



Sarah Thurman

Athens's Farmers' Market

Athens, GA

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Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Today is January 20th, 2021. My name is Diana Dombrowski. I'm here with the Southern Foodways Alliance and Sarah Thurman recording for the COVID-19 oral history project. Sarah, if you could, please tell us when and where you were born.

Sarah Thurman: I was born October 12th, 1988 in Van Nuys, California, which is about thirty minutes north of Los Angeles.

Diana Dombrowski: All right. And is that where you grew up?

Sarah Thurman: I grew up in Simi Valley, California, which is a suburb a little farther north of Los Angeles famous for the Rodney King trials and the place of respite for many LAPD officers.

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I grew up actually in a tract home right along the edge of a massive green preserve that allowed me to have horses as a child and to climb through the horse fence and end up in just limitless open spaces among coastal live oaks. And there were creeks and coyotes. And it was a pretty nice version of suburbia to grow up in.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow! It sounds beautiful. I can almost picture it. What was it like to grow up there? What did your parents do?

Sarah Thurman: My parents were both manual laborers who worked in the entertainment industry. They worked in post-production, so they were responsible for, like, connecting wires among buildings for the post-production industry. And so it was interesting because, yeah, they were manual laborers.

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They were gone all the time, 'cause it was a two-hour commute each direction, and they were **gone** all the time.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: So I grew up in daycare centers and with babysitters basically at eight weeks after I was born. And I loved playing outside. I loved being with animals and being in the garden and being in the mountains, but I'd say the social dynamic of that upbringing was extremely lonely. We didn't have any sort of city center; we didn't have any sort of cultural identity as a town. We were largely a commuter town.

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And I think of my upbringing as a middle-class community trying really hard to be upper middle class, so there was living beyond means and bankruptcies and parents committing suicide and lots of drugs and things that-- the hot mess was the parents, in my opinion, in my upbringing. So I got out as fast as I could and I moved up to Northern California in Humboldt and went to Humboldt State University and played around redwoods and pristine riverways and beautiful oceans, and it was a welcome change. It was lovely.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Yeah. Humboldt sounds like the complete opposite.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. It was as far away as I could get while being in state and it was the total opposite, and it was fantastic. And growing up in a massive suburb surrounded by other massive suburbs bordering a massive town was not my preferred mode of living.

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So once I got out and got into a smaller community, I felt a lot happier and healthier, and have been pursuing smaller towns since then.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: Now living in Athens, it's the biggest town I've ever lived in since I left.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow. I've heard a lot of great things about Athens and I'm looking forward to hearing about your experience with the farmers' market there. But I'm curious if Humboldt is where you got into working in agriculture or with or around agriculture?

Sarah Thurman: You know what's funny is I was following the path that my parents hoped for me and was trying to be a good girl and do the college thing, and so I actually majored in political science and I got a teaching credential. And I really wanted to understand how the world worked so that I didn't stumble through it when I was actually an adult, and I think I accomplished that objective through political science.

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But the second I graduated I was, like, I want to farm. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: And I don't think I even admitted it to myself while I was in college. And I would kind of border the farmers' markets and be really intimidated because I felt like they were so cool. And I didn't know what a bell pepper was when I went to college. I was lucky to have roommates who knew how to cook and who grew vegetables in their home. They were from Washington. They were much more progressive and liberal. And I'm really grateful for them

because they taught me about vegetables and eating food that we could grow in our yard. But I didn't do anything independently until I graduated.

Sarah Thurman: I moved to Brazil.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

Sarah Thurman: So I had a teaching credential, and I was, like, well, there's kids everywhere in the world.

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I don't have to find kids, so I know I can find kids wherever I want to go, but what do I want to do? And I was, like, I want to learn how to work with my hands and actually have a skill that can sustain me. And so I went through the Willing Workers on Organic Farms website and I found a rural orphanage that had an organic farm on it in Brazil, and it was like just the light shone from heaven and lifted me up and was, like, this is where you're going! And just from the moment I kind of saw their little blurb in the WWOOFing guide I was, like, all right, this is where I'm headed. And I kind of sent up a prayer and was, like, well, if this isn't where I should be, make it really hard, but if it's easy this is where I'm headed. And everything just worked out perfectly. And really, I wanted to be truly bilingual. That was something I really wanted to accomplish. And I had studied German for, like, five years but when I went to Germany it was really a delightful place but if kind of felt like a good place to retire. [Laughter]

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Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: It didn't really feel like where I wanted to go in my early twenties. So Brazil was my home for two years and I got to farm, and I got to learn about kind of like native wisdom in a really beautiful roundabout way, and I got to learn to listen to the people in the community and ask them what they wanted me to grow. And I got to see what happens when foreigners come in and decide they want to grow European cultivars in a subtropical zone, and the mess that it makes, and the way the pests flourish. And then I got to see what the people who lived there wanted to eat. And I just listened to them and grew what they wanted me to grow, and it worked out beautifully. And obviously I got to work with kids.

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And when I came back, I decided that I needed to be a big girl and do what I'm supposed to do, so I got a teaching job. And then I fell in love with my now husband, who was in Georgia, and so I moved out here to be with him. And I couldn't get a teaching job right off the bat because my credentials were for California. And so I was kind of in a little panic moment. And my husband's, like, "What do you want to do? You're not gonna be homeless, you're not gonna be hungry. Go do what you want to do." And I was, like, "I just wanna farm!" So that's how I got into farming in Georgia, was his encouragement.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: And we can go straight into that, or I can pause and--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] I only have one question--

Sarah Thurman: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: --and that is, I'm curious if you could tell me a little bit about who taught you and was stewarding and shepherding you while you were abroad to farm? Maybe their name or the relationship you had with them.

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Sarah Thurman: Verônica Balbino Campos is one of the most magnificent women I have ever met in my entire life. And she was one of fourteen children. She was born in Pernambuco in the North. There was a massive drought. Her family was starving. They moved down to Rio to try and to live, and she grew up on the banks of one of the rivers in the bay and would beg farmers as a little child to throw their rotten fish to her so that she could help do her part to feed her family. And as the family was literally starving, a native Tupi Indian man saw her and kind of snagged her to work for him.

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He had an herbal business where he would sell native plants to people, and he would send her out into the woods to get the plants and the medicines that he wanted for his **store**.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: And so he taught her, and then she was the matriarch of the orphanage. Sorry. Do you want me to repeat that 'cause we just heard his little--

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, that's fine. It's all good. It's all good.

Sarah Thurman: Okay. So she was the matriarch of the orphanage and she was just one of the most magical people. I don't even know what box to put her in. She wasn't like a mother figure. She wasn't like a **sister**. She wasn't a friend. She and her husband were-- I don't know--

my greatest teachers, and they taught me how to be a really good human being. And she was just magical. I don't know. She was the kind of person that-- she would pull me out of the kitchen, and she'd say, "Look, look, look, look, look, do you see the mother sloth climbing out of her nest with her two babies?" [Laughter]

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Diana Dombrowski: Aw!

