



Susan Desmond

Wholesome Wave Georgia

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Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. Today is February 8th, 2021. This is Diana Dombrowski with the Southern Foodways Alliance recording with Susan. Susan, could you please tell us how to pronounce and spell your name?

Susan Desmond: It's Susan Desmond, S-u-s-a-n D-e-s-m-o-n-d.

Diana Dombrowski: All right. And when and where were you born?

Susan Desmond: I was born in Detroit, Michigan in the late [19]70s.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. Okay. [Laughter] All right.

Susan Desmond: Close enough?

Diana Dombrowski: Yes. And what brought you all the way from Detroit to Georgia to work with Wholesome Wave?

Susan Desmond: Oh, as most people, it was definitely not a straight shot. After graduating college, I was a ski bum in Colorado for a little while, then I worked in a nonprofit out in California for a number of years.

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I actually worked with people with disabilities for a long time just because my mother was a special ed teacher and I was just drawn to work with people with disabilities. Things happened. Life happened. I ended up in Atlanta. My parents had retired to Tennessee. We had some loss. My sister passed away and I didn't want to be so far away from them. A three-and-a-half-hour

flight just felt so much at that time that I looked at the map-- they were moving to a town called Crossville, Tennessee. And I just made a decision looking at metropolitan areas-- I'm not a rural person. I'm more of a city person. And I looked at Nashville and I looked at Atlanta, and Atlanta won out based on proximity and just the culture and things to do in Atlanta. So that's how I ended up here. As far as how I probably ended up at Wholesome Wave Georgia, I had been working in food-- let's call it food rescue-- for a number of years, and that's where you're getting food that is not good enough to sell from, like, Whole Foods, all the different grocery stores, from restaurants.

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So, basically, food that's going to get thrown into a landfill or hopefully get put into a landfill, or hopefully maybe get composted, but, instead, we were rescuing that food. We rescued around two million pounds of food, and it would go immediately into food pantries or community meal programs all across the metropolitan Atlanta area. And it was really fulfilling, but there was a part of me that felt like that was just the very end of the food supply, and I really wanted to work with an organization that was at the beginning of the food supply. And I believe, like, SNAP, you have more power to really change food access. And so, since we'd worked so much with SNAP, those two things were just important to me. And then, again, personally, I am--I don't know, but everyone who I work with says that I'm an avid gardener.

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I really enjoy gardening and I grow all kinds of things, so the opportunity to get to know our local farmers and work really with the local farmers has just been wonderful, 'cause I have all

these wonderful teachers. And when something's weird on my vegetables, I'm, like, hey, what do you do for this? And so it's just an extra little perk of working with Wholesome Wave Georgia.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, that's really nice. I love that it helps in every way, so you can take some of it home, but not in a--

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --way that's like a burden, it's like a boon.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's really nice. Yeah. And when it comes to 2020, if we think about, say, this time last year, what did you think the year ahead was gonna look like? What were your plans or maybe your goals?

Susan Desmond: Professionally?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. So professionally, we were an organization that had gone through-- I'm sure you know we had some turnover in the organization.

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And 2020 was going to be like a rebuilding year. I had very large, lofty goals for fundraising and for the events that we were gonna host. I am just such a proponent that food is love, and that is a big part of kind of what I talk about a lot with the organization. 'Cause to me, when someone comes into your home, you feed people. And so we were gonna do community meal programs where we partnered with a farmer and maybe we partnered with Riverview or one of our great

producers for protein, and we put out some meals to showcase our chefs, our local food scene at, like, a senior center, and talk about food access. And I wanted to do these events, and we were planning for Picnic in the Park at this time last year. And we were doing it totally different where it was gonna be a big community block party in one of our local neighborhoods here and bringing together all these new restaurants.

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And we were so excited, and ... womp, womp. I mean, I can remember being on the phone in March, the event was April 26th, and being, like, well, it's outside; do you think we're gonna be able to host this event in April? And we were, like, well, let's wait another week to call it. Little did we know that that was just a pipe dream. So I was sitting with just lots of plans of how to maybe restructure the organization and just different things we could put our hands on as an organization. So, yeah, it's a brand-new year. I was in a very optimistic place at this time last year.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. And I think that I've certainly felt the same way. I think everyone I spoke to felt the same way because different new diseases like SARS and other more novel things had popped up--

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --and just moved along, and it was barely a blip really.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

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Diana Dombrowski: So when do you think you started to realize COVID was gonna stick around, was gonna have a deeper impact than those other times?

