



Ed Seiber

Seiber Design

Atlanta, GA

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Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski

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Diana Dombrowski: Today is December 31st, 2020. This is Diana Dombrowski with the Southern Foodways Alliance COVID-19 Project here with Ed Seiber.

Ed Seiber: Seiber.

Diana Dombrowski: Seiber. German.

Ed Seiber: Seiber.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. Thank you. Ed Seiber. Thank you. Ed, if you could please tell us when and where you were born.

Ed Seiber: I was born in Augusta, Georgia in July of 1951, and that came about because my father was a football player at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and his coach enlisted most of the football players into the National Guard during the Korean War. So, he was stationed in Massachusetts and my mom was still in Knoxville. Fort Gordon in Augusta was the closest army hospital. So, that's the reason I was in Augusta.

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I was there for about a week I think, and then we quickly went back to Knoxville, Tennessee where my parents lived and I grew up.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, great. So you grew up in Knoxville?

Ed Seiber: Uh-huh.

Diana Dombrowski: What did your parents do?

Ed Seiber: My father was in construction materials, primarily windows, doors, hardware, things like that. He was in sales for a number of years before he became the president of a company there, a privately-owned company. My mom was a homemaker and she raised three children, my brother and sister and I.

Diana Dombrowski: Great.

Ed Seiber: She was also a gardener.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh!

Ed Seiber: And a bon vivant.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Ed Seiber: That's where I got my social skills, from my mom.

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She loved to throw a good party.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow!

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. Is that what led you, do you think—like, sparked this interest in being involved in food?

Ed Seiber: You know, it's hard to say. I'm sure it had something to do with it. I do recall that after growing up on typical Southern staples, and just oatmeal for breakfast and typical food for lunch and dinner, my mom began experimenting with more international cuisine, at least what

was known at the time. And she loved Hawaiian food and that's why she used to throw a lot of luaus at their house, complete with tiki torches and rum drinks and things like that.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's a **good thing**. So, what brings you to Georgia now having grown up there?

Ed Seiber: Well, it was sort of a circuitous path.

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I went away to college in North Carolina at Davidson and did junior year abroad in Germany and became a German major, and then went to Northwestern outside Chicago for graduate school in German Literature and Languages. I did that for a couple of years and then decided, no, that's not really what I want to do. And ended up coming back to Knoxville to study architecture because, even while I was in graduate school, I was working in the summers for my father's company and met a couple of architecture students there and they said, hey, if you enjoy this work, then maybe you should consider getting a degree in architecture. So I did. I got a second bachelor's degree in architecture at the University of Tennessee.

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And after casting about for a while, ended up moving to Atlanta because I had been around university towns for so long, I decided I wanted to be in a larger city. And just ended up here. Had no idea I would be here for forty years. So, I guess that this has been home for quite a long time, and I love this city.

Diana Dombrowski: That's really nice. Yeah. It sounds like it was good for you to put down roots.

Ed Seiber: Yeah, definitely.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And could you tell us about the work that you're doing currently?

Ed Seiber: Well, I and my partners and colleagues have a small architecture and interior design firm here in Atlanta, which I've had since the late [19]80s. And we specialize in restaurants and bars and hospitality and retail projects. We're very much a boutique firm.

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And we just recently moved our office, I guess right at the beginning of the pandemic. We are now located in what's called the ~~M.E.T~~ **Met.**, which is a large multi-building complex that was built in the early 20th century as a cotton storage facility by Asa Candler, who was one of the founders of Coca-Cola. It's changed hands several times and has been undergoing renovations for creative offices, makers, artist galleries, tenants like that. So, we worked here for—I think we moved in March 2. We were here for two full weeks when the pandemic hit, and we went back to our homes where we had been for five weeks transitioning from our old office to the new.

And we've gotten pretty good at it.

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So, now there are two of us who are working from home all the time and have been since we left the office. And the other three of us work from here because we've got quite a bit of space. We're the only tenants right now on this floor. So, it's pretty easy to get here, pretty safe to be here, and

it helps relieve the cabin fever that, I guess, the rest of us suffer when we work full time from home.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Ed Seiber: And that's how I became—our work with restaurants and bars and things like that is how I came to know of the Southern Foodways Alliance, because of my clients and friends and contacts in the restaurant industry—

Diana Dombrowski: One moment.

