**Katherine Wilkin**
**Roanoke, VA**
***

Date: July 2, 2020
Location: Remote Interview in Blacksburg, VA and Roanoke, VA
Interviewer: Jessica Taylor
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 32 minutes
Project: COVID-19 and Foodways

00:00:01

Jessica Taylor: Okay; we are recording again. And Katherine, can you please state your name and when and where you were born again?

00:00:09

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah; so, my name is Katherine Wilkin. I was actually born in Richmond in 1995.

00:00:16

Jessica Taylor: Okay, great. [Laughter] And what brought you to Roanoke?

00:00:21

Katherine Wilkin: So, my family moved to Roanoke when I was going into the second grade, so we moved for my dad's job.

00:00:27

Jessica Taylor: Okay, okay. And what has been your occupation in Roanoke?

00:00:34

Katherine Wilkin: For the past almost three years now—it'll be three years in October—I have worked for the small grassroots coalition called Protect Our Water Heritage Rights.

00:00:48

Jessica Taylor: And what do you do for them?

00:00:51

Katherine Wilkin: So, I'm the coordinator and that whole organization is primarily focused on fighting the Mountain Valley Pipeline. So, I have worn a lot of different hats there. [Laughter] So I do communications work. I do administrative work. I also spend half of my time on our Mountain Valley Watch Monitoring Program for construction monitoring.

00:01:17

Jessica Taylor: Okay, that's great. And what are some of your earliest memories of Roanoke?

00:01:23

Katherine Wilkin: Oh gosh. I think my first memory of Roanoke was when my dad moved about a year before we did, so I think it was, we came to visit him and we stayed in the Hotel Roanoke and it was this big deal because we like ordered in room service and we were like watching movies with him [Laughter] which didn't happen that often. So that was pretty cool. We did the whole like downtown Roanoke Star circuit. So yeah, that was like 2001, I think.

00:02:00

Jessica Taylor: That's wonderful. So how did you get involved in organizing?

00:02:05

Katherine Wilkin: It wasn't the track that I really saw for myself right out of graduation. I graduated from UVA in 2017. But I wanted to go into environmental law and was talking to my partner's mom, who his parents live on Bent Mountain and they're impacted by the pipeline, so she recommended that I talk to another person who lives up there, Roberta Bondurant, who was a criminal defense attorney for a long time, but she's retired from that now and spends most of her time with POWHR. So, I sat down to coffee with her for a couple hours just to talk about her law school experience and how she has become acquainted with environmental law. And after we talked for a while she was like, "So, I actually work with this organization that fighting the pipeline and if you want to apply for this position that we're opening up that would be awesome, but like no pressure." So, I applied and that's how I got into it. [Laughter]

00:03:10

Jessica Taylor: Cool. So, what's been your experience with restaurants and food service in Roanoke? Like why are you working on this specifically? What's your background in it?

00:03:23

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah so, my first job was actually in a restaurant. I started working at a place called Wildwood Smokehouse when I was seventeen years old, I guess. It was my last year of high school. And I worked there for I guess almost a year, maybe a little under. And then when I moved to Charlottesville for school after my first year I got back into restaurants, did some bartending, worked at a vineyard. Then when I came back, [Laughter] after I graduated, I actually started working at Local Roots for several months before I started working with POWHR.

00:04:03

Jessica Taylor: Oh wow, okay. So, what is Local Roots?

00:04:07

Katherine Wilkin: It's a farm-to-table restaurant in the Grandin area.

00:04:12

Jessica Taylor: Okay.

00:04:14

Katherine Wilkin: Uh-hm.

00:04:14

Jessica Taylor: Great. So, you've worked in local food for a while?

00:04:17

Katherine Wilkin: Uh-hm, yeah and a lot of my friends and family are in it, too. My partner actually still works at Local Roots.

00:04:23

Jessica Taylor: Okay. How would you describe the local food scene in Roanoke?