Sarah Thurman: And it would be two-hundred yards away and I'd be, like, "No." And I'd go and I'd get my glasses and be, like, "No." And I'd go and get binocular and I couldn't see-- she had the most stunning vision. And she didn't like to read. She wasn't a booky person. I just remembered the other day she graduated high school in her thirties by getting the orphanage children to do her homework for her! [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: But she was so wise, and she could just see deeply into everything and everybody. And she was very fiery. So we spent a lot of time together and she would just point at plants and say, oh, you see that plant? Well, you go combine those leaves with the roots of this thing and you'll have a kidney cleanser. Or you can cure lice with this thing.

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Or when her blood pressure would go up, she would boil eggplant and she would drink the eggplant to drop her blood pressure. And I would watch her with her little blood pressure monitor go from a dangerously high level to a functional level in minutes. And she would kind of mourn that Brazilians kind of embraced western culture wholeheartedly. They love it. I mean,

they just eat it up. And she would kind of lament, why are the kids wanting to drink Coca-Cola when God's given them the most flavorful beverages that exist? And we had-- I have to think of the words in English-- we had a starfruit tree, a guava tree, tons of lime trees, bananas, sugar cane-- what's the word in English?-- cassava root. We grew a ton of cassava root. We had taro root.

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We would pick these plants that kind of-- they weren't collards at all but they kind of played the role of collards in the food. And we would go in the forest and pick those, and I would take them and plant them in the shade of the trees on our property so that we didn't have to go as far into the forest. She was a miraculous human being that I miss every single day.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. That sounds really nourishing for you and for the kids in the orphanage, too.

Sarah Thurman: Oh, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: When you got back to the states and you're trying to get your footing here and you have this encouragement from your now husband and this opportunity, and you felt this pull and calling to keep doing what you had been but in Georgia, what was the next step for you then?

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Sarah Thurman: I literally googled organic farms. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: And **Nicholas from** [0:14:07.0], Crystal Organic Farm came up and it was really the only organic farm I saw that had a website, and they said they were hiring. So I emailed him, and he said I could come out and work for him. It was the easiest thing, but it was also 2014. It was when gas was at a really high premium. I had a terrible truck. It was an hour commute, and I spent probably 60 percent of my income just on gas. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: But it was **just there**, I was safe, I was fed. I had a blast. And he really worked me, and I probably was a pretty terrible employee because I didn't have the common sense yet of how to farm. Like Joel Salatin says, common sense is learned, it's not innate.

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So he really helped start to teach me the common sense of growing food. And then, when that season broke, I was, like, maybe I should try and find a farm closer to home. And I found Full Moon Organic Farm, which was on the property of the former Roots Farm, which is kind of legendary, I think, in Atlanta and Athens. And so I started working for a woman whose name is Iwalani Farfour, and it was like night and day between working for a man on a forty-acre organic farm and working for a woman on a two-and-a-half-acre farm. And obviously just the accommodations for a woman's body were innate in the job. We didn't work on any task more than two hours. She gave me a lot of time working on the tractors so I could not destroy my body.

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It was a nicer flow to the workday and so it was a lot more sustainable, and I had an absolute blast. And she was the one that made me work at the Athens farmers' market because she's a

pretty quiet person, and so part of my job was having to sell at the Athens farmer's market, which is how I got connected into that community.

Diana Dombrowski: And how long did you work there?

Sarah Thurman: So I worked with her at the market for a season, and then I got pregnant, and the next season I was mostly pregnant, and so she actually continued to have me work for her. And her husband hired me to work in his farm cart stand. And they really helped me maintain my income while pregnant, because the fantasy of farming while pregnant is cute, but the reality is just not there when it's a production-oriented job.

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So they continued to support me by kind of funneling work through the farmer's market to me. And so I did two seasons vending for her, and then I stepped into the market manager role that next season. So I've been at the farmers' market for six years. I'm starting my seventh now.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: What was it like with that learning curve, to be the market manager?

Sarah Thurman: Oh, it was a huge shift because I had all these kind of intellectual skills I had developed in college, and I'd always been in these organizing roles, so it's like I had all these latent skills, but they hadn't been touched for five years. And then I had a small child on top of it, so I was very tired and very committed to not failing in a way that I had never been before.

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And so the first year I just kind of blacked out and my single goal was to not fail, which involved me waking up at 4:00 AM and working while my son was asleep, and then every time he took a nap just kind of going back to work and not sleeping or resting. And my milk had dried up I was so stressed with the job, and just so obsessed with not failing and not quite sure how to do that.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: That was really hard, and so that kind of pushed me into a year-long depression that was pretty-- it wasn't depression, it was anxiety. It was just like not being able to really connect or slow down and enjoy and feel confident and secure in any situation, especially in relationships with other people.

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And I went from being really invisible in Athens to being incredibly visible, and I got very nervous about saying the wrong thing and sabotaging my career and getting fired or something. And so that took-- some good therapy helped me get over that. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And Jan Kozak, my former market manager, was a fantastic mentor. And he kind of sat me down-- and I think this is really pivotal in the way I think about Athens-- is one day he sat me down and I was waxing poetic about this fear that I had, and he looked at me and he said, "Sarah, everybody wants to see you succeed, and you have to walk into the room and believe that the people in the room want to see you succeed. Everybody loves the farmers' market, everybody wants to see it thrive, and nobody's trying to destroy you." And I really listened to him when he said that, and I started to take on that mentality when I walked into rooms in my community and when I was doing my work.

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And it saved me. And it's so true, and I think for so many of us that's the reality is the people around us want to see us thrive, and they want to see us succeed. And we get in these head games where we're in some sort of war and one slight transgression is going to be the end of us. And I don't think it's really true for most of us.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I think that makes a lot of sense, because it is such a well-known and well-loved part of the community, but to do it while you'd have to trust yourself to steward that treasured institution in a way. And it sounds really fortunate that you had a mentor in that, as well, or at least someone who was willing to guide and give you advice and encourage you along the way for that who'd been in the exact same role.

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Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And what I'm hearing is that you had these relationships that really supported you as you followed your intuition here and gained confidence in all of these things that, in 2020, maybe prepared you to confront the obstacles that the pandemic presented. Were there significant events in those six years leading up to last where you had big learning moments, as well?

Sarah Thurman: I'd just like to pause and say your analysis of my life is so spot-on.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: Like, you could probably quote yourself in [0:21:46.7]. [Laughter] That is so cool. You're totally right.

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And a lot of my growth in my personal life reflects exactly what you're saying, which is just, as I got into the role and I got comfortable and confident in my ability to succeed at this job, I was able to focus energy on my own personal maturity and spiritual growth, which go hand-in-hand with the job, they're interconnected. But a big thing that-- well, let me just back up. In 2018 my dad got diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and that was a really big thing, and he died in March of 2019.

