for higher air quality inside?"

We said, well, there were all those solutions coming out back in the winter about, well, you can use ionizer, you can use UV light, you can use all this and you can use all that, and, you know, some of it was relatively unproven. Now, UVC light was used in healthcare settings, I think in surgical suites or something like that, but hadn't been used in commercial retail and restaurant settings, and we didn't know how effective it would be. We dug a little deeper and we talked to engineers, we talked with some other experts. We found out that air filtration was one way that we could address that.

So our clients were in support of that, and they said, "Okay, we'll pay a little bit more to have a higher level of air filtration," which means you've got to increase the thickness of the filter and, you know, increase the fan speed and things like that, all those other kind of things that give them an assurance of a better-quality air quality inside and higher filtration rates.

In another situation, we had a client—and we have a lot of clients who've asked us about "How can we increase the outside air?" We said, well, windows, windows, doors, garage doors, things like that, and those had been in vogue for a while for the inside/outside experience, and, you know, it's a challenge in the Southeast. We lived in Florida, so we know what humidity and the insects are like and the heat. So how much do

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you want to open the restaurant to the outside in the summertime? And, you know, given, too, that you've got pretty intricate exhaust and ventilation systems for the kitchen equipment, how does that impact the balance of airflow and those sorts of things?

I think one of the things we've learned is that restaurant customers are more willing to endure a little bit of environmental challenges to be able to go out and eat, you know. If they have to sit outside on a sidewalk and it's 90 degrees and 95 percent humidity, or if they have to, you know, sit in a restaurant that's not adequately cooled because all the windows and the doors are open, yeah, we're willing to do that. We're going to wear shorts and sandals and short-sleeve shirts and things like that. We just have to get out of the house, you know. We want to be around other people.

So we've addressed some of those challenges with some of the things we're doing now. We still love our air conditioning. We still get complaints about, "It's not cool enough in here," you know. And those are concerns as well. Ultimately, I think we'll go back to—especially as global warming continues to, you know, impact our daily lives here in the Southeast and all over the country, we're still going to have to have our air conditioning and humidity levels where they need to be.

[00:41:01]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I think that air filter is so wise, because one of the most surprising things about living here in Pennsylvania has been the impact of fires out West here on the air quality, where there were several days that we had a quality advisory that folks shouldn't go outside because of the fires in Canada and California that made the sky yellow for a few days here, and that was really shocking.

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[00:41:29]

Ed Seiber: We had a few days like that here, although I think the Southeast has been relatively free of most of those bad days, but part of it could be that we've had, you know, lots of rain and lots of thunderstorms here in the Southeast over the last month, month and a half. It seems relentless sometimes, although today we've got almost sunny skies, so we're counting our blessings.

[00:41:59]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. The South is no stranger to intense weather, yeah.

[00:42:05]

Ed Seiber: Yeah. We still have a big portion of hurricane season ahead of us, so we'll see what happens, even here in the Georgia Piedmont Region.

[00:42:18]

Diana Dombrowski: I know it sounds like the restaurants that you're talking about have to be so resilient, you know, just—and really kind of—you know, stand alone, because the existing structure and existing, like, default just isn't what your clients are interested in right now when they try to—yeah.

[00:42:40]

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Ed Seiber: No, and, you know, there are still challenges coming, and there probably will be more restaurants closing in the Metro Atlanta area, but there will be a lot more openings as well, and especially those that have pivoted to a different business model or a hybrid business model with online ordering, takeout, delivery, things of that sort, or a mixture of the two.

And one of my favorite places has pivoted to—they were doing online ordering for food and pickup only, but now they're doing in-person service in the main restaurant space, and then they've got this adjacent space where they're doing to-go cocktails only, and they're not seating in that area. So they've had staffing problems, too, and they've said, "Well, we can't staff the way we were," because even if you set up an interview for people to cook or for front-of-house people, they may not show up or they're demanding high hourly pay, which I understand. You know, they've got to make a living. So a lot of people just left the industry and they're simply not there anymore. Maybe they are doing other things that are paying, you know, 15 to 20 dollars an hour, guaranteed 40 hours a week and more, as delivery drivers or, you know, working for Amazon or whomever. So they've had to pivot, and I think they've done very well.

It's interesting in Georgia, you know, it still is predominantly a Bible Belt state. State laws around liquor and alcoholic beverages have evolved over the last five to six years, but the pandemic has created opportunities for takeout alcoholic beverages or even delivery. I think that's coming here—

[00:44:51]

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, yeah.