Susan Desmond: So, honestly, I really think the first few weeks. March 12th for us is when our life changed 'cause that's when my children's school was, like, eh, no more school. 'Cause we'd been hearing about it, but it was just that turning point where it was this thing that there were some cases in Seattle, and we just started hearing a little bit about it. And then it was like the reality hit really hard 'cause our children are home, now you have to work from home, and good luck, right? And then it went from no one wearing masks because masks don't really protect you and blah, blah, blah, to me getting out my sewing machine and making masks, right?

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But when I realized it wasn't going away probably wasn't until, I want to say, like, mid-April. And I would say that because it just, in our head, was like, oh, it's just gonna be eight weeks. We've got this. We live in the United States of America. We are taught this false sense of superiority or this false sense of we've got this, we can handle this. And I would say around April, with just so much misinformation and things escalating, the counts going up so much, it was, like, okay, this isn't changing anytime soon. And we've been adapting all along, I feel like every day. First it was toilet paper, remember? [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

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Susan Desmond: Remember, a year ago, thirteen months ago it was, like, oh, man, there's no bleach wipes, there's no bleach.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. So it's just been a weird year.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. People were sanitizing their food, wiping it down.

Susan Desmond: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: No one was really sure. You're doing what you could. And with kids at home, how were you able to balance that, would you say, or try to balance? [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: Yeah. So my children are young.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Susan Desmond: They're two and four. So it's not as if you can just say, hey, go read a book; hey, sit at the computer and do your homework, whatnot. They actively need you. So my husband and I would just split the day. I would get up early and I would start work around, like, seven, and I'd work to about seven to twelve, and he would be with the kids. And then I would take over and be with them the rest of the afternoon, and we just tried to schedule our days that way. It sort of worked. [Laughter]

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You just sort of muddled through and figured it out. Eventually, we were able to get some childcare and had someone come in and just sort of take care of them. We were really fortunate that we were able to do that 'cause so many people were not able to.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: So mid-June our world changed because we then got childcare.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: It's really dramatic when you have two little ones who don't understand.

Diana Dombrowski: No. They need, they constantly need. Yeah. Absolutely. Wow. That sounds really super challenging. Even if it was, for that period, so demanding, were you kind of in, would you say, like, survival mode?

Susan Desmond: Oh, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: Oh.

Diana Dombrowski: Or were you planning to take care of yourself in different ways, or just getting to the end of it? Yeah.

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Susan Desmond: There's a thing where moms just sort of take on more burden, and that's just sort of-- I don't think it maybe is the case for every family, but it's the case for my family. And it was just exhausting. And I'm not gonna lie, there was a lot of wine consumed during that period of time, 'cause there was anxiety, not knowing what's going to go on. Just worrying. So then there's the guilt of putting your children who, up until this point you really didn't let watch very much television, they don't have tablets or anything, and plopping the kids down in front of the television 'cause you just needed to get things done. So there was just a lot of guilt. And then, my children's birthdays-- and all she wanted was this birthday party and not being able to do it. So those things wrapped up.

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But the one real benefit is, because I am such a gardener, I did get to spend a lot of time with them planting, and last year, 'cause they helped me, seeds were sort of all over the place. We had some random romaine growing. It was fun, but my garden was really great because I was there, I was watching all day long. I could cover things if I needed to and just really keep a good eye on it. And they were really involved in that, so it was kind of nice.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That's really cool. I've found with a lot of people that looking for a silver lining, however small, is really the key to staying resilient over this long term. Yeah.

Susan Desmond: Oh, yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And when it comes to work, I know that everything is happening over a screen, too.

Susan Desmond: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: So what was that adjustment like for you and for people you worked with, do you think?

Susan Desmond: So with Wholesome Wave Georgia, we are a pretty collaborative group, and oftentimes we eat lunch together, a lot of conversations and ideas are shared during that time.