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And as I was going through the process of him dying and his death and the healing from that, the sound of my intuition became very loud and I learned-- Brazil taught me that I had an intuition and that it was something that was legitimate and that I needed to listen to it at all costs. And then it was thoroughly reinforced in that time in my life when my dad was dying and that we were navigating some pretty uncharted territory in our own lives.

Diana Dombrowski: Hmm.

Sarah Thurman: And it's funny when you go through those dark hours and you come out, you come out just refined a little bit more and much stronger and much more confident in your own voice. And so definitely coming into 2020 when everything started getting really messy and complicated, one part of me just wanted to be lazy and let other people handle the situation, like the child **in me** really took over.

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Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And then, the adult in me was, like, this is your job. This is your job, and it doesn't fall on anybody else. And there was a voice that was, like, you can handle this. And I'm really grateful for all those life lessons that led me up to 2020, because I'm really proud of what we did with the market and how we handled it. And I think that had I not been as grounded in myself and my intuition, that I would've crumbled under the pressure. And, instead, I just, like, took a deep breath and pulled up my pants and was, like, it's time to handle the situation, it's not the time to be weak. I can cry in 2022 but not right now. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] I think a lot of people are operating similarly right now but in these really individual settings.

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And I just want to say that that attitude of not looking for the silver lining but trying to see what's possible when everything gets thrown in the air and in different directions, picking up what you can and making something of it is what a lot of other people in Georgia and working in agriculture that I've spoken to have employed, as well. So I just want to say that you're in such great company, and I think that mindset is what helps people succeed in agriculture anyway, facing a lot of different obstacles, but especially in the last year there is so much that people have in common when it comes to that kind of resiliency.

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Sarah Thurman: **Um-hm.**

Diana Dombrowski: So I just wanted to say that. But I am curious, when we start thinking about your experience with COVID, when you first came to understand that it would impact your job and that it would impact your life?

Sarah Thurman: Like, what were my initial thoughts?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Or do you remember when that was? Because the virus was in some news in January, and then in March it really hit in a big way as far as restrictions go.

Sarah Thurman: When I was in Brazil, we survived a pretty significant flood that I didn't realize was as traumatizing as it was until I started having these recurring nightmares once my son was born that every time it rained in Georgia our house would be washed away in a flood.

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And I actually kind of made this lightbulb connection in March that those two things were connected and then the dreams stopped. And I feel like the arrival of the coronavirus was another flood that, unlike the first one I survived, I actually kind of saw coming. But it was that same terror in that way where these things were happening and I wanted to deny it, wanted to deny it, but, at some point, you're, like, no, no, no, you can deny it all you want, that flood is still coming. And I was trying to avoid it pretty hard for January and February. And in early March I went down to Florida to go freediving, which is just something I love doing and is like a mental and spiritual practice for me that has just been phenomenally positive in my life.

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You know about freediving?

Diana Dombrowski: Yes. I went to school in Gainesville, and swimming in the springs is a really big part of my life.

Sarah Thurman: Yes!

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I have a lot of friends who are cave divers and free divers and underwater photographers and stuff in that area. Where did you go diving?

Sarah Thurman: In High Springs.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my gosh! Yeah, of course. There's Blue and then there's Ginnie. Oh, those spots are really special to me.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. Ginnie Springs to me, and I'm sure there's other spots in Florida, it's just that's the one I know that--

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, yeah.

Sarah Thurman: --feels like a holy place that I'm actually invited to attend.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, yeah.

Sarah Thurman: I don't feel like I'm-- what's the word?-- desecrating it. I feel like I'm called to participate. And the way that I participate is a positive one.

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Yeah. And it's been beautiful to watch. My son, like, he's a fish. So I've had this fear of the water that I didn't realize I had until my son **indicated** a very intense attraction to the water at a very young age. And so I started being, like, all right, I gotta be better at the water than my son is so that I can continue to take him deeper in and be a guide and not a hindrance. And so I thought it was going to be scuba diving and then I accidentally learned about freediving and by the end of the book I was reading I was, like, all right, I gotta try this. And I went down in, I guess it was 2019, and it literally rewired my brain. It was just such a magical, powerful, positive experience that I came back totally converted.

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And then my husband's, like, all right, I gotta keep up or else you're just gonna do all these fun things without me. And so he also had some pretty big insecurities in the water. And we went back down to Ginnie Springs with another friend who was totally afraid of the water. Both of them were, like, we'll go but we're wearing life vests the whole time; we're not playing around, we're not interested in diving. And both of them, by the end of the trip, took off their life vests, learned how to trust their bodies, trust themselves that they could do this thing. And both of them dove and both of them came back equally changed. And now we're just a freediving family that is stuck five hours from the coast.

Diana Dombrowski: That's amazing! The water is so important to me, especially in North Florida.

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It's a really, really big part of my life in, like, a spiritual sense.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And it's so cool to connect with you on that.

Sarah Thurman: You'll have to tell about spots or something, or, like, meet us **down** there or something.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. And not being able to go this year has been pretty--

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: It's okay. I accept it, but it's hard for me **knowing** that I have this beautiful thing that I can do with my family that's **unquestionably positive**. And my son finally learned to swim actually during quarantine. We had him in swim lessons. So he's four-and-a-half and-- I feel like you can appreciate this-- they have an Olympic-sized pool in Athens, and he swam across and back and across again on his own just happy as [0:31:48.7].

Diana Dombrowski: Oh!

Sarah Thurman: He was scratching itches while he was swimming, so comfortable in the water. And I'm, like, I gotta get this kid-- to give him the gift of Ginnie Springs or to give him the gift of the coast of Florida.

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We went down to Puerto Rico as a family in 2019 and went diving, and it's so cool that there's a world above the water, there's a world at the water, and there's a whole 'nother world underneath the water.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: And whoa! Okay. You understand **what I mean by that**.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, completely. Oh, and on so many levels, yeah. And I feel the same way, 'cause I haven't been able to go back in the winter and that's the best time to go.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: There are no tourists, and the water is the clearest, and the manatees are coming to the springs and stuff. And it's really magical and very important to me and I haven't been able to go. But I'll be able to go back. And one of the really nice things is that Blue Springs

was really decimated by a hurricane three or so years ago and it's just starting to regrow all the grass, and, honestly, in so much diversity that it looks like there are flowers underwater because it's crystal clear.

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Sarah Thurman: Wow!

Diana Dombrowski: And it's really, really cool to see how, as people have kept their distance, the springs are able to recover. And I would be so happy when our interview is over to share some stuff with you about that.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah, please.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. Cool. Okay. Let's put a pin in that.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: But I'm just totally connecting with a lot of things that you're saying and really glad that we can talk this morning, so let me just say that.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's really cool. Thank you. This is really nice. Okay. I'm trying to get my head back in the COVID zone.