Ed Seiber: Sure.

Diana Dombrowski: My dog.

Ed Seiber: [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Having worked from home for a long time, I'm sure you can understand.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: But **I'll get** him out of the room.

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We weren't expecting any mail today on the holiday.

Ed Seiber: No problem.

Diana Dombrowski: Sorry about that.

Ed Seiber: No problem. So, we're used to being interrupted by pets and kids and spouses and partners and all sorts of things. No, as I was saying, that my introduction to the Southern

Foodways Alliance was through friends and clients in the restaurant industry here in Atlanta and in a larger area. And that started a number of years ago, attending Potlikker events, both here and in other cities in the south. And, as I mentioned to you previously, a number of fall symposia in Oxford, which I dearly missed this year.

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So maybe next year we'll be able to hold it again, so we'll see.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah. I'm curious about whether the ways that you've supported SFA have become different this year, aside from working from home?

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Well, I was signed up to go to the spring symposium in Birmingham and was really looking forward to that because the focus was on restaurants. And that had to be canceled, unfortunately. And then the fall symposium was done completely online, and I did not participate in that, so I really felt that I was missing some contact. Obviously, kept in touch through *Gravy* and podcasts and things of that sort.

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But really looking forward to next year when the focus is on environments. And I've already talked to John T. and made some book recommendations to him, so I know he will be studying up on several things. And I very much look forward to participating in 2021, in whatever form it is.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That's great. I know that people who are involved in nonprofit work have **watched** those organizations shift what they need to do and their plans in the face of a lockdown.

Ed Seiber: Yep. Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So, as a board member for Wholesome Wave Georgia, what has that been like during this time?

Ed Seiber: Well, we have been going through transition this year. We have brought on a new executive director and we had several new staff members who have just done an incredible job.

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We did have a core of staff who transitioned from the previous executive director, so we did have some continuity there. And, of course, we had continuity with the board. Had a great board, especially our board chair, Kristie Abney, did an incredible job. Today's her last day. Kristie, look forward to seeing you as our past chair. But we realized pretty quickly that our model for fundraising was gonna have to change. We have a primary—well, we have a series of fundraisers. We had a picnic in the park scheduled for the spring in the Summerhill neighborhood, which is just east of here, and we had to postpone that. We have our primary fundraiser, the Southern Chefs' Potluck, every September.

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And last year, for the first time, we had it here in Atlanta. Previously, it had been at Serenbe, which is about 45 minutes south of here. And this year we had to go completely online and virtual. And we didn't know how that was gonna play out. We'd never done it before.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: We looked at sort of the telethon model, I guess, for lack of a better expression. And we just had great response from some of our key contributors. Our staff found someone to

help guide us with the online process. We had videographers and organizers and things like that. And it was actually held just down the hall here in the penthouse of the ~~M.E.T~~ **Met**. So it was much more successful than we thought. We were able to exceed our fundraising goal.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

Ed Seiber: And I think—the staff could verify this—but we had online participants in a number of states, and we were just so grateful that we were able to pull this off. And I think our staff, Susan and Em and Will and everybody else just did a wonderful job.

Diana Dombrowski: That's great news!

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's wonderful.

Ed Seiber: We also had Georgia ~~Gibbs~~ **Gives Day for another fundraising effort**, which happened—well, it's a nationwide event, I think, but it happened a month or so ago. Time seems to run together this year.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Ed Seiber: It's probably been the same way for you, as well. But we exceeded our goal for that, as well, and that was completely online. So we've been fortunate, and we've also had some great support from funders.

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And some private foundations have blessed us with their largesse this year in terms of incredible contributions to our efforts. And we've just been so supported by our community and by our partners and our funders and our board and everyone else, in spite of all the challenges for this year. So it's been a pivot as it has been for all of us, I think, in whatever field we're in.

Diana Dombrowski: I'm glad it's been so successful. That really speaks to the network of support that Wholesome Wave **Georgia** must have already established. Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Yeah, we do. And we've got deep roots in the restaurant and bar industry here.