00:04:29

Katherine Wilkin: It's very… [Laughter] It kind of exists in like these cool little pockets. So in the Grandin, South Roanoke, Wasena area there is a big focus on sourcing things locally and just bringing in high-quality ingredients from nearby farmers that are practicing a lot of more sustainable farming practices and doing the best things they can with those ingredients. There's also a really cool-- I've only sort of recently become acquainted with it; I wish I had sooner-- but over on Williamson, I guess on the north side of town is where a lot of the best like non-Eurocentric foods are, so there's like a really amazing Vietnamese place up there, the best tacos in town are up there. It's pretty fascinating. [Laughter] And then there's a lot of it dispersed throughout town. There's a lot more like small family-run places and typical chains, too.

00:05:50

Jessica Taylor: So how would you describe some of the challenges that food service folks face in normal times, like before this happened?

00:06:01

Katherine Wilkin: I would say one of the biggest things is unpredictable wages, because you don't have a consistent paycheck necessarily. I think it's still the same, but when I was serving, I was making $2.13 an hour and most of that would go to taxes on my tips. So, there were a lot of times that I just wouldn't get a paycheck. So if you just have a bad couple of weeks or something, like not a lot of business or you had a bad day and it reflected in your service and you didn't get as many tips, then it's hard to budget that and it's hard to know if you're going to continue to have that consistent income. There's also a lot of turnover in the restaurant industry,

which is on the one hand nice because there's always-- like it's an applicable skill anywhere, so if you move or for some reason need to leave the place that you're working at and find a new place, it's pretty easy to do so. But on the flipside, you can kind of be let go for anything. [Laughter]

00:07:18

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, definitely. So, when did you start to think that COVID might be a problem for food service folks?

00:07:30

Katherine Wilkin: I started to suspect it in early March but when I actually realized that it was going to be huge, it was March 15. I was in Charlottesville at like this little cabin that we had rented up there for the UVA Law School's Accepted Students Weekend. And we got there, like got all situated and started cooking dinner, and my partner got a call from the general manager at the restaurant that he works at saying, "Hey, we're going to take-out only. And we need to figure out the logistics of that." And because he's the Executive Chef he was like, "Well, I'm not going to throw everyone into that with me not being there." So, we ended up packing up our things and going back first thing the next morning so that he could handle everything that was going on with that.

00:08:34

Jessica Taylor: Katherine are you frozen? Jessica, is she frozen to you? [*Off Mic Conversation*]

00:08:44

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, I think it's coming from my end.

00:08:48

Jessica Brabble: [*Off Mic Conversation*]

00:09:01

Katherine Wilkin: So yeah, we came back the next morning and he was kind of preparing to make this transition to new hours, lower staff, different menu items, different organization of the menu because they used to have a separate lunch and dinner menu, and for a while during the virus they weren't running that. They were running just one menu all day. Yeah, March 15 is when [Laughter] it really started to feel kind of like an *oh-shit* moment, I guess.

00:09:38

Jessica Taylor: Uh-hm. What were the folks around you in food service experiencing beyond Local Roots? Like, did you notice people—how were people adapting to getting hours cut basically and having like a shift in what their everyday looked like?

00:09:59

Katherine Wilkin: People started to get stir-crazy really fast. For a lot of folks that I'm friends with, they were either completely laid off, no hours or anything, or they were maybe working one day a week, if where they were had a need for front-of-house people. There were a couple of exceptions to that. I know there was one restaurant in town that from the beginning seemed to do

a pretty good job of keeping their front-of-house people rotating and still working as much as they could. But yeah, a lot of people took up new hobbies [Laughter]. A lot of people did a lot of hiking, which we're fortunate to live in an area that that's an option. But yeah, I think it made a lot of people reassess whether they wanted to stay in the industry.

00:11:05

Jessica Taylor: Do you have a sense of how Roanoke might be different from other areas in this way, like how it might be different from Richmond, for example, or elsewhere in Appalachia?