Sarah Thurman: [0:33:50.5] So I had my come to Jesus moment when I went down to Florida in the beginning of March with my son to go freediving right before the market season started, 'cause I was, like, this is gonna be my last chance before I have to work every Wednesday and every Saturday for the rest of the year.

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And so I take my son down to Florida, we meet up with this friend who's got this house right by Ginnie Springs, we go diving the first day, and we get out of the pool and my son's, like, "Oh, my stomach hurts." And he starts puking all [0:34:23.7].

Diana Dombrowski: Oh!

Sarah Thurman: And my son doesn't puke on a regular basis. And so we were, like, oh, it's fine, it's fine, it's totally fine, it's fine, it's fine, you know, trying to pretend we're not, like, oh, shit, my son has coronavirus. And I had tried so hard not to stop anywhere, and I tried to just get down there. But the next morning he woke up with a fever and I kind of was, like, all right, I might kill this woman. Not only might my son be deadly ill, I might get it and I might kill this woman. And we turned around and we left. So we were there for, like, twelve hours and we turned around and left.

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And that was my, like, okay, I'm done lying to myself. I can't even pretend to enjoy the things I used to enjoy because every moment is going to be a negotiation about the value of somebody's life versus my desire to do things I enjoy. So we came back, and I got the board together. And also Erin Barger is the project manager of Envision Athens in Athens, which, if you don't know about, it's kind of the implantation arm of this twenty-year strategic plan for the town. She is one of the most powerful and wonderful humans I've ever met. And she approached us at that same time, at that same meeting-- I think we called her to say, like, well, what do you think about us opening? All these markets in Atlanta are still opening but we feel really weird about it.

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And she basically said not only would it look terrible, I think it's unethical and you should not endanger people at this point in time. And so seven days before our market open date, we had that conversation and we were like, all right, we need to change gears. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And I **had been thinking** about, like, well, what are other options?

Because for me, I think this is really an important part of what I felt kind of morally implored to bring to the table was that the world might be crumbling, everything might be falling apart, every aspect of your life might be up in flames, but you still have a consistent, safe, and reliable food supply.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And for me, that was, like, okay, what can I bring to the table? And it was like that messaging was what I held onto through all of it, was if I have any control over it, I'm going to maintain a safe, stable, and secure supply of food.

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And I knew my growers had had a functional season. Their demand was out of control in Atlanta. And the whole food supply chain was falling apart. And so as I was thinking about that, I thought, okay, we need to switch to an online market in order to be able to maintain the continuity and the security. Like, even if the online market sucks, everybody in my community that is in contact with me can say in their head, okay, there's this place I can go and I can still get food. And so to me I was, like, well, if we lose our access to food, we're going to fall apart as a people. And we can handle a lot if we know we can still get our food. And so we partnered with Collective Harvest and, I'm not kidding you, in seven days they offered every single one of our

vendors the opportunity to sell through an online shopping platform that didn't exist, they created it.

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And while they were in that learning curve, they offered very single one of our food vendors the opportunity to sell through them. Which I just think about that and I think they're the heroes, they put in the work, and it was not easy. The glitches in the system were monumental, but we did it and it existed. And even though we couldn't open up on March 23rd, we were able to tell people, look, here it is. If you want it, it's here. If you have other ways to get food, great, but don't feel insecure. You have access and that access is abundant and rich and consistent.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: So we did that from March to May.

0:39:02.3

And then, while that was going on, we obviously watched what happened with the coronavirus and how it was affecting our community in particular. And our community took a pretty strong stance with masks and the social distancing, and so I feel like we handled it really well relative to other communities in our vicinity. And so, by May, we were, like, okay, we can do this. We can open it. We will certainly be safer than Kroger. We will certainly be safer than Walmart. We have way more control. We have an open pavilion. We can mandate masks. It'll actually be a better option than what currently exists for people who are shopping in person. So we opened up May 8th, I think, and we had handwashing stations at the entrance, we had a just 100 percent you have to wear a mask at all times, even when people are outside.

0:40:04.7

We had hand sanitizer at every station. We had different people touching the money versus the food. We didn't let customers touch any of the food. It was very much like a come in, get what you need, go home, don't bring your family kind of like environment.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And it worked. We felt really good about it. And it took a lot more volunteer power and a lot more of, like, wrangling the customer, but we felt like we were able to provide a safe, stable, and secure way to get food.

Diana Dombrowski: That's great, because when you think about that exchange, there's people coming to get the food and then there are the people growing it who also need to know that there's consistently going to be a consumer.

0:40:58.4

And not feeling safe to let them pick up a lot of things and touch a lot of things or do this examining really probably felt like a significant barrier. But having the market and all that community support must've made a big difference. Were there things that you did to support the farmers, as well, in that way?

Sarah Thurman: Well, my initial reaction to what you're saying is-- and I think it might be a little bit off, so just redirect me if I'm off.

Diana Dombrowski: Sure.

Sarah Thurman: But as a business manager, the things that I had not ever had to think about that became incredibly real right in May was that the demand for local and organic food was higher than it had ever been.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: And everybody was feeling insecure. The farmers were feeling insecure, the customers were feeling insecure.

0:42:02.8

I don't blame anybody for the thoughts that they had, but what happened was we ended up becoming a less desirable avenue to sell food. And so when Atlanta customers can pay 25 to 50 percent more for the same product without thinking about it, and the customer base was there, it became really competitive to keep our farmers at our market. And then, at the same time, I don't blame any capitalist for going where the demand is greatest. Of course that makes sense. But I had been marketing safe, stable, and secure--

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

0:42:56.7

Sarah Thurman: --and I was actually losing my vendors to Atlanta, and also to people who were like aggregators who were buying and selling and delivering to people at their homes. And so the vendor, on one hand, is saying, well, how am I going to make the most money here when I have these other environments that are incredibly profitable because I had a 50 percent at the market limit at a time? And so we were pressured, basically, to limit the amount of customers

coming into market while trying to compete with the profitability of other avenues that didn't have that same consideration. Does that make sense?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that answers completely my question. 'Cause I had pictured farmers feeling insecure and not sure where all the food they were growing was going to go, and it turns out the situation is the opposite where they have to now be discerning about where all this produce is going to end up.

