



Rebecca Van Loenen
Augusta Locally Grown
Augusta, GA

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Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Today is January 27th, 2021. This is Diana Dombrowski recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance with Rebecca van Loenen. Rebecca, is that how you pronounce your last name?

Rebecca Van Loenen: Yes. Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. Great.

Rebecca van Loenen: You did a very good job. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Okay. All right. And could you please tell us when and where you were born?

Rebecca van Loenen: So I was born July 23rd, [19]87 in Hammond, Louisiana.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, great. And you're working in Georgia now. What brought you to work in Augusta?

Rebecca van Loenen: So I moved to Augusta about nine-and-a-half years ago after I got married to my husband, so directly from Louisiana to Georgia. And from there I was fresh out of college and got a few jobs. One of them was the 4-H office locally through extension services, so, yeah.

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Diana Dombrowski: Great. And what brought you to work in agriculture or food, anything food related?

Rebecca van Loenen: So I grew up in a small town right outside of Hammond, Louisiana called Tickfaw, and we are or were an agricultural-based town, lots of strawberry fields and a few other vegetable crops, but for the most part it was a small town. And I started to see a lot of those small farms dry up, and it was from various reasons. You know, you can name them all and it'd take too long, but I really saw the difficulties that they were dealing with. I'm also the child of a small-business owner, and so I saw that we would grow our own food because, when you own your own business, you don't necessarily have a lot of income coming in.

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And so we were a one-income family based on the small business that my family owns, and so we grew food in various ways on our one-acre plot. Also at times we had a cow so we would do crop rotation with the cow, so pretty much backyard sustainable gardening and that helped feed our family. And sometimes it was less expensive than going down to the grocery store, which we only had one in town, going to the Walmart and buying food. And so that life lesson, because food is so innate in all of us, just took me and really grabbed ahold of me, and it's kind of what I wanted to do with my life.

Diana Dombrowski: That's great.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Is that what you studied in college?

Rebecca van Loenen: I did.

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So I went with a general studies degree because I knew I wanted to go into nonprofit management and alternative education, and so that's what I based my degree on. And so I have a minor in horticulture and ag management. And then I specialized in nonprofit management with an emphasis on grant writing, so I am doing what I went to college for. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Great. That sounds really smart. That sounds very smart of you, yeah. So you started at Augusta Locally Grown as the executive director, is that right?

Rebecca van Loenen: I did.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Rebecca van Loenen: I started about-- goodness-- a year ago almost to the day.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow.

Rebecca van Loenen: So I started right before the US shut down. There was about a three-week grace period that I had before I had to deal with pandemic life.

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Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my gosh.

Rebecca van Loenen: [Laughter] Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. So, yeah, let's get right into it. [Laughter]

Rebecca van Loenen: That's what **I've been doing**.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Okay. So knowing that you started the job that soon, when did COVID really come up as something you knew was going to affect your own life?

Rebecca van Loenen: Right. So me and my husband both have interesting viewpoints and it helped us to shape how we were going to navigate COVID and the pandemic. So he works in the hospital doing access control, security cameras, keycodes, shutting down floors, opening up floors, things like that. And so he's got an eagle-eye view of everything that goes on in one of the most prominent hospitals here.

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And then I started a job, obviously, in food access points. That's mainly what we do with Augusta Locally Grown, we connect the farmer to the consumer and provide educational components to that. So I had a little bit of grace in knowing what Augusta Locally Grown was and is. I was only on the outskirts, so I wasn't fully immersed in it like I am now. And I just remember the first few weeks, we would hear conflicting things from the news that said pandemic is coming or it's not coming, don't worry about it, stock up food, don't stock up food. And so we just kind of gauged to that and also had basically inside intel to the hospital system and what **we knew** what was coming or didn't know what was coming.