00:11:20

Katherine Wilkin: I'll start with elsewhere in Appalachia. I think one big difference there would be Roanoke does have a really big up-and-coming food scene. A lot of new higher-end, locally-owned restaurants have been seeing a lot of success in the past couple of years here and places are continuing to expand. Whereas if you were to go to like a very small town in Appalachia there are just a handful of restaurants; it's not a big employer for the area. And I don't actually have any sort of statistics for Roanoke about how many people are in food service, but from my very biased pocket it does seem to be a lot. [Laughter] As far as differences from Richmond, I think our food scene is kind of moving in that direction, in the direction of like Charlottesville and Richmond, where it is becoming a bigger thing…because I moved so early, I don't actually have a lot of communication with a lot of people in Richmond that are my age. And I know that in a lot of places, restaurant workers tend to skew younger. I would suspect that there were possibly some differences because Richmond is a bit more like college-centric in some ways. In Roanoke, I mean, we have Roanoke College and we have Hollins, but aside from that and the

community college, it is a very like long-term community I guess. Like people move here and stay here and have families here. And I know they do in Richmond, too of course, but you do have more of an influx of college students with bigger schools. So a lot of the people that were laid off when restaurants started to close or change hours, they're people who like, that is their primary source of income, something they've been doing for a long time, as opposed to like, they were just doing it for a summer or they have been doing it part-time and they're also students or something like that.

00:13:41

Jessica Taylor: Hmm. Do you have a sense of how beyond the Tip Jar folks were helping each other out? And yeah, just any kind of sense of mutual aid beyond what you set up in Roanoke?

00:14:03

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, a friend of mine actually put together an additional Google Doc that had compiled a lot of mutual aid resources for the Roanoke area. And she did the same thing for the NRV which is where she's based. But I know the United Way was doing a lot. I didn't see a lot about rent assistance, just the emails that I got through my landlord about how they were handling that. But yeah, I do know from firsthand like people were cooking each other meals and helping buy groceries and gas money and that sort of thing.

00:14:49

Jessica Taylor: How was that being communicated, like for groceries and gas money and things like that? Like was it within the specific restaurant, like over text, or was it like broader?

00:15:02

Katherine Wilkin: For me it was mostly word-of-mouth, like people who knew people that needed help were willing to step up and help them. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that there was a larger network, but I wasn't a witness to it, I guess.

00:15:17

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Jessica, did you want to ask some stuff or do you want me to keep going?

00:15:26

Jessica Brabble: I can go. So, when did you first get the idea of the Tip Jar?

00:15:31

Katherine Wilkin: I want to say it was mid-April. I could double check that date. But I don't know that it's—it might freeze up my computer if I try [Laughter] right now. But it was around mid-April. One of my supervisors at my job actually started the Blacksburg and New River Valley—the Southwest Virginia Tip Jar is what he called it. And I started talking to some of my friends here about it and they were asking if they could put it out on their social media and have people from Roanoke sign up. I asked my supervisor and he was like, "Well, there's already a lot of people on it and it's getting a little hard to manage. But if you know someone who would want to make one for Roanoke then I'm happy to share resources." And I was like, "Okay, I guess I'll do that." [Laughter] So that's kind of how it started on my end of things.

00:16:30

Jessica Brabble: And it's something that we've seen a lot with like bigger cities. So how did you adapt this idea from like a city-based system to Appalachia?

00:16:42

Katherine Wilkin: It was still—Roanoke is all things considered, a pretty big city in Appalachia, which made it easy to adapt. I actually kind of just copied the resources from the group that did the Pittsburgh Virtual Tip Jar. They put out templates on their website for people to use, which was super helpful. One thing that was a little bit difficult though, is even though Roanoke is a fairly sizable city, given its location it's also very spread out. And the surrounding areas are very connected to Roanoke. So we would end up with people from like an hour away that would put their name on the Tip Jar list or people who worked in both Blacksburg, Christiansburg area, and in Roanoke and would put their names on both. So, finding where to draw the line with that was tough. What I ended up doing was, if I could find a Tip Jar that was closer to them then I would try to contact them and let them know to sign up for that one instead. But I think that only happened once, like someone from Charlottesville happened to sign up. So, for the most part, I just kind of let people stay on the list and mostly only pulled duplicates. And we did get a couple of trolls. [Laughter] I had to kick them off.