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And obviously we've got connections with farmers and with farmers' markets. And I know one of the things we did was realize that there are gonna be a lot more people who need food assistance, who are becoming food insecure or income insecure because of COVID-19. And I think our staff did an incredible job in signing additional people up for SNAP benefits. And the farmers obviously had huge challenges, as well, because a lot of their restaurant business all of a sudden was no longer there due to the drop in the restaurant business in general. So, I hope—I don't have specific information, but I hope—that Wholesome Wave Georgia and some of the organizations addressing food insecurity were able to absorb some of the agricultural output that normally would've gone to restaurants.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's funny speaking to you about that now 'cause the project that I initially got started with was focusing on organic agriculture. So, I've spoken to Serenbe and a couple of places around Atlanta, and then spoke to folks who were involved in the restaurant

industry, and now people who are looking at it from the system-wide kind of perspective. So it's going to be really nice to check in with all of you, as well, for the second interview to see how that ended up working in a more long-term sort of way. The first interviews we did were really about logistically those challenges.

Ed Seiber: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: And a lot of folks, at least in agriculture that I spoke to and were willing to speak to me, were able to do that pivot with that online kind of market change to make sure that there wasn't too much of that excess or food going to waste and that sort of thing.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Exactly, exactly.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Ed Seiber: So, I'm looking forward to finding out our year-end statistics when we have our first board meeting next year about how many more people we served through the SNAP doubling at farmers' markets.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Ed Seiber: And we also have our Georgia Food for Health program through which we partner with various medical organizations and healthcare organizations to address dietary issues through healthy eating, fruits and vegetables and things like that. You know, it's been a year of huge challenges, but I'm heartened to see the response from all of our communities. And the restaurant community is holding on by their fingernails right now.

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Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Ed Seiber: And some of the pivots that they've done have just been incredible. And it shows the strength of commitment on their part, and to each other and to employees and to vendors and purveyors and things like that. So we're starting to see a little bit of movement in a positive direction with some of our clients and some of our perspective clients. People are still, in spite of the challenges, looking to open restaurants or to modify restaurants, to taking the opportunity to move into existing restaurant spaces and reposition them, reconcept them and things of that sort.

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So we hope to see that begin to build. I just think that we are all so ready to see each other again, to hug each other again, to break bread with each other, to raise a toast to each other, to reconnect to our essential social humanity again that we've all been sorely missing. We can't do it all through this **digital** means, obviously.

Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Ed Seiber: And I'll tell you a story that happened to me just a couple of weeks ago. I frequently stop to eat at Bread & Butterfly, which is a French bistro between my office and my home. And they have set up dining there in their covered patios, and they've got a side dining room that has French doors that open up completely to the outside.

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Through social distancing and fresh air, it's been one of my key stops where I just get out and go have a bite to eat and a glass of wine. Normally, I'm there alone in late afternoon, but it just so happened a dear friend of mine showed up and it was amazing just to be able to sit down at a

table and to converse and to dine and to see each other. And those sorts of things that we took for granted last year and earlier this year just mean so much to be able to sit down and to commune with each other.

Diana Dombrowski: That must've been one of the first times you'd seen that friend in person for a long time?

Ed Seiber: Well, we do see each other every now and then. This friend is an excellent chef in and of his own right. And I've had a few small gatherings with him and his wife at their home.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, good.

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Ed Seiber: His wife is also a board member of Wholesome Wave Georgia, so we've had our pod, disrupted though it may have been due to circumstances. But, yeah, it's been so important. And the chef and owner of Bread & Butterfly, Billy Allin, has also been an incredible contact for me because we have our socially distanced conversations while I'm sitting there eating. And we trade stories about what's going on in our lives and in our businesses and in our political situation here in Georgia, which is still very dramatic and will be, I guess, for quite a while.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm curious if we could maybe go through the timeline of what COVID's impact was like for your business, for your work with clients, starting around that March period.

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Is that when you would say that you first became aware of COVID's potential impact on the business?