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Often, I'm one of those people, I pop up out of my seat and go walk to someone else's door to ask them a question, 'cause you get tired of emailing and I like the person-to-person just dialogue,

getting to really share with your coworkers and understand where they are. So I would say it was challenging because we are such a small team, and we do a lot of sharing. And during that time period, we had a staff member who had been with us for a long time, she left and went into the Air Force as one of the two public health officers for the United States.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Susan Desmond: So that was a big transition and wonderful, but we had to onboard a new staff member. In fact, we've brought on, like, three new staff members during COVID, so it's all been like this, and that's just really-- it's strange but it's okay.

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Like, I do feel as if we have relationships with them, and I feel good about the process, but it was very strange to have to start people over Zoom.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. I can imagine. And wanting to at least be around them sometime, or have a date when you can see, we'll be around you this time. Yeah.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That's really hard.

Susan Desmond: I will say, one thing that we did do as a group, when the weather was warm, we were still-- we're really big on company culture, organizational culture-- is we would have potlucks. We have a monthly potluck where we would, depending usually determined by, like, birthday, but one staff member would get to pick the theme and then we'd all bring in food related to that theme. And it's just a lovely tradition, and I really think it adds to the comfortable, real lovely environment we have there. But that went away, but we decided to start it back up.

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And so we would do them outside, actually on my back deck. And so we did that up until November when it got too cold. And so we haven't been able to reconvene, but we plan on it as it warms back up.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, that's nice.

Susan Desmond: Yeah, it is very nice. So that was the one little thing that we were able to maintain.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. And when it comes to working with the public, with all these programming ideas and plans, what was it like to shift gears or postpone what you were doing in that way?

Susan Desmond: So for I would say probably one of the more challenging aspects is the farmers' markets, getting them online. Unfortunately, not all of our markets did open last year because of COVID concerns and just capacity challenges. And it costs money to create hand-washing stations and to get enough hand sanitizers and the signs that you need and even just having people there to maintain, like, hey, you need to wash your hands.

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There is a cost to COVID precautions. So not all of them opened. I would say some of the struggle was just getting to the organizations or the markets, getting them the stuff that they needed in order to open. As you probably know, SNAP is not something you can use online so a lot of our families-- a lot of the markets went to this online system, which was great, innovative for them, but some of our SNAP families that was a challenge. So we needed to work with the

markets and come up with a method for them to be able to swipe our families' EBT cards so they could double their benefits. And it was time consuming for everyone involved, but it was just really important to still have that benefit available. Yeah. And to be very honest, we work with the public in a somewhat minimal way. We're more the administrative side.

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Because of COVID, we did come up with a few things that we hadn't done before, something called Plant 2 Plate, which is where families can purchase plant starts with their EBT card, and then we were providing them the containers and soil and shovel and gloves to really encourage home gardening.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. It was an idea that came out of COVID, and it's been lovely, and it went over so well we're gonna continue it and actually really flush it into a program because people really like it. So we found that it's kind of a draw for families, for people with children especially, to come to a market and to use their benefits. And when we surveyed people last year-- don't quote me, which obviously you are--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter].

Susan Desmond: --but I want to say about 75 percent of the families who did show up for our Plant 2 Plate had never stepped foot in farmers' market and had never used their EBT for fruits and vegetables at the farmers' market.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Susan Desmond: Emme has all the statistics, but it turned out that this little-- and, again, it came out of the idea of, like, victory gardens which everyone was talking about.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: That let's do this on a much smaller idea because a lot of the families don't have the space to do a victory garden, but they might have a stoop to put a container. So it's just container gardening. But what we found it was really a great marketing tool for the farmers' markets for our families who use SNAP. So, because of that, we've sort of gone all in and we're doing it again this year. And we're doing it in more locations. We're going to do it around the state. I'm curious to see what happens, if that's the same thing, we see a lot of families who've never been to the farmers' market come out.

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So I'm really excited.

Diana Dombrowski: That's such a good idea. Yeah. It makes me think of when grocery stores give kids, like, little cookies, but the plants are so much more nourishing.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: And here's the other thing, I didn't know until having a conversation with someone from USDA, I didn't even know that you could do plant starts with an EBT card.

Diana Dombrowski: That's brand-new information.

Susan Desmond: Did you know that?