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So I just remember thinking, okay, it'll come here-- I remember swine flu from growing up, and I remember the cases and the numbers and what it did, but I also remember what we did to navigate through it. And we did a lot to up our immune system and to combat things that way. So that's just what we did in here. We stocked up on foods that we knew that help with flu-related symptoms, supplements that help with that, and then-- we did that. And I got this job and the US shut down. And when the US shut down, it was a different story because, all of the sudden, you had this whole fear mindset. But still, at the same time, my husband works at the hospital, we're

not seeing numbers go up, we're not-- so you hear one thing on the news but yet you're seeing a different thing go on in the hospital.

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And it was just, to be honest, very difficult to navigate because you didn't know, do you go with the scarcity mindset that's being depicted on the news or do you go with the inside view that you have in the hospital? And so it was very hard to balance, to be honest. And, yeah, so--

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I can imagine, especially in the position you are with the market, responsible for your employees' safety as well and--

Rebecca van Loenen: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: --making decisions as far as that goes with a lot of conflicting guidance, not just nationally but also statewide and countywide--

Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: -- as other organizations tried to grapple with that. How did you end up making decisions for the nonprofit?

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah.

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So we are interlaced with Georgia Organics, Wholesome Wave Georgia, and then a whole slew of other farmers' markets across the state, and even the nation. We run a pretty unique farmers' market in that, for the past twelve years, we've had an online farmers' market. So that helped, because we didn't have to transition to a very different model. What we had to transition to were

increased sales to the teams of-- one week we did forty customers total. Within a week we did a hundred customers. It jumped up. And then the next week it was two hundred.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Rebecca van Loenen: So we just tried to navigate around that. But, at the same time, how do you do it safely?

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So we were on a few Zoom calls and a few chats, emails, because all of the farmers' markets across Georgia started to band together and say, okay, best practices, we're hearing these things for different food-related industries such as restaurants or grocery stores, but yet, we don't operate like that, we're open air. So what kind of safety precautions do we need to do to take hold of that? So I just guided us along those lines. For our online markets, it was pretty much business as usual. We did adjust to where, instead of the customers come to the access point out of their cars to get the food that they would pick up from an online order, we would just take it to their cars. So that was helpful and handy to be able to not have to navigate that too much. But then we have traditional farmers' markets.

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And so, when those opened-- those are specific markets in food deserts, so we knew we had to open them, but we also had an issue of where-- so they're in food deserts but we have programs that run through them that are specifically for people with diet-related diseases, hypertension, things that we knew were risk indicators for other disease, so we took extra precautions. Our farmers-- if you notice, the average farmer age is sixty to seventy-five, so, obviously, that is in at-risk age. So we had younger farmers that would sell for the older farms. So basically, we had

one farmer that would come to the market and sell for two or three other farmers, and that helped to mitigate risks.

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So, like, a farmer buddy program that we started, and we just continued that through the end of our market season, which was in December, and that's just what we did to help navigate all around this.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And when it comes to the daily operations like the routine of the work that you-all were doing, it sounds like you shifted virtually to operating over Zoom more. And what was it like for people who were supporting the farmers' markets in person?

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. So we did shift as much as we could to Zoom, as pretty much everybody else did. The biggest adjustment was probably-- we teach cooking classes to the same group of women that have diet-related disease that go to the farmers' markets, and so, usually, that's a pretty hands-on class.

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And now you're talking about taking women who the average age is 50 and above in communities that don't have the best resources as far as internet and seeing, hey, can we teach a cooking class online? And should we still continue to do this despite the pandemic? And weighing out those options. So we did it. We took it online, and it was vastly successful to the point where we will probably do the cooking classes again online. We actually continued it longer than the six weeks that we were supposed to, but what they told me was they were so lonely, and they just needed a place to connect, and this was their place to connect. And you could do it over food.