Ed Seiber: Yeah, we did. We were moving along into a really productive and successful year for the business and for our clients, and I guess once the counts became so high here in Georgia, in spite of the fact that our governor did not mandate any masks or things like that—we did have mandated closures and I think those started on a city-wide level and a local level first. So we were in the midst of designing several restaurant projects, some of which were beginning to move into the construction phase.

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And once the situation became obvious to all of us and pretty dire nationwide, but especially in Georgia, those clients began to question the reasonableness of moving forward with the projects. So we had several projects postponed. We had some projects that I think have probably been abandoned. We're not certain. I think everybody is still trying to determine when and if they should begin to move forward. We did have a couple of projects that were early in the design phase decide to move forward with the idea of opening in spring of 2021. But now we're not sure if spring of 2021 is going to be an all-clear. It's probably not.

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We think summer or even early fall is more likely, depending on the vaccine distribution and inoculation schedules. So, in addition, we had a project down in Pensacola that decided to go on pause. And then, of course, you had the hurricanes and the flooding in Pensacola. So we still don't know what's gonna happen with that one. There's just so much that they have to overcome down there to rebuild the local infrastructure and the economy, and then to try to forecast when those things will begin to move forward. But, on a positive note, we have had a couple of

projects that are currently in construction and are moving forward that will be complete in April or May of next year. And one of the projects has decided to really focus on outdoor dining.

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And even indoor/outdoor dining with garage doors opening into the dining room and into the bar and covered patios that we're seeing more and more becoming important. We've got others that don't have those opportunities, but they've decided to move forward with some less costly finish renovations and things like that, knowing that there's going to be this pent-up energy and pent-up urge for people to get out and dine out and see friends again, and, at some point, begin to travel. We've also had projects that just went away completely, so we'll see.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: We've also assisted some of our clients with modifications to existing facilities.

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And we've seen what we think will probably be permanent changes in the restaurant business, transitioning to a more to-go and delivery method, and who knows what else. It's always been an extremely entrepreneurial business, and I think our friends and our clients are rising to the challenge and are trying to hold on as best they can and get back.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. After a disruption of this magnitude, I can only imagine what someone in the planning stages would be thinking about, to try to buffer anything like this happening again, including those smaller changes like maybe making sure windows open—

Ed Seiber: Yeah, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: —to maybe even changing location.

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So what has it been like to navigate that with different clients?

Ed Seiber: I think one thing about architects and designers is that we love challenges and we're used to exploring options and alternatives. And we love to learn about new technologies and new materials and new methods. So, on the one hand, it's fulfilled that constant quest for learning and for new knowledge. It's also challenged us to begin to put together solutions based on current situations. And we're trying to keep up with the changes and the recommendations of the CDC and other expert organizations.

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You know, at first when the pandemic came about, we were all sort of making do as best we could, spacing tables apart. Is six feet enough? What sort of capacity should we have in dining rooms? How much fresh air should we have? What sort of filtration for our heating and air conditioning systems? And that knowledge and that information has evolved over the last several months. We're starting to get an idea what's effective, what's not effective. And you've seen people embrace these things and spend money on putting these things in place. I know several restaurants have upgraded their heating and air conditioning systems and their air filtration systems. They've added different types of technologies, and we're starting to get an idea what is most effective.

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So we've started to institute that in some of our designs and pivoted during the design process and even during the construction process to do that. So it's been eye opening. It's been dependent on how much cost some of our clients have been willing to undertake, and it's a risk-rewards

situation. It's, like, can you ensure your customers as a restaurateur that you're keeping their health and safety in mind, and how are you demonstrating that and what's most effective? So I think we've seen a lot of things that have been promulgated that may not be as effective as others.

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So we'll probably see some shakeup and some ongoing knowledge coming to bear. We have to try to decide what's marketing and what's effective.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: So we're trying to navigate our way through that and be able to make good recommendations, we and our consulting engineers and experts, making good recommendations to our clients and our friends in the industry.

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: When everyone first started staying at home, was maybe looking at a couple weeks, maybe a month or two in the spring, I'm sure you were working with clients to maybe extend their timeline slightly. And I'm curious about what or when you started to realize as a whole that this might take more time, and you-all would need to plan around a longer sort of term?