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[00:44:52]

Ed Seiber: —to Georgia, or it's being talked about, a lot of it is, just from a business point of view, that how can we continue to generate revenue and what are our resources for that, and I think people like the convenience and they also like the bartender-made cocktails that they can get and enjoy at home in front of the new widescreen TV, because everybody's making their homes as nice as they can, in addition to the home offices and things like that.

So it's been an interesting time, and I think that this fall is going to be another challenging period for restaurants and a lot of our clients, a lot of people who still need, you know, assistance in one form or the other, either through access to fresh locally grown food or food subsidies or things like that.

[00:46:02]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. As we [glitch in recording] this kind of reflection on this period, I'm curious about thinking to maybe February or March of 2020 and now, what have been some of the biggest surprises or maybe some of the biggest obstacles you're proud of having met?

[00:46:30]

Ed Seiber: Survival in a personal sense, but also in a business sense. I think I mentioned that—I don't even remember now—we were fortunate to be able to get two PPP loans that really kept us afloat during the downturn, and thank goodness for those. I'm proud of

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the fact that we've been able to, as a firm and as a group of creative professionals, that we've been able to pivot along with our clients and that we've been able to grow our staff, replace our staff, and that we've been able to, as much as we can, support the flexibility that all of us as individuals need to have now with all the challenges.

Biggest surprises, I don't know if there are those anymore. After having gone through the great recession, which impacted us quite a bit. And now going through the pandemic, it's just—are we going to have another one? Is there going to be one other one, you know, in our lives, in our professional careers over the next three or four years or five years? Are we going to have a fifth wave, a sixth wave? I don't know. It's starting to [unclear].

But, you know, one of the pleasant surprises has been the resilience of people that I work with, people that I work for, and, you know, friends and family. I know we're all ready to get back to what we considered a normal life. I just don't know if that normal is going to be what we consider normal in another year or so. I think these are going to be lasting changes and adaptations to [unclear], but we'll figure it out. We'll figure it out.

[00:49:05]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I think the biggest surprise that could happen now is if plans don't change.

[00:49:13]

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Ed Seiber: Yeah, yeah. If you stay in place, you're going to get left behind, you know. If you don't adapt, you're not going to be around as a business, and I think you have to do that.

You know, as far as personal surprises, I used to really enjoy my time at home on the weekends just to sort of shut down and recharge without any plans, because I can do that. I don't have, you know—I live alone and don't have a family, immediate family, so I can be pretty flexible. The other surprise is how badly I suffered from cabin fever because of that, you know, and how much I really looked forward to being in the office and being around colleagues and just being away from my house, you know, [Dombrowski laughs], because you can only spend so much time there. I don't think I would make a good astronaut on the way to Mars. I used to think I'd be a perfect fit for that because I could spend so much time alone, but now I have my doubts.

[00:50:21]

Diana Dombrowski: Well, there's plenty of work to be done here on Earth, that's for sure.

[00:50:23]

Ed Seiber: That's true. Thank God we're getting our fair share of it right now [unclear].

[00:50:31]

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Good. Those are my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience during the pandemic, anything we haven't touched on?

[00:50:42]

Ed Seiber: I don't know. I'll probably think of a dozen things, you know, once we hang up, but no. I miss traveling. I think I've only been—I went to Nashville back in May, and that was the first night I spent away from my house since the pandemic started, and stayed in a hotel. It was strange driving up there. It was strange being there. We were still masking up once we were seated at a dining table or a bar, whatever. And then I went to Knoxville, where I grew up, and visited my siblings back in June, and then New Orleans next weekend will be my third foray away from the nest. So I think I'll probably still do it. I love the city. It'll be interesting to be there. I've got some friends there. I hope to be able to see them as well as the friends I'm traveling with. I don't know.

I miss the spontaneity of life before the pandemic. I miss meeting new people, casually getting to know somebody sitting next to you at the bar and finding out more about them. I mean, those sorts of things I'm missing. They were starting to come back. Those [unclear] I think are very important.

[00:52:27]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

[00:52:28]

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Ed Seiber: That's my story and I'm stickin' with it.

[00:52:29]

Diana Dombrowski: [laughs] Thanks. Okay, I'm going to stop the recording.

[End of interview]