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And we would talk about what you ate this morning, and why you cooked things a certain way, because that's what your mom or your grandmom told you to do. We would have their kids or their grandkids in on the Zoom classes, too, whereas if we would've done it in person it would've been pretty limited. You don't have childcare options for a lot of these women in multigenerational households. So it just worked, and it actually turned out to be a lot better than what we were expecting to do. There were times that I would take my laptop and hold it over the stove and **say**, here, this is what I'm cooking. This is how the ground meat should look, or this is how you want your veggies to be wilted when you're sautéing. And it just kind of worked. And what was the other part to your question?

Diana Dombrowski: I was curious about what it was like for employees supporting the farmers' market in person to be doing that work.

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Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. So for them, I wanted to assess their comfort level as much as possible, and it turned out that I had more in-person support than what I was expecting. Some were the ones who would wear a mask and a shield, and others were just, you know, let me just come out and help. We just need as much help as possible. We had a few volunteers that came onboard because their jobs decreased, and so they came out to help, because we just needed it. We weren't as concerned about ourselves, as selfless as it sounds, as we were concerned about the health and welfare of the food that we were distributing and how to do that in the best way possible.

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So we had our own huddle that we adhered to, and once a week we'd come out for food distribution and then we'd all go home and **work about that**. I think the hardest part was the stress that was on my team, because there was one point that we were working seven days a week just on the online market. You'd open the online market, you'd start to see how many orders were coming in, and then we would have to make sure we had all of the volunteers onboard. We also started home delivery, so we had to make sure that we had home delivery drivers screened and reported in. And so this was pretty much twelve hours a day for seven days a week for up to three months. And that's a lot of stress that you take on your team, and I started to see it on them.

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They were happy, they were smiling, they were glad to do what they did, but you could tell they're tired and they're emotionally tired. And at the same time, they didn't necessarily have to worry about food access for their families because we had such a good system set up, but some have kids that are now home all the time and spouses that are home all the time; and navigating the fears that were kind of external. And so this was one spot a week that they could come and feel relief, and they would say that. They're, like, I'm so stressed but I'm so happy to be doing this. And I get to see people one day a week and do something that has impact. And then it was just up to me when to make the calls. I had such a willing team, willing volunteers.

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But at a certain point when do you say, okay, we're gonna maybe knock off home delivery, or we're gonna do things to mitigate as many sales as we're getting so that I can have my team get

rest. So it was a constant balance act of that, just trying to mitigate the health and welfare emotionally for your team and then the health and welfare for the community, so, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I can imagine working maybe like your first week 12 hours a day is one thing, and then maybe the next two or three, and that's another, but when do you think y'all started to process that this wouldn't be a period of weeks and it might, instead, be months and it might be longer term?

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. I think we just all hoped that by the summertime things would get better.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

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Rebecca van Loenen: And to be honest, where we operate in Augusta, it was. We haven't seen a spike in cases until now, where there was a more serious spike in cases. So we, in essence, lived in a bubble here. We had other counties that we operate in that closed down more, and then we had other counties that were a little bit more lenient. But I just remember that we were able to get to summertime, early summer, June, and life was starting to get a pace to it, and we were able to get a break. And then, towards the end of summer, I remember us kicking back up again and hearing the cases were coming in and there were restrictions that were coming onboard from another county.

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And I could feel it, that this is gonna be a little bit longer. And I remember saying, we can't do this, we just can't keep doing this forever. This is gonna run us ragged. And so, it was at that point that I made some serious decisions on what we were gonna do and what we could do.

Diana Dombrowski: So--

Rebecca van Loenen: Because we-- go ahead.

Diana Dombrowski: So some of those changes involved the delivery options or the staffing at different shifts, or what were those kind of calls you made?

Rebecca van Loenen: It was staffing. It was weighing to see, are we going to get some more staffers in? There were some other changes that we wanted to make for the market, capacity changes. So, for instance, we needed a new ecommerce platform.