0:44:07.3

Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. Everybody wanted their food. And they hadn't factored that in in their crop plans. And by the end of the second rotation, like that summer/fall, they had adapted as well and were able to crank out more food knowing that it would easily have a place to go. But this year definitely forced me to be a lot more business minded and a lot more aggressive and a lot more complex in the way that I speak to people and what my arguments are for why they should come to my table, if that makes sense.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

0:44:58.5

Sarah Thurman: So it just wasn't good enough anymore to be this cute little innocent farmers' market that exists on Saturdays that brought three thousand people, two thousand of whom maybe didn't buy more than five- or ten-dollars-worth of stuff. So I think it was good. I'm grateful for it. I think I've become a much more savvy businessperson because I can see the complexity and directionality in messaging and in tone and how what happens in front of the

consumer audience might be very different than what's happening behind. Up until this point, it's been a very simple, straightforward job. It was, like, bring as many people to market as possible and encourage them to spend as much as they can. And this year became much more complicated.

0:45:57.5

And there was probably a couple months of deep, deep bitterness about the predicaments that I'd found myself in and a little bit of resentment towards myself for not being more cunning and have seen it coming, because I just didn't see those kinds of demands coming. And it just got really complicated really fast. But I realize that I'm really good at that kind of deliberation and those kind of factoring scenarios where you have to play many hands at the same time.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. Yeah, you're trying to mediate. Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. And though I wanted to be just this sweet, innocent little manager--
[Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: --life didn't give me that opportunity, and I'm proud of myself for being able to step up into that and juggle a lot of balls and be able to provide for all people in all directions as best as I did.

0:46:59.4

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That sounds like a huge accomplishment, 'cause this was such a pressure cooker of a year. And I'm curious, just while we're speaking about the farmers' market itself, what you all are anticipating for 2021 when it comes to those vendor and customer

relationships? Is it possible or are you guys just, like, we're still hanging on and we're taking it day by day right now?

Sarah Thurman: You know, somebody asked me that exact same question in a member meeting on Saturday, and she was, like, well, what's your plan? What's your plan to increase revenue for us? And at the same time, she was saying, well, there were too many customers at the market. It didn't feel safe. They were hanging out and just enjoying themselves too much and not [0:47:57.1] shopping and leaving.

0:48:00.0

Hold on one second. The cat was trying to walk on my husband's keyboard.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: And, honestly, I think if we step back and look at the situation right now from a very distant lens, we are in a much worse situation now than we were in March. And the positive rates in Athens are very high. They're above 30 percent right now.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: One of my board member's husbands works at the hospital. She said four out of the five wings are completely dedicated to COVID patients and they are truly stretched to their max right now.

0:49:00.2

And it's not being talked about the way it was in March, I think 'cause we're just so fatigued from the entire situation and we just want to pretend that it's fine while sustaining in this environment. But I don't feel like it's ethical to do anything beyond safe, stable, and secure. And I know that

that's probably not what the vendors want to hear. They want to hear some master magical plan to make them enough money to pay their bills, and I get it.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: That's I think why I'm really grateful that I started in farming and then went into market management. Like, I get it. They are so fragile. They are on the fringes at all times, and nobody at the market is coming out making stacks and planning to **go** to Barbados or something.

0:50:06.0

They're working themselves to the core, and I understand that, and so I have empathy for it. But if we don't run a safe market we will get shut down by the city. If we disregard best practices and public health advice, we're gonna get shut down, and if we get people sick, which was a huge-- oh, gosh, I remember the two weeks before the market opened just full of this dread that was terrible, and it was, like, well, I can kill somebody.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: That blood could be on my hands. And if I don't do this right people could die.

0:50:59.9

And I still feel that way. I think my primary objective is to maintain the sales channel for those who want it and make sure that it's done safely and that it's consistent. And luckily, really people have learned so much in the last year and have really adapted to finding ways to get food in a way that works for them. And though that doesn't help necessarily make my vendors a ton of

money at the Athens Farmers' Market, they're finding other ways to sell their product. And, again, it's not really good for my business, but there's more important things in life, and I'm really grateful that people have access to the ways that work for them. I would say most people, and I think we're doing everything we can to serve the people who don't have access and opportunity in the same way.

0:52:03.0

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I'm curious about what y'all have done when it comes to-- I think it's the RX Program with the farmers' market?

Sarah Thurman: Are you talking about the FARM Rx program?

Diana Dombrowski: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

Sarah Thurman: And then, are you just curious about food access in general?

Diana Dombrowski: Yes.

Sarah Thurman: Okay. There's more [0:52:26.6].

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Sarah Thurman: We're notoriously bad at talking about all the cool things that we do. So, yeah, the FARM Rx program is our fruit and vegetable prescription program, and we just finished our fourth year of the program. And the basic scope of the program is that we provide low-income individuals with diet-related illnesses a produce prescription for fresh fruits and vegetables. So they are treating their diet-related illnesses with fruits and vegetables.

0:53:00.6

And I have so much to say about that program, but the short of it is just that it works, that people enjoy being in the program, they enjoy the access to fruits and vegetables, they enjoy changing their diet for something that gives them more energy, more optimism, and more joy. And they enjoy the connection with the other participants as they're making positive decisions in their own life. Obviously, we were concerned about the high-risk nature of the participants and how their participation in the Athens Farmers' Market could directly affect their health in a negative way. All of the participants have comorbidities and that was a big deal.

0:54:01.0

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: So we ended up rewriting our program plan three times and ended on a plan where we basically allowed the participants to shop through Collective Harvest again and buy kind of like customized CSA boxes, and then pick them up at Collective Harvest. So they were still eating the produce from our farmers, but they weren't needing to come to the market. And it worked. We had a 94-percent retention rate.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: The participants had a good time. The cooperative extension office switched their entire nutrition education curriculum to an online curriculum. They were the first in the nation to do it, and they did it for our program and it worked really well. They did a great job. So that was one way that we were continuing to provide produce to people who needed it in an hour that they might not be able to afford it.

0:55:02.0

Our SNAP doubling program skyrocketed. It was stunning to see because it had been dropping for so many years **due to** the changes in policies for EBT as well as just a stronger economy and more people were employed. So we were really proud to be able to offer the option to double food stamps at the market, and that was definitely utilized. When PEBT came through, every single parent of a student in a Clarke County school received a PEBT card because the whole county is on the free lunch program--

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: --because of the poverty in Athens.

0:56:01.6

And so all those parents received PEBT cards relative to the amount of children they had in schools. Those were used a lot at the market, and we were able to double those, as well, which was pretty cool. And then, the last thing that happened that was just really amazing was a participation in a county-wide initiative called Athens Eats Together. And basically that Athens-Clarke County received CARES Act funding and they supplied a significant amount of funding on their own to be able to address the immediate fallout of the coronavirus. And one of those elements was food security and food access. And so the Athens Community Council on Aging received a pretty large grant to provide food through the Athens Eats Together project. Oh, it was so impressive, it was so impressive.

0:56:57.1

They did food bags that had produce in them, and then they had obviously frozen foods, nonperishables provided from the food bank. And then they had a local catering company at the event who did premade meals. This high-end catering company made these meals that were

frozen and distributed to people so that if they didn't have the ability to cook or they didn't have time, or just to supplement their produce, they were provided these gourmet meals. And then, we were the produce supplier, so they bought all organic and local produce for all the participants in the program and then they also gave them vouchers to come to the farmers' market and buy whatever they needed, however they needed to supplement those bags. And the objective of the program was immediate and effective food access. Wait. Hold on.