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Ed Seiber: I think it was probably late spring and early summer for us. And there were a couple of colleagues of ours who had more challenging situations, either someone living with an

elderly parent or someone whose child had underlying conditions, things like that. And I think it began to hit home for me when we realized that it wasn't just an individual circumstantial situation, it was something that was more widespread for all of us. Because once we realized that it was human-to-human contact, going out, even in a socially distanced indoor restaurant, became more problematic, not just individually but for anybody else we came in touch with.

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And ours is an inherently collaborative profession and we rely a lot on working together in person to share ideas, to review materials, to work through some things that are just tactile, to tell you the truth.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: While we could pivot to Zoom meetings and conference calls and things like that, we found that there are just certain things you can't show on the screen. Like if I'm showing a material, what can you see through the mediation of computer technology and cameras and things like that?

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So I think when we began to realize that this was going to be going on, especially as the summer wore on and cases continued to climb, that we were gonna need to look at a longer-term solution. So sometimes we've exchanged materials in the parking lot here wearing our masks.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: We've had things delivered to our remotely working colleagues or to our clients. And I can still remember the first Zoom meeting or the first—it was probably the last in-person

meeting we had here in our conference room back in the spring before we went to Zoom meetings completely. And one of our colleagues attended via Zoom, and then the rest of us were sitting spread out at the conference-room table.

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But then we quickly transitioned to all Zoom meetings for most of our clients and started transferring materials via couriers or dropping them off at someone's front porch or whatever. We've since had a couple of meetings here with interior design or architectural reps wearing masks sitting across from the table. We've also had to do some onsite construction observations because of just certain things you can't do via photographs, videos, and things like that. We've sort of had a hybrid situation. Getting back to my birthplace, Augusta, we just finished a project over there for Goodwill of Middle Georgia and the Central Savannah River area.

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And one of my business partners and I had been over there for a couple of construction phase site visits. We were able to stay distant from each other. It was primarily outdoor or indoor in which there was a lot of air circulation. Some of those things you just have to do. But I remember the first time that I drove over to Augusta, which is about a two-and-a-half-hour car journey, that it had never felt so good to drive along an interstate for two-and-a-half hours to get out of the house and to get out of the neighborhood and that sort of thing.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Ed Seiber: I think that thrill was just a one-time thing because driving that distance is no longer quite as fun as it was after being cooped up for a certain amount of time. But we've learned to exchange photographs and videos quite a bit more.

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We've had a lot of conference calls. But my colleagues and I will continue to do in-person site visits for construction. We just have to. There're just certain things that you can't avoid.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I'm glad that you can.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And I know that health must be the top priority for all of you, but with such a small team, I imagine you're able to make a lot of individual plans for people, for whatever is best for their situation.

Ed Seiber: We have, we have. And we'll continue to do that. For example, one of my partners lives with her family 70 miles east of here, so they moved out there a number of years ago because of her husband's job. And they really love the lifestyle out there. They live on 25 acres, and their two children grew up there.

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And Stacey decided early on that she still wanted to work with us, and so we said, okay, let's do what it takes to work remotely when you want to and then come in when you want to. And I have to hand it to her, she's commuted in at least three days a week for...

Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

Ed Seiber: On a good day it could be an hour if there's no traffic, but on the bad days it could easily be two hours depending on situations along I-20. So she has set up remote work a couple days a week, and we've always been flexible with that.

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We were fortunate in that we were able to transition to a work-from-home model when we were moving out of our old office into our new office here, because we had five weeks where we were without a home. So we took the servers and put them in my home office and actually managed quite well during that period. So we had pretty good practice for that. And we were so glad to be able to move in here and to get settled, and then, two weeks later, go back home again. So we knew the drill. We knew what we had to do. And I'm pretty sure that we're going to—even with the vaccine widely distributed—that we're going to continue to take advantage of flexibility in working from home.

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Some of us will continue to do that, whether it's full time or part time, or come into the office on an as-needed basis for meetings or for brainstorming sessions or collaborative efforts, whatever. But that's just the flexibility that we can offer. And I think you're going to see that industry-wide and business-wide, especially in people who have to work in high-rise, densely populated office environments. On the other hand, I think there are gonna be people like me who really like to have a separation between home and work and look forward to being out of the house and coming to the office and interacting with colleagues and clients in this setting. And it's a setting that we truly—we love. We love being over here.