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Ours was outdated. We had an accountant and a web developer all in one that pretty much had to support that website five days a week. And so they were starting to get tired. I knew I needed to transfer to a new ecommerce platform, but I also had a staff that would have to learn an entirely new ecommerce platform, as well as all of my farmers. And I just remember towards the end of the summer saying, we're not doing this yet. It's not gonna happen. We're going to take a break and we're gonna make sure that everything is at a lull, because we knew that orders go down around-- or we assumed-- November and December. And so we did. For two months we did not make any more changes, we let things go. I didn't market the online market as much as we had been in the past because I needed to let my staff take a rest.

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And we did, and I think they're very appreciative of that now. But as far as home delivery, we still continued to do that and we saw a decrease in home delivery, and so that's why we didn't make any changes. We saw a decrease, people were really-- they told us they liked coming and picking up their orders more than home delivery because it was the one time a week that they got to see people. And it was an open-air friendly environment, so we just kept doing what we were doing as far as pickup and home delivery, so, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's great. I'm curious what that experience was like for you, and if you had maybe some models in your life when it comes to decision making in these surprise kind of moments that you look to?

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Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm. So, as I mentioned, I grew up in South Louisiana. We have hurricanes, and one little minor hurricane was Hurricane Katrina.

Diana Dombrowski: **Right.**

Rebecca van Loenen: And our family's business is a diesel mechanics business based near New Orleans, so it's actually on one of the industrial canals right outside of New Orleans. And when Hurricane Katrina happened, basically everything shut down. I remember you couldn't get food, you couldn't get a generator. It was another thing that almost overnight-- you prepare for hurricanes, but you don't prepare necessarily for a Katrina. And our family business has a lot of family members who work for us.

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So it's very personal when you have an event like that that displaces your business, which is your sole income from your family, but also extended family members, aunts, uncles, my brothers, things like that. So I remember trying to navigate all of that uncertainty and just the life lessons that you learn from that, that you take it one day at a time, that there's always hope. Things always get better despite gas shortages and generator shortages. That you come together as a community and you share stuff, and you just work through it. And sometimes bad things happen, but you have to look past that because you have to get through the day. And that's all you have to do is just get through the day and then you'll get through the next one and the next one.

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And things slowly get better and life slowly changes, and you just adapt. And that's what happened here in my little circle, in my little world. Things shut down. All of a sudden, my husband has to go in and out of COVID wards at the hospital. And they are technicians working with security, so you don't always think of them with the PPE or all of the protective measures that you just didn't have in place for staff like that at the time, contractors **moving** in and out. You thought of obviously the frontline workers, the doctors, the nurses, but just him navigating that and him coming home. And dealing with formula shortages in the store.

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I have a little baby and she was still on formula at the time, and a certain type of formula because she has allergies. And then that was sold out. So it's, like, okay, well, if this doesn't happen, what do I do? Do I go to the goat farmer down the road that I know, and I get milk for my baby? And it was a very heavy time, but it reminded me very much of what we did during Hurricane Katrina. And I remember us having the only generator on the street and so we were able to keep

my neighbor's prescription for cancer in our freezer, and it was two-thousand dollars a month back then for his prescription, so it was very crucial that he have it and that he preserve what he had.

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And that's how things were here. I remember our farmers banded together. They would deliver for one another to the drop points. Our staff banded together. There were some times when I couldn't get my delivery order and so one of my staffers would take it home for me and then I'd just pick it up from her. All those kinds of good stories, especially with our programs, being able to start a vegetable prescription program with these diet-disease-related women, and how they banded together. Because of lockdowns you didn't have a lot of socialization that went on, and some of these women-- there was about three in the program that had Alzheimer's spouses, and some spouses were more advanced in the disease and some were less.

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But through the program, they were able to meet and talk and have a listening ear on one another, and share resources, if not just a listening ear, share recipes, cook for one another. Those were the bright spots that happened, and that's what helped to keep me going. And it slowly got better, so there's always hope. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] I'm so glad, 'cause I know when it comes to people who work in agriculture and who work in food, you have to be resilient, you have to look to models in your life of people who've maybe not found a silver lining but at least figured a way around an obstacle before that's a surprise, because there's so much that you can't count on anyway. And I

think that's definitely been the case for a lot of people, but it's great that you were so primed already with the electronic market that others were just beginning from scratch.