0:58:01.0

How did they say it? Oh, they wanted to immediately and effectively address food insecurity in Athens-Clarke County. And so they took that seriously and they addressed it effectively and they addressed immediately. And we were so proud to be able to be a part of that. And basically in-- Lola, I don't think she wants to hear you in the recording. That's my old dog getting her morning **attention.**

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Aw!

Sarah Thurman: We started that program with them in the beginning of October, and we have done over a hundred-and-seventy-thousand dollars in produce purchases that went straight to members of our community. And we were doing fourteen hundred people a week, I think.

0:59:01.5

I have the numbers if you're interested, but it was one of those beautiful moments where you wonder if the government even has a capacity to show up for people when crisis hits, and I just saw it. I was involved in it firsthand. And the way it unfolded was this literal opening of arms that just said, oh, do you need some food? Okay. [Laughter] Nobody was shamed, nobody was questioned, nobody was investigated. It was like, do you need food? Great. Here's unlimited

amounts of food to meet your need, and then next week they'll be more and next week they'll be more, and we're gonna do it through the end of January. And we're still doing it. And it just was so beautiful to see this-- we saw 430 new individual customers come to market between October and December, which is significant when we were only seeing about a thousand a week.

1:00:05.0

And they were just every cross section of the community, but really a lot of seniors. And I was able to look them in the eyes and say, "Go get what you need. Go get what you need to feel secure, to feel like you have plenty of food, to feel comfortable, and if you need more money come back, you've got more money. Go get what you need." And it was just the greatest honor to be able to fulfill that goal of security.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: It was beautiful. And some people would look at me and they'd be, like, "Where is this money coming from?" They were in shock. They were, like, "Wait, I can just go and get what I need? It's that complicated?" I'd be, like, "Yes, it's that complicated. Go and get what you need." And they'd say, "Where's the money coming from?" And I'd say, "This is what it looks like when your government shows up.

1:01:00.4

There's a massive global pandemic and the government showed up. They're taking care of you. This is what it looks like." And they would just stop and sit back and kind of gaze off into the distance.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: They'd be, like, wow. And I'm so proud to live in a community where that's what it looks like. Something terrible happened and the government leveraged its assets and its resources to immediately and effectively address food insecurity. And they did a bunch of other things. I just wasn't involved in them. But I'm so proud of this community. I'm so proud of the leadership. I'm so proud of the way that people in this community worked together to address problems and be really effective problem solvers. And I don't know if other communities function on this level.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

1:01:55.2

Sarah Thurman: And I'm so proud to live in this community and know that the people that work in the government come from a really pure heart and a spirit of service, and they do it, they pull it off. It's really beautiful to see.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That's so impressive and seems like it's probably unique to the size of the community that you're in, too, where everyone is motivated. And it's small enough to enable people in leadership to be nimble when it comes to these sudden obstacles.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's so cool. That's really nice.

Sarah Thurman: And I don't want to [1:02:35.6] every single food insecure person in Athens had everything they need.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: I know that that's **not** a reality. But at some point, you have to say, okay, the people that are gonna interact with this program are gonna interact with this program, right? I can't pause until every single person is addressed. I just have to do the absolute best I can every single day. And I feel like that's what they did.

1:02:57.5

And I think I could definitely offer some areas for improvement, but the fact that it happened at all-- I've never seen anything like this happen.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: And on the scale and with the intensity and the focus. And I think that the city deserves a ton of credit and the Athens Community Council on Aging, and the food bank and **Epting** Events all deserve so much credit for just not-- I was looking at some of the organizers of the program as we were on Zoom calls and thinking, a year ago, your job was, like, one-twentieth of what it is today. And they didn't quit. You know what I mean? They just said, oh, you're just gonna pile on an entire new business model and an entire new program and I'm just gonna do this thing? Okay. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: And we just did it. None of them have quit. None of them have walked away. None of them have given up. They've just persisted. And I know they're tired.

1:03:59.7

And I'm just so proud of them and so grateful to get to know them and work alongside them.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. So it sounds like everyone really came together in a lot of big ways that made big impacts and big changes which you got to see everyone do that hard work with up close, even though maybe some things were happening virtually when it comes to different meetings. A lot of this still had to be in person, like picking up produce and selling it, and so you got to see how everyone else was handling this. And I wonder what your experience personally, emotionally, and mentally was like and how your health was during this time?

Sarah Thurman: Where to start?

1:05:00.6

This is something that time will tell, so I'm glad that we'll revisit this, 'cause I don't want to say this like there's a period at the end of the sentence. But in January and February I started planning for the market season and had invited this woman to become a market chef for the market [1:05:28.4] demos every week. And she was part of the Weston A. Price Foundation. And I'm not 100 percent in agreement with every single thing that that foundation says, but they were big on the fermented foods. And I had felt personally just inspired by that, and I was interested in-- I had been trying to get pregnant for, at this point, it would've been, like, seven months I had been trying to get pregnant.

1:06:01.2

And I wasn't getting pregnant and it was kind of hard on me emotionally and mentally.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: Like, I'm **at the prime** of my life, I'm perfectly healthy, I'm happy. What's going on? So I started kind of adapting these strategies from the Weston A. Price Foundation

into my diet with the hope of kind of being in better health and hopefully aiding in getting pregnant. When coronavirus hit, I started pushing really hard that nutrient-dense food increases your immune system, it helps you ward off invaders. It just helps fortify you and allow you to weather the storms that come in your life. And I was pushing fermented food really hard in my own life and in the lives of the people reading my emails and my **market**.

1:06:57.8

And I just read recently that gut health helps mitigate the long-term effects of the coronavirus.

Diana Dombrowski: Really?

Sarah Thurman: And that people with strong gut flora and healthy GI tracts have little to no long-term effects from coronavirus. Now, again, I'm glad we're gonna revisit this in a year, because it was just one article. But I say that to say that was where my head was at in March. It was, all right, this flood is coming, I can't stop it, but I can fortify myself and I can encourage others to fortify themselves so that they're best prepared to handle it. So I was doing a lot of exercising. I was getting a lot of sunshine, a lot of fresh air, and trying to eat as well as possible so that if and when I was exposed to the coronavirus, I had a fighting chance.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: I don't get the final decision, but I can do my best to be prepared.

1:08:02.8

And so that's where I was in the beginning. And I actually did get pregnant two weeks after opening day in May when we opened the market in person. And I pretty quickly got really sick. Maybe four weeks into the pregnancy I got as sick as I've ever been in my entire life. I would

wake up sick and I'd walk to the kitchen and tell myself I was gonna make breakfast, and I'd just be done, and I'd just sit on the couch. And I swear it would be, like, four o'clock when I would muster the energy to get up.