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We're part of another creative community, which we were previously in the Virginia Highland neighborhood on a much smaller basis. But here at the MET, I think they've got just over a million square feet total. And there's still quite a bit of empty space and transitioning space here.

So we will see. It's exciting. We like being here in Southwest Atlanta where there is just a lot of momentum for creative endeavors.

Diana Dombrowski: It sounds like you feel hopeful about the future.

Ed Seiber: No. I think we—as architects and designers, we tend to be optimistic people to begin with.

Diana Dombrowski: I understand.

Ed Seiber: At least, I tend **to**.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. So thinking about the next year, knowing that it's impossible to predict but still trying to get some sort of plan together for your business and for your clients, what do you think the next year looks like for all of you?

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Ed Seiber: I think it's going to be more of the same, probably for, I would say, at least half a year. But we've adapted to it and we will have project work that will be continuing. We've got several great potential projects in the works. It's interesting, Diana, because we had a period where we were getting no requests for proposals or very few. And we were able to subsist on our ongoing work. And, of course, we took advantage of the P.P.P. Program back in the spring. And we hope to do the same early next year when the second phase comes into operation.

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But then, sometime around mid to late fall, we started getting a lot of requests for proposals for restaurant projects, for other types of projects. And while we haven't secured all of those, we've had a few that have started up and we're beginning to see glimmers of entrepreneurial activity

again. In fact, we've got some meetings next week on a really great potential project that is sort of a combination of agriculture, hospitality, and production. So we're looking forward to that. Maybe we'll be able to make an announcement about that before too much longer. You know, it's interesting.

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We've always worked in multiple states because our client base in the past has been restaurant groups that had locations all over the Southeast and sometimes out of the Southeast. But it seems like recently, over the last few years, our focus has become more Metro Atlanta and State of Georgia. We still have requests, every now and then, for out-of-state projects, but it's been really interesting to really feel that we're a part of a community again here, especially in the city of Atlanta and in the surrounding suburban areas. And we're seeing a lot of focus on the suburbs these days, I think maybe because people believe that the suburbs are a bit safer due to being able to spread out more.

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And people are working from home so those people who were commuting into the Midtown and Downtown areas now are working remotely and taking advantage of the neighborhoods where they live and things like that. But even here in Adair Park, West End, and Mechanicsville, the neighborhoods immediately around the MET, we're seeing a lot of potential activity and restaurant clients who are looking to start out with maybe a to-go and delivery model and then transition back again to in-facility dining and becoming part of a community. But we're also seeing interest in food truck parks and things like that.

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People are starting to pursue some dreams that they've had and are starting to say, how can we take advantage of the circumstances now and try to provide something that the community will embrace and support? And I think that's the other thing, is that we're all trying to support each other.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: We're trying to order food for pickup or delivery from our clients. We're trying to support our friends who have supported us at Wholesome Wave Georgia in the past by contributing their time and their talents to our fundraisers, our friends in the restaurant and the bar industry who have stood by us. And now we're trying to individually stand by them when we can to go drop in every now and then and see them through the plexiglass or behind the mask, and even stand and have a drink while we wait for our to-go food.

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So it's just important that we do that, and we make those small steps to be with each other in whatever way we can.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That makes me curious, too, having lived and worked in Atlanta for these several decades, and especially working in this field, can you think of a time of similar disruption when people needed to be flexible and make these changes so quickly? Or was there maybe a time period recovering from a recession or some kind of economic **turn** that gave you insight when you were maybe hunkering down during this period?

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Yeah. The only thing that even comes close would be the Great Recession.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay.

Ed Seiber: And that hit us hard as a firm, as a business. It hit a lot of our clients in the restaurant industry very hard. And we did have to hunker down then.

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We had to—just like we have now, we've reduced our salaries, we've reduced our fixed costs whenever possible. We had to do the same then. We had to lay people off then, and that—for a small firm like ours, that was heart-wrenching. It was really tough. And we had to hang on then. I was fortunate that I had some family backing that allowed us to weather that storm. And I think those lessons toughened us up quite a bit so that when this hit, we felt like, okay, we can take this, we can take this.