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Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: So I'm curious if there was maybe something you shared within the network or some sort of perspective that you-all had within the networks you were in that you thought was maybe unique or helpful for others you were working with?

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. So, because we were connected, there was several other farmers' markets, even another one in a county that we operated-- one of the counties operates their own farmers' market and they took it online. And I remember when they took it online, they used a totally wrong product for an online market. And I also have a background in web development.

Diana Dombrowski: **Right.**

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. So talk about perfect timing.

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So we started getting calls and messages and emails from other farmers' markets, one was even in Colorado, that said, hey, how do we navigate and do this, because we know that you've been doing this for twelve years? And then I had to say, well, I haven't been running it for twelve years, but I did take over from someone who had been running it for twelve years; and knew some kind of in and outs of how to navigate that. One of the things that we knew right off the bat before pandemic was that our ecommerce platform was outdated. We knew it. We had plans on

changing it and curving around that, and then, once we had such a-- I mean, our sales quintupled. I didn't even know that was a word until a few months ago but it's a word. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Rebecca van Loenen: And we're still there. But our ecommerce platform could not support it and we were just fixing patches and fixing patches.

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And so we were able to tell others that were using the same ecommerce platform how to fix the patches and how to just run and go.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: And then, other new ones that were starting on, we had done some research about some other ecommerce platforms for online markets, 'cause everything was online, that we were able to share and give that knowledge to. And so it just helped. It was such a community effort to help one another.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: The other thing that we had to do was share farmers because you were in such short supply, we would sell out within twenty minutes to an hour of our market being online.

Diana Dombrowski: That's incredible.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yes.

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Diana Dombrowski: It's great, and so it seems like you said you're still at that stage that was quintupled from prepandemic.

Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: Do y'all think that is going to sustain for the next year? What are you thinking about--

Rebecca van Loenen: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: --or **trying** to anticipate for the next couple months?

Rebecca van Loenen: So we're at a point where we had a rest. We did transition to a new platform and now we are trying to sustain. And so our sales have sustained. We're at a level that we can manage, so now we want to build on that and increase. Everyone that joined that was new, we want to make sure that they stay on and they stay aboard, and they stay energized. And that we can grow our local food society, community while we have the ear of the community.

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So that's our next movement. I don't anticipate sales dropping at all. They have stayed at this same level for a period of six months now, so since July they've stayed pretty steady. And so we're anticipating that that will continue true. The biggest complaint that we get is that we want more fruits and vegetables being sold online. So we're just working to get more fruits and vegetables, and if we do that, we should see an increase of sales, but we're also going into the end of the winter months, so you're not gonna see that many increase in veggies at this time of year for us in our zone.

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But come early spring, we should see that, and we've got plans in place to bring on some more farmers and help subsidize some of their costs to bring their product to market, so, yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Have any programs like the Paycheck Protection Program been helpful for you-all, or was there anything that you applied for just to-- it sounds like with profits so high at the market, I don't know, was that something that you needed to consider financially?

Rebecca van Loenen: Right. So there was a point that we seriously considered it. And then we just kind of navigated away from it. There was a lot of headache involved in the application, and we weren't even sure if we would get it. I'm the only full-time employee, and the rest are either part-time or volunteers or right above a volunteer level. So we didn't worry about it. We do take a small percentage of the sales, which helped us.

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Now, we were going into this year already with a known deficit for our organization, and we weren't sure how we-- we had some partners that may not come onboard for a few of our programs, and so we just weren't sure how we were gonna navigate that. And we had all these plans in place for a new director, and new fundraisers, and then pandemic hit and we're like, oh, shoot, we passed a budget, or my board before me passed a budget; how are we gonna do this when we can't do anything that we were supposed to do? So the amount that we got from sales actually helped us navigate this year with a tiny bit of overage. So we were able to navigate our decrease, be able to run our programs how we needed to, and still have a little bit to finish the year strong, so, yay!