00:18:27

Jessica Brabble: So, can you explain a little bit how the Tip Jar worked, like how the funds were distributed among those who signed up?

00:18:38

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, so there are two different processes actually. There's the full-Tip Jar list which people basically went into a Google Form, put in their like PayPal, Venmo, Cash App, whatever information and then I maintained the spreadsheet on the other end and made it public, so people could if they wanted to give a tip to someone they knew and had a relationship with, or they were getting food take-out from a restaurant and they wanted to give a little bit to the servers there or bartenders that weren't getting any income from that, they could organize based on that and search the whole spreadsheet. So people would give individual donations in that way. But then there's also the Tip Pool which I set up through a PayPal pooling system where people would donate however much they wanted to donate and then I turn around and distribute that as evenly as possible across everyone who signed up.

00:19:42

Jessica Brabble: Awesome. So how did word spread of the Tip Jar once you got it up and running?

00:19:49

Katherine Wilkin: So, I posted it on my social media, Facebook and Instagram, mostly. But I've never been super active [Laughter] on social media, so from there I just kind of encouraged my friends who signed up to share it on theirs and I think that was how it spread mostly. And then as far as people signing up for it as opposed to donating, I think the restaurant industry is uniquely connected, at least in my experience, pretty much anywhere you go. So, you can always find someone who knows someone at the next restaurant over or has friend-groups like across

different restaurants in the city. I think it's kind of a result of having very similar lifestyles and similar hours [Laughter] so people just tend to hang out with the folks that have the same free time as them. [Laughter]

00:20:52

Jessica Taylor: One of the things that is really interesting about this is that you don't really require proof for help. And that was one of the things that we were most excited to talk to you about. We wanted to see how you kind of came to that decision and like what that decision actually means in light of like a lot of other, different organizations that are kind of doing the same but different.

00:21:22

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, for me a lot of that was actually a function of my personal capacity, both in the past when I was in the restaurant industry and knowing what that was like, as well as my personal capacity now, running the Tip Jar. I mean, I can't think really of a substantial way that someone would provide proof that they were in need. And that is just an additional hardship and struggle for someone to go when they're already having a really hard time. So, I didn't want to be the arbiter in that way and decide, "Oh you show need, but this other person seems to need it more. So, you're not going to get any help." And I think the other thing that helped with that decision, too, is the Tip Jar—I mean I waited maybe a month before I set up the Tip Pool after I had created the Tip Jar program itself. So, it was originally based only in individual donations and most of those were happening through word of mouth or people who knew people. So, it

didn't make a lot of sense to—from my end—decide who was quote, unquote in enough need to be a part of it.

00:22:49

Jessica Taylor: Uh-hm. Why did you add the Tip Jar Pool at the moment that you did? Was there—

00:23:00

Katherine Wilkin: That was by request of an individual donor who wanted to contribute a substantial amount and wasn't sure the best way to distribute it. And I was kind of hesitant to start a Tip Pool because Russell, my supervisor, had told me that logistically it was kind of a nightmare. [Laughter] He had a hard time with his bank and everything with it. But with the amount that this individual wanted to give there was—it would have been hard to distribute it equitably otherwise, because it was high enough that it could have gone to a lot of people but not so high that it would have given them like a couple dollars to each person.

00:23:45

Jessica Taylor: Okay, so in terms of going into the future, how do you see the Tip Jar evolving as the situation has kind of evolved over the last few months and will continue to?