1:08:56.0

And bless my husband for taking really good care of me and the family while this was happening, but it took me down to my core and I was barely alive. And everyone just said, oh, morning sickness just gets worse with each kid. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: And I'd be, like, okay, well, I guess this is my life now. And I was mentally really happy that I was pregnant and so I was down for anything, but it was really hard to do my job, obviously, and to take care of my family. And I didn't go grocery shopping for, like, three months and all the things I had done in January and February went out the door for sure. And then I went to my first midwifery appointment and they kind of pulled me in and they were, like, oh, there's these hygromas on the neck of the baby and basically your baby is gonna die.

1:10:02.1

And I was, like, wait, what? My husband came into the ultrasound, but they didn't let him in the office.

Diana Dombrowski: Whoa.

Sarah Thurman: So there's no way to not blindsides someone with that news. I'm not mad about it, but I was just totally blindsided. And they just were, like, your baby's gonna die.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: There's no pretty picture here. And I guess one of the really hard parts was that they told me at, like, eight weeks but they also said basically, because I hadn't miscarried at that point, I was probably going to carry the baby to term and then it was gonna die when it was born. And so they were, like, you need to decide what to do. I was, like, wait, what?

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

1:10:57.9

Sarah Thurman: And it just kept getting worse for a while there because they were, like, you basically need to have an abortion or you're gonna birth a dead baby, and nobody wants to birth a dead baby. It's terrible for the parents, it's terrible for the staff at the hospital. It's terrible. We do not recommend it. If it's your choice, we'll support you but there is no silver lining. Your baby is not going to survive, and you decide what to do.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my gosh.

Sarah Thurman: It was really terrible. And then, basically, because we're in Georgia, Athens doesn't do abortions and technically it would've been an abortion because the baby was alive. And so they were, like, well, you need to go to these abortion clinics in Atlanta, and, oh, this one doesn't have protestors. And it was really upsetting.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: And I realized they weren't doing anything they normally do. They weren't calling the clinic for me. They weren't setting up appointments. And I kind of realized, like, oh, they can't help me.

1:12:00.5

And so I asked them, and they were, like, no, we can't help you past this line. Oh, yeah, and your insurance won't cover it. And so they were basically, like, you need to go kill your baby. You need to go do it in Atlanta in the **dark** of night, and you have to pay out of pocket for it, or you can birth a dead baby.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my God.

Sarah Thurman: **It was just** so terrible. And the second I got pregnant it was obvious, and everybody at the market already knew I was pregnant. And I had always said, oh, well, I don't want to hide early pregnancies from my community. We're in this together. If I lose the baby, then I want you guys to know I lost the baby. I don't want to suffer in silence. And then I just got handed the real-life dose of what I had been saying. So for, like, May, June, and July probably, I think-- yeah, 'cause we lost the baby in early August-- I was just having the most intense dilemma.

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And there was kind of a date on it of, like, okay, well, you can get an abortion before this date, but if you cross this date, you can't do it anymore and you're gonna have to carry the baby to term. And that personally was just devastating to be kind of abandoned by the medical system when I really, really, really needed them.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: So I have a great therapist and obviously a great partner, and we spent probably five or six weeks of me being extremely ill trying to figure out what to do and what felt right in the situation. And so we ended up having the D&E.

1:13:59.0

And I missed one market the Saturday after the procedure and ended up back in the hospital that day 'cause I was hemorrhaging 'cause they didn't get it all. And that was really scary.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: But, yeah, so it was hard. It is interesting to talk about now because it's not as emotional, but it was a really hard process to go through. And I've read a bit about other women with a similar situation where the medical system is not equipped to deal with you emotionally in any way.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: For example, when they went to monitor the growth of the baby a couple weeks after the diagnosis, they just put the baby up on the screen for me to see. And they didn't ask me if I wanted to see the baby. And it's hard to turn your eyes away when you're watching the beating heart of your child.

1:15:00.9

And then, after they turned the screen it off, it had gotten much worse. And so it was becoming apparent that it's not gonna get better. She turned the screen off and she printed out the pictures of my child, but not the ones with the hygroma, the ones where my child looked okay, put them

on my lap, and just walked out of the door. She didn't say anything. She didn't ask me if I wanted pictures. You know what I mean?

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Sarah Thurman: And so it was a really hard pill to swallow. In so many things in life, you put your best effort in, and you don't give up and it pays off, and this just wasn't it. My best effort didn't matter at all. So that happened, and I was working on just maintaining hope and believing that it was all gonna make sense.

1:16:00.8

And then I got pregnant, like, six weeks after or eight weeks after or something. So we got pregnant, and then that one was the polar opposite. I didn't get sick at all, like, nothing. I just didn't feel pregnant, but there was a baby in there. And I started bleeding, I don't know, six, seven weeks in. And I kept calling them, like, oh, I'm bleeding. And they're, like, there's nothing we can do. You have a hemorrhage. It's probably clearing up. And my mom-- everyone was freaking out being, like, you need to go to the doctor, like the doctor could actually participate at all in the situation. And so they took an ultrasound of my second baby showing me its little beating heart. And they were, like, yeah, everything looks okay. You're just clearing up that hemorrhage. And then, the next day, on election night, I miscarried.

Diana Dombrowski: No!

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. And so it was just like--

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my God.

Sarah Thurman: --two babies in an eight-week window, or maybe a little less than an eight-week window-- no, a twelve-week window.

1:17:01.0

And my body was just wrecked.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh.

Sarah Thurman: It was just so physically-- all the hormones and just so much blood and so much deprivation, like I just got sucked dry.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: And then, I was trying to manage the market at the same time and think about 2021.

Diana Dombrowski: God, I'm so sorry.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah, yeah. And it's funny, though. You run your mouth saying things and then I feel like life has a way of checking you. And I remember joking in March, like, well, if I can't get pregnant during the quarantine then there's no hope. [Laughter] 'Cause I was, like, this is the time.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: We succeeded at getting pregnant twice, but it just didn't pan out. So I've been humbled a lot. And physically it's been just a really rough rollercoaster of being in really great shape in March and then just getting literally, like, sucked dry.

1:18:04.5

And then, now trying to come back into my body and heal on all the levels.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: You know, it feels good to be back in my body and be getting exercise and to feel my heart beating and to feel the life flowing through me, and it feels good to drink coffee in the morning and eat good food and be able to sleep and stuff. So I'm really grateful for that, and I'm grateful that I ended up in the hospital multiple times and didn't get sick with coronavirus. And we've made it this far without knowing of an infection in our family, and I'm very deeply grateful for that.