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Diana Dombrowski: That's amazing. Wow. Congratulations.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: We did get a few-- now, this was really helpful. Georgia Organics did a few mini-grant programs to help with any kind of extra supplies we had to buy because of the measures we were taking, and that helped with masks, 'cause you had to have extra masks, you had to have hand sanitizer stands, things like that. And so those, even though they were small, I think the highest was, like, twenty-five hundred, helped us to open up a new site for food distribution, and then it helped us cover the extra measures that we had to take. I think, at one point, we had to pay a hundred dollars a month just for a hand sanitizer stand at one of our markets.

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So costs were outrageous at times, and that helped us navigate that, and did help us finish the year strong. But other than that, we didn't get any government help or support.

Diana Dombrowski: **Wow.**

Rebecca van Loenen: It was all community support.

Diana Dombrowski: That's really amazing. While everyone is trying to protect themselves and stay safe so that they can help others, I'm curious about how the health of your staff and maybe how the health of your family was during this time?

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. So that was a big thing. I remember, gosh, a month into pandemic life, I got this weird fever, and I almost never get a fever, and it was a slight runny nose. And

I'm, like, oh, goodness, here it is! And so went and got tested and it came back negative, and the fever lasted for about three days, and we still don't know what was up or what was going on.

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All of my staff has stayed healthy to the exception that I have had one particular worker who works in one of our in-person markets, and she had a bad knee infection caused from a surgery in her knee and so she had to be out. She's already at the at-risk category based on some of the indicators that she has. So at one point, I was either covering for her or we had another market manager step in and cover, especially around the times when we thought that things were gonna get bad in Augusta, we kind of pulled her back and she was fine with it. She was okay. We talked about the reasons. And so she was fully onboard and fully happy that I was already thinking about some of these things.

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So physically, we have all stayed healthy, and that has been a huge blessing. We have had a few that were exposed and so they stayed at home at times, just navigating things the safest way possible, but so far, we're good. And then, it's just I think the mental toll has been the hardest. We had one of my market managers, her husband unexpectedly lost his job. And he had a pretty high position, as well, and so they had savings to navigate it. But I just remember that stress right after it. And it was like everything just finally culminated.

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All the fears that we're hearing about pandemic, all the things that we're seeing, job loss, it just all hit. And I remember just kind of breaking down with her. So I can honestly say there's been more of a mental toll than there has been an actual-- I don't want to say physical because your

mental health plays into your physical, as well, but you know what I'm saying. More of like the actual **sickness**, there's been more of, like, a mental heaviness to my staff and myself.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And it's hard because meeting in person and so many types of social support are just not available or not safe.

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And that might make the stress worse in the first place, and you also can't see at the end when everyone's gonna get together for a big group hug--

Rebecca van Loenen: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: --or a big group dinner, and the ways that you recharge. Do y'all talk about what you're really excited to do when some of these mandates lift?

Rebecca van Loenen: We want to do farm-to-table dinners, which we can do now, but we want to have the gatherings like we used to. In one of our low-income neighborhoods, there's a potluck that we would do to celebrate either the beginning or the ending of one of our programs, and you can't do that right now. And we want to do it. I think the biggest thing that we can't wait to do is have in-person meetings, as terrible as that sounds.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Rebecca van Loenen: Nobody likes in-person meetings to begin with, but we like them now.

[Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. We used to do things like cookies.

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I work for an organic certifier and it's a really big thing to get to share cookies.