Diana Dombrowski: No. No.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I had no idea. Wow.

Susan Desmond: But you can. So not only were they using their EBT card, but we were doubling it, so it was 50 percent off for all of our families. And then we find, when you give people a little something-- so we gave them a plant-care guide and containers and the soil and all that-- people show up. And we're really trying to put together a way to follow the families. People like to take pictures of their food. I'm trying to get them engaged-- maybe we'll have to do a stipend with a couple families to sort of get it going-- but get people to really take pictures.

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'Cause seed transformation is pretty-- when you see a plant grow, it's a very visual medium, one, but it's empowering and there's just a sense of pride when you show off your beautiful tomato that you grew. So I'm trying to really create that connection to do some storytelling around it.

Diana Dombrowski: That's exciting. And I have a feeling that's just one of many stories where you-all figured out a way around the obstacle, got creative, and did something new. Because you're actually the final concluding interview that I've done for the project--

Susan Desmond: Oh.

Diana Dombrowski: --and I've been so impressed by each individual partner that Emme's connected me with. And I know that the strength of purpose that all these people have shared with me really points back to this hub that everyone's connected to at Wholesome Wave. And

even if everyone was busy in their corners figuring out what to do, being part of that Wholesome Wave network really made the food system they were a part of more resilient.

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That's really clear.

Susan Desmond: I hope so.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. What else do you--

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. So what we were curious about, I guess, and what we asked others is how your daily routine changed, which you've talked about a little, what kind of obstacles you faced, how the year looks different, and then looking ahead, what you see 2021 looking like for you and for your work?

Susan Desmond: I don't know about the obstacles. I mean, obviously, obstacles have been just not being able to leave the house.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: Being together and having to work.

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There's that life-work balance. And I think that COVID has really mixed that all up, and it's really challenging to have a good life-work balance when everybody is working from home, everybody's home all the time. We have these computers on us constantly.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: I would say that that's been challenging, 'cause I was better about separating things out when I would go to the office. And I was kind of one of those people that I really like to get my work done at the office because I need to focus, and I really try to be present with my kids. So this has been a challenge for me. And it still continues to be a challenge. The room I'm in right now is the one room the kids aren't really allowed to go in. And I've had to do that because living in chaos is really-- it is what it is, but I do a lot of the grant writing, in fact, I do all the grant writing for the organization, and a lot of the just writing in general.

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And I need to focus to do that. So, yeah, figuring that out, finally having to say, nope, you guys cannot come in this room, mommy's working. That was a challenge that I had to overcome. Also I'm in a sweat jacket and I'm in leggings, and my bike is right next to me, which is different. You know, getting up and getting dressed, I don't do that every day.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: I've definitely changed, and I feel bad about it, but, at the same time, you gotta do what you gotta do, right? I almost think I work more hours now than maybe I did before just because my office is here, and I don't have to leave at a certain time to go get the kids or I don't have quite the same amount of hard outs as maybe I had before when we were doing extracurricular activities and there was just more running around.

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So that's probably been a big change. For us as a family, farmers' market's our life. It's the one outing that we get to go to. I have young children. They touch everything, put their hands in their mouth.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: They're just children, right? So we don't go into stores. So going to the farmers' market and getting those interactions with the fiddlers who play and the different people who are just now part of their community has been really important and probably one of the things that kind of gets us through. Saturday it's, like, are we going to the farmers' market?

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Yes, we're going to the-- and almost like twice a weekend, sometimes we go on Saturday and on Sunday just because it's something that we can do that feels safe and feels some sort of sense of normalcy, I guess, for us as a family.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That's great.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. And I can hear my chickens right now 'cause I forgot to feed them this morning.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: They're fine. And then, for 2021, I don't know, I was more hopeful probably two weeks ago, maybe three weeks ago, than I am now. And the only reason why I say that is, you know, you're hearing about the vaccine numbers are so low.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: And in order for us to return to normalcy, we need it so much higher. So I'm a little disappointed that this isn't changing anytime soon. I have big plans. I want to do a nice, big freaking event for the organization with a couple hundred people and a big fundraiser.