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We didn't realize how much we would have to take and for how long, but we've had other means of support this time. But I think that was a similar situation, although this time it's just inherently different because it's beyond anybody's control. We can't blame it on a housing boom and bust cycle. We can't blame it on people buying properties and selling properties and flipping properties and things like that in quite the same way.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's not isolated to one neighborhood.

Ed Seiber: No, it's not. It's not. It's not isolated to one industry. Although it does seem like the restaurant and hospitality and travel industries have suffered more than others. Now, I'll say that we in our profession are very, very fortunate because we have a model of practice that allows us to work from home for the most part.

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Diana Dombrowski: Right.

Ed Seiber: And we have the technology at our disposal to be able to do that, whereas lots of other people don't. And especially people that work as restaurant servers or chefs, front of house, back of house people, delivery drivers, I mean, they have to put themselves out there every day just like healthcare workers and other essential workers. And some of them don't have the means to do otherwise. You know, in a lot of ways we feel very fortunate, and that's why it's been really good to serve on the board of Wholesome Wave Georgia to realize that we can make a difference in people's lives who don't have the benefits and the wherewithal that the rest of us do.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

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I can imagine that gives you a very unique and detailed insight into the livelihoods of a huge number of people in Atlanta and how they've been **affected**.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And some of my friends and some clients have had to deal with their personal health issues with COVID-19.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: And we have done a lot of work recently at the Atlanta Airport. And that's where the immediate impact of the pandemic first hit home for us. Projects canceled, put on hold, disrupted business for a lot of our clients, and several clients had COVID-19 very early on because of their exposures at the Atlanta Airport.

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And I think, at that point, we said, well, that's unfortunate. They were a very vulnerable segment of the population. But then it became more widespread with other friends in the restaurant industry who also contracted the virus, and dear friends of mine who contracted the virus doing just what they have to do to support their businesses and their families and things like that. And, fortunately, no seemingly long-lasting effects, but who knows? We'll see what happens. We don't exactly know what the long-term effects are.

Diana Dombrowski: No.

Ed Seiber: No.

Diana Dombrowski: Right.

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For that reason and some others, I will say that the interviews we're collecting now are going to be public not until about 2022, just so that we're all able to reflect in a certain way and contextualize, because the scope of this is so enormous in a lot of ways.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: It's not just food, it's people's health and financial security and safety in a lot of ways. So we want to make sure that we're able to do all of that justice when we do open up the interviews to the public.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. I think it helps. Interviews like this help not just to articulate things but get things off my chest. And one of the things that we've had to deal with as a small firm and also

with a wider network of our clients and friends is, how do you deal with the uncertainty? How do you deal with the anxiety? How do you deal with the stress?

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And I know that we've had conversations among my colleagues and myself about, do we have jobs? What can we deal with?

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Ed Seiber: Can we afford to make a cut in what we pay ourselves and still get by? And we've all had to deal with that. So I think what we try to do is be as transparent and as open as possible, and to talk and share our concerns and our ideas and comfort, those sorts of things. I've probably never read as much as I have this year. I've always been an avid reader because of my background in literature, but that's been very helpful. And one friend who is in the restaurant and bar business also has a literature background.

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So one of the things I really look forward to when I visit with him and I pick up to-go food and have a drink while I'm waiting for the food is to say, what are you reading, what are you reading? And so we've been able to share in that sense. So that's been a bond of sorts. And other friends—I've been in touch with college buddies who I haven't seen in person in a number of years and we're doing the same thing, what are you reading? What are you listening to? What music can you recommend? What movies are you watching? Those sorts of things.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Normalcy. Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Diana Dombrowski: Thanks for your time. Thank you.

Ed Seiber: Thank you. It's a pleasure to see you in person and to talk with you, and I look forward to our next interview on the other side.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely.

Ed Seiber: Whenever that is.