1:18:59.1

And we're trying to just stay really disciplined and humble about the reality of the situation now and make it through to the other side.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Because you have to endure, but that is so big. It's so, so big. And I'm really glad that y'all have managed to stay safe when it comes to the pandemic, but I'm so sorry that that happened for you guys.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah. I don't know if you are a big fan of Dolly Parton, but I'm a big fan of Dolly Parton.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [Laughter] Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: In 2019 I went from not knowing who Dolly Parton was to virtually memorizing her forty-, fifty-year career.

1:20:00.2

I took a weekend, and I went alone to a B&B in Tennessee and just, like, paddle-boarded on a river and had just time to be with my own thoughts. And at that point of reckoning, Dolly Parton came into my mind, and she says all the time-- I'm not gonna say it just like her, but she basically says, you can get through anything if you have hope. And I just decided, I have to have hope. I have to believe that I will make it to twenty years from this point and I will look backwards, and it'll all make sense. And I just kept Dolly in my-- I still keep Dolly in my mind every day, for all the stuff we're going through.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: If we can hold onto hope then we can make it through anything.

1:20:58.7

And I noted that when I don't have hope in the future, then I start to get really overwhelmed with the day-to-day. If I hold onto that and then it's, like, this will all make sense because I will get through this and I will look back and it'll just be, like, oh, yeah. [Laughter] I will be able to talk about this casually one day.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Sarah Thurman: And I believe that, and that's given me probably the deepest foundation of energy and optimism that I can pull from.

Diana Dombrowski: It's interesting that you mention that, because my last question for you, when it comes to the interview itself, is what ways that you're taking care of yourself. Are you going to take care of yourself maybe differently or do more of the same during this time to get through it?

1:22:00.7

Sarah Thurman: I feel like I've been pretty good at taking care of myself. That's not a new concept to me.

Diana Dombrowski: Cool.

Sarah Thurman: I don't know if I'm just selfish or--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: [Laughter] My husband's laughing. I don't know. I wasn't raised in the environment of deprive self to serve others. It was common sense that you take care of yourself so that you can serve others.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Sarah Thurman: I'm not part of that self-care cult of 2020. I've always, like, gone for hikes when I needed them.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Good for you.

Sarah Thurman: But-- oh, shoot. What was I gonna say? You were asking me how I care for myself and then I was gonna say-- okay. Hold on. Let me get my thought formulated and back on **track**.

1:23:00.2

Diana Dombrowski: Sure. Yeah. Absolutely.

Sarah Thurman: Somebody said something on the internet about following your dreams and they were, like, yeah, you might not want to go back to school 'cause it's gonna take four

years and then you're gonna be almost forty. And they were, like, but even if you don't go back to school, in five years you're gonna be almost forty.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: And I was, like, oh, my God. I'm thirty-two now, and I laughed so hard because I love my job and I'm so grateful to it and I'm grateful for it, I'm grateful for the person it's grown me into, but it's not my life's work by any means. And I've known that for a long time, but I haven't had the self confidence or the urgency to speak truth to what I actually want to do with my life.

1:24:05.1

And this pandemic-- mad props to my therapist, too.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: This pandemic has really-- it gave me a summer of gratitude where I was able to be really sick with the pregnancy, I was able to go to Tennessee when I needed it, I was able to not work for days on end because there was literally nothing going on. And I'm so grateful for that space. I'm not sure that that's how I want to live the next ten years of my life, and so this time has allowed me to realize that I really do want to go back to grad school and I really do want to get a master's in social work, and I want to become a therapist. And that has given me the most optimism and excitement about my future that I've felt in a long time.

1:25:04.9

And I see a path, and I've learned so much in this role as a market manager about where my strengths are, and what I do and I don't like to do, and how I do and don't want to spend my time.

And it's led me to the point of being able to actually say what I really want to do. And I am so excited. So I'm applying to go to grad school in the fall and will be leaving the position as market manager in June or July and will try a new path. And I'm just so excited. I'm so excited to get to read books for a job-- [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Sarah Thurman: -- and learn and learn and learn and learn, and then just immediately turn around and start applying what I've learned in new situations.

1:26:04.6

And I feel like I had to kick down one door to see the thousands of doors behind it. And now I know, like, the mystery is out, if you just work hard and you stay committed to the path that you've taken, it will work out. [Laughter] And I don't need to sit by and hope that I'm discovered one day, and that somebody is gonna save me and put me on the path that I want to be on. I just have to put in the time, and I have to put in the work. And there's a really simple path to follow. It's right in front of me. And I'm just really grateful to be at a point in my maturity that I can just see it for the simplicity that it is, you know.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm, yeah. That's amazing. Congratulations.

Sarah Thurman: Thank you. Yeah. I'm really excited.

Diana Dombrowski: I'm excited just listening to you. That sounds really like a fabulous perfect fit for you.

1:27:02.7

Sarah Thurman: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And I bet you're gonna do amazing things, just like you have in everything else you've told me today. So congratulations. I can't wait to see what things are happening for you in a year.

Sarah Thurman: I know! **It's gonna** be exciting.

Diana Dombrowski: That's gonna be really cool. Yeah. Yeah. Do you have anything else that you'd like to put on the record about what's been significant for you in 2020? This is your time to speak because I have asked you all of my questions. No pressure. [Laughter]

1:27:56.7

Sarah Thurman: It's just been really interesting as I grow up to watch how the world changes and that this is obviously been that under a magnifying glass, but-- what was that noise?

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, sorry. I think my microphone rubbed against the zipper on my jacket.

Sarah Thurman: That's what it sounded like. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Did you hear that? Okay. [Laughter] I thought maybe that was only heard in my ear. I didn't realize you could hear that. I'm sorry.

Sarah Thurman: No. I started talking and I don't even have a finishing thought to that.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Sarah Thurman: It's just been really interesting to watch the world change, and I'm grateful to be a part of it and I'm excited to see how we all kind of grow and change with it. And I hope that we all embrace that, 'cause I do think we're all gonna end up better on the other end.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

1:29:00.3

That sounds great. Thank you for your time. Thanks for doing this. Thank you for being so honest and open with your life and your work and what's been happening for you. I'm really grateful and I think that your perspective is really unique in the collection of people that we've talked to. So it's gonna have a really special place, and I want to thank you very much for that.

Sarah Thurman: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to share and I look forward to listening back to me talk someday. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely. The next step is totally-- when I hit the stop record button, we're gonna sit for a minute and let the audio download, if you don't mind leaving the window up for a moment.

1:29:58.2

And then maybe we could talk about the springs or I could email you a little bit about that.

Sarah Thurman: Yeah, we can. But can I pause for a potty break?

Diana Dombrowski: Of course. Okay. So let me just finish by saying the audio is going to load today. I'll send you a copy, I'll send you the transcript, and those are gonna be the next steps.

Sarah Thurman: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: So that's what the next steps look like for this. And I'll stop recording right now.

[End of Interview]