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I don't know that even in October I'm gonna be able to do that because I just don't know what's gonna happen. And that's really terrible because fundraising events is one of the things we use to sort of supplement income, and our ability to do some of our programming coming from events.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: So I think I'm a little bit worried about that.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Have y'all applied for any of the PPP or are you eligible for that?

Susan Desmond: So we received it on the third round last time. So we're in a weird situation. We actually did better as a fundraising organization in some ways because we're food access and we're helping people get food and so we did really well with donations.

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On the other flip side, it's one of those weird things, we put out way more money into donations. And the PPP loan is based on revenue, not based on expenses. So even though we had more revenue last year, we also had more expenses. They're not taking the expense side into consideration, which maybe it will change, but as of right now we're not eligible for the second round, or for the new round.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: That sounds like--

Susan Desmond: Well, it's one of those things where I've called our legislators and I'm advocating that they need to look at the expenses, especially for organizations that work with the public and do food access or mental health or the things that are really needed right now.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And the thing with the PPP was it was really designed not for, okay, let's do this again in a year; okay, let's make sure this is something people rely on for the long term, but it was supposed to be a band-aid and a bridge that gets from one point to the next.

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Susan Desmond: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: So I'm curious, too, given Georgia flipping blue, which everyone is really excited about-- [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: Yeah. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: --how you feel that might impact what you-all do in the future?

Susan Desmond: So I don't know. It was really interesting, 'cause the ag secretary was from Georgia. Sonny Perdue was our former governor.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: And I thought that we might have more-- when they were trying to change the rules on EBT use, being able to use it online, I thought maybe we were gonna be able to

benefit from Sonny Perdue being from Georgia, but it really didn't work out that way for us, at least not in my opinion.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

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Susan Desmond: So I am hopeful that things may change, and funds might loosen up.

Raphael Warnock just got appointed to the ag committee, so having a senator that's on the ag committee is a big deal. Both of our senators are getting a lot of traction, so those are things that I'm really hopeful for. I don't know. With the fact that the USDA moved to Kansas City and it's still really confusing; I don't know what's gonna happen. But I will tell you, I'm very aware who sits on what committee and make phone calls as needed. Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

Susan Desmond: So I'm aware of what I can do for advocacy, I guess.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And more is possible now than even just two months ago for sure.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. So I'm optimistic around that.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. Good. All right. Those are primarily my questions.

Susan Desmond: Okay.

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Diana Dombrowski: Because the point of the interview was to get a snapshot in time and then follow up once we're either primarily vaccinated and mandates are lifted, or in a year if, God forbid, we're still in the same situation.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: But let's not even speak that into existence and just plan to follow up.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: 'Cause that provides more chance for long-term reflection, and right now people are really-- they're getting through the day and the week. And capturing the details of that is what we really wanted to do in this instance together.

Susan Desmond: All right.

Diana Dombrowski: So thank you.

Susan Desmond: Thank you.

Diana Dombrowski: Is there anything else you'd like people to know about your experience working during COVID?

Susan Desmond: No, not really.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Susan Desmond: It's just been a marathon. When we started this out, I thought it was just gonna be a sprint.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Susan Desmond: But this has just turned into such a marathon, and now it's like an Iron Man. It's just never-ending is sort of how it feels right now as a family.

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And, again, had you said this to me-- what is it, February 8th-- last year February 8th, I wouldn't have believed you.

Diana Dombrowski: No way. In living memory, it's just not something any of us have a touchstone for. Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Desmond: And the only other thing I will say is I'm so fortunate-- and I don't want to be one of those "I'm so blessed," 'cause I find that obnoxious-- but I'm really fortunate that I do work for an organization that is really flexible and that my work is still needed during this time, and I haven't been one of the millions of people that have had to rely on the services that we work to provide or unemployment. So, yeah, I feel really lucky that I can't even complain about work being at home and all that.

Diana Dombrowski: I understand, yeah.

Susan Desmond: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Well, I'm happy for you, too. I hope the spring and the summer bring you as many events as are safe and lucrative for you. [Laughter]

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Susan Desmond: Yeah. Yeah. Otherwise, it's just me begging large funders for money, which is okay. I like to diversify our funding stream, though.

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely. Good luck with that, too. Okay.

Susan Desmond: Yeah. Thank you.

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you. So I'll stop the recording.

[End]