Diana Dombrowski: Definitely.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

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Diana Dombrowski: And now and then, our hope is to—my hope is to stay connected with you and all the interviews in the project with updates about other universities S.F.A. is going to be partnering with who are doing similar types of documentary work. So hopefully this is going to be part of a network of other scholars and archives who are trying to document this time. So it's been a really unique thing because we're used to doing such a reflective interview where a lot of time has passed.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: But there's so many details in this moment that we want to make sure are captured per month, per week, per season. And then also allow that more reflective time after we've all got a little bit of distance.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And so it's very unique for us, as well, on this side.

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And it's also gonna be really nice to stay in contact, too, as things change. So we're doing things a little differently ourselves on this end.

Ed Seiber: So normally would you do these interviews in person?

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely.

Ed Seiber: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely, yeah.

Ed Seiber: Well, I hope that we'll be able to do that next time in person, and perhaps you can visit us here in Atlanta in our studio.

Diana Dombrowski: That'd be great.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I'd love that.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. So are you a freelancer or are you working with an organization or—

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. So my day job is in organic agriculture. I work for an organic certifier. And I work with the Southern Foodways Alliance on a contract basis. So, Annemarie, the oral historian at SFA, and I know each other from our time at the University of Florida. We both worked for the same oral history program there.

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Ed Seiber: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: So that was my full-time focus for maybe four or five years, and so that's how I got to know her and we're staying connected through this work now. Usually I transcribe interviews, because travel isn't as easy for me with the job that I currently have.

Ed Seiber: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: And so COVID's really opened up a great opportunity for me to interview again in a totally unexpected way, so that's what we're...

Ed Seiber: So, do you—and let me ask you a few questions that you asked me. Where did you grow up?

Diana Dombrowski: I grew up in Orlando, Florida, and I lived in Gainesville for ten years. I went to the University of Florida and then stayed there about six years working for the university and doing oral history. Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Right, right. So do you get out with your day job? Do you actually go to farms and . . . ?

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Diana Dombrowski: No. I'm not. No, no, I'm not. I'm in the office and I work with new clients who are coming onboard. And I work on organizing the annual updates that are coming in from clients.

Ed Seiber: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: So, yeah. It's very—

Ed Seiber: Do you get outside at all?

Diana Dombrowski: Yes, thank goodness! Yes. I've been so glad, honestly, to have—I don't know, I've always been a kind of outdoorsy person.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I appreciated it so much more as, like, the refuge to be with people and connect with people in a healthy way during this time.

Ed Seiber: Yeah, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And it's really been something. So I grew up in Florida. I lived there twenty years. And I started graduate school in California, put that on pause, and moved where my family actually is from for many generations, which is Central Pennsylvania.

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So I work in Amish Country right now.

Ed Seiber: Ah!

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Lancaster?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. So near Lancaster and right—that's a primary place for all of our clients, and then here in the middle of the state. We're right in between Pittsburgh and Philly in PA.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And there's a lot of Amish folks here, too. They're the majority of our clients. So we've got a lot of snow, so I'm going to learn how to ski and do those sort of things that would never happen.

Ed Seiber: Yeah. I've got dear friends that live in Montana, in Whitefish, Montana.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow!

Ed Seiber: And I usually go out there at least once a year. We designed the house for them that they live in.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Ed Seiber: And I haven't downhill skied in three or four years, but they were trying to lure me out several times this year. I'm still hoping I can go this winter and cross-country ski and perhaps snowshoe. So, anyway—

Diana Dombrowski: No, I understand.

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It's really important to me to come back to Florida at least once a year, and that's clearly had to be on hold.

Ed Seiber: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I've been every New Years for, I think, going on years and never miss it.

Ed Seiber: [Laughter] Yeah. New Year's Eve tonight's going to be unique, to say the least.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. Definitely.

Ed Seiber: I'll be at home. I guess I'll have to drink some champagne myself but, you know, whatever.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And **toast** to, on New Year, a new and different year. Yeah.

Ed Seiber: Yeah, yeah. Well, on that note, happy New Year to you.

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you.

Ed Seiber: And wishing you and all of us the best of 2021.

Diana Dombrowski: Yes.

Ed Seiber: So we'll see.

Diana Dombrowski: Yes. Thanks again for your time.

Ed Seiber: Sure. You're welcome. My pleasure. All right. Bye.

Diana Dombrowski: Take care.

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