Rebecca van Loenen: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: And maybe you don't eat the cookies, but at least they're there and someone brought them in, or someone baked them or picked them up. And we took it for granted. Yeah, we took it for granted. Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yep, so took it for granted. So, yeah, that's what we're looking forward to. And it's kind of odd when you walk into a situation that they're like, oh, we can actually sit in a room together, but we're socially-- but we can sit in a room together. What is this?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Well, thanks for sharing with me. Those are my main questions.

Rebecca van Loenen: Uh-huh.

Diana Dombrowski: But I wonder, are there other parts of your experience that have been significant over the last year that you'd like to share or reflect on?

0:42:00.7

Rebecca van Loenen: You know, I think that there is such an untold story that maybe I'll get time to do that talks about how well our local food system stood up when, whether there were actual food shortages or just everyone was panic buying, but besides fruits and vegetables, we didn't run out. We were able to connect the consumer directly to the producer in a hundred-mile radius of the CSRA, which is the regional area that we kind of identify ourselves in. We're right

by South Carolina and the Savannah River, and so we just identify that as the CSRA. And so we were able to connect such a pretty wide array of products.

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You're talking milk, eggs, butter, meat, vegetables, pet food, gardening supplies, live plants. So when everybody was gonna plant their own garden in their backyard, they bought from the local growers. And so we almost didn't have a panic buy after so long because people learned where they could get their products and how they could get their products. And that's really what Augusta Locally Grown was started to begin with, is to connect locally the food systems. We just didn't know how well it was gonna stand up, and we didn't know how well our producers could hold onto that.

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So, yeah, I think that's something that, one of these days when I get the time, that I really want to look deeper into to see how and why, and to figure that out a little bit more, how we can do it better, where were the cracks. Because obviously it was a needed support during this time.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I know that the second part of the project is gonna be us connecting again after some period of time when things go back to normal-ish.

Rebecca van Loenen: **Okay.**

Diana Dombrowski: And I'm really looking forward to meeting you in person and maybe even going to the market; and hope during that time everyone's been able to get together and celebrate what an achievement that is, too.

Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm.

0:44:57.3

Diana Dombrowski: I'm really glad for you, and I'm so impressed by the resilience that your whole team shared, especially because there were so many volunteers involved, like you describe, who really committed. And for themselves, clearly it was important personally for them, and also just wanting to keep their community together. That's really, really meaningful. Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah, yep. I remember, just to paint a picture, one time at our highest points we had one of our board members who was helping out, and her sons who were out of school, and we had a wagon full of gallons of milk that we were taking to the parking lot to distribute into people's cars. And there's a hill that you've got to walk up to, as well. And so I had my baby on my back in a baby carrier, carrying some bags of groceries, and then I had my market manager right beside me with-- she had three bags of groceries on each arm.

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And there we are just lugging it up the hill to the people's cars. And that's just the spirit of where we were at and what we were doing, so, yep.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. I can see that suddenly, like, your personal and professional-- you have to bring yourself to everything and everything is touched by COVID, and you gotta draw on all these wells of strength to make it up the hill. Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Yeah. [Laughter] And we did.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That's very evocative. I can picture it. That's great. That's great. And I'm sure you did it again and then you did it again. Yeah, yeah. Thank you. Thanks for your time with us. I hope that y'all stay healthy and well--

Rebecca van Loenen: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: --in the coming months. And now that we've had the first interview, I'll send the audio to you and we'll get it transcribed, so that's the next brief step.

0:47:04.5

And in the coming months, Annemarie, who's SFA's oral historian full time, is connecting with other groups around the country who are doing this documentary work to make sure that, when it goes online, everyone's amplifying each other so people who are interested can draw from a network that's already built up. So I'm gonna stay in touch and keep you updated on what other people are talking about in their interviews, what we're hoping to do with them, and so we've got those two points to look forward to before we're able to sit down together, hopefully soon.

Rebecca van Loenen: Uh-huh. Sounds good.

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you. Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Thank you.

Diana Dombrowski: Thanks again. Yeah.

Rebecca van Loenen: Bye-bye.

Diana Dombrowski: Take care.

[End]