00:24:03

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, so my plan at this point is to finish distributing what's in the Pool right now over the next couple of weeks. As things are opening up, I know people are going out more

and a lot of restaurants are bringing their servers back on. I know that was also a function of the PPP money that was distributed because one of the stipulations was hiring back, I think, seventy-five percent of your original staff or like the original hours of those staff, which is great news, people being back to work even in a limited capacity. But I am actually moving [Laughter] at the end of this month to New York City, so I plan to finish distributing the Tip Pool and then shutting that down, and probably putting something out on the Tip Jar page and on my social media that I'll continue to maintain the spreadsheet if people want to give individual donations. I'll monitor that and everything, but I won't be collecting large sums for the Tip Pool anymore.

00:25:17

Jessica Taylor: Okay.

00:25:17

Katherine Wilkin: But I would also be happy to pass it on to someone else in the area if they want to take that aspect of it on, as well.

00:25:23

Jessica Taylor: Wow, that's awesome. So how has your experience as an organizer in the environmental capacity translated to what you've done with this and with Russell?

00:25:40

Katherine Wilkin: I think it's not necessarily like a tangible skill that has translated. I would say it's more just the recognition that we're all going through something hard at any given time and

the best way to support our community is to support each other at a local level. Unfortunately, with the pipeline fight we have not had a lot of allies in the government and have actually seen some violence from the state in a lot of ways. So over the past three years, as cynical as it is, I've kind of learned that I can't really rely on the government [Laughter], so I don't want to ask anyone else to have to rely on the government entirely either. It makes a lot more sense for us to help each other out.

00:26:43

Jessica Taylor: That answer was amazing; thank you.

00:26:48

Katherine Wilkin: [Laughter]

00:26:48

Jessica Taylor: That was so great. Oh my gosh. [Laughter]

00:26:51

Katherine Wilkin: Thank you.

00:26:53

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, I'll pass it back to Jessica in a second. I think for me my--my last question would be, how do you define mutual aid in this specific context, like in Appalachia? Appalachia has a long history of mutual aid. You see it today.

00:27:19

Katherine Wilkin: Yeah, to me it kind of just manifests as taking care of each other for the sake of taking care of each other, like not needing anything in return, but knowing that because you're building this community, if you do need something you'll have a support system.

00:27:43

Jessica Taylor: And what is next? What do you think will happen to the Roanoke food scene as we transition to Phase 3 and things kind of remain uncertain over the summer?

00:27:58

Katherine Wilkin: Oh, that's an excellent question. Given what I've seen as far as COVID numbers in Southwest Virginia, I am not hopeful that restaurants will continue to open and things will go back to some semblance of normalcy in the way that it might be in the rest of the state. We actually in Roanoke didn't have a confirmed positive case until after the stay-at-home-order was issued by the governor. So, while the rest of the state was kind of hitting their peak and then trying to flatten the curve, we were just kind of stagnating along, like slowly getting cases. So now as the rest of the state is opening up, we're seeing really what is our kind of first big wave of the virus. So, I suspect that either we will see restaurants closing down because of an outbreak, which we have seen a couple of times already unfortunately. I think some will go under just based on not having the income that they did before. Restaurants already have a hard time meeting their bottom line and actually turning a profit in a meaningful way. And I wouldn't be surprised if the governor were to move in the direction of kind of backtracking on the phases

in a way depending on how numbers continue to come in for Roanoke and the rest of Southwest Virginia.

00:30:02

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, Jessica did you have any questions you wanted to--?

00:30:08

Jessica Brabble: Yeah just to end on more of a light-hearted note, [Laughter] what have been some of your favorite restaurants and some of your favorite dishes to order in as we've been under lockdown?

00:30:22

Katherine Wilkin: Oh, so [Laughter] right at the beginning of all of this my partner's brother told us about this taco place. I think it's one of the ones up on Williamson actually, called Taco Riendo and his selling point was, "It's even better than the place that we thought had the best tacos in Roanoke." [Laughter] So we have definitely ordered that in several times. And one of my favorite comfort foods is pho and there's a really great place out on Williamson as well that I've ordered take-out from. And they're just the sweetest people, too that run that place. It's like a little family-run place. They'll always shut down for like a couple weeks out of the year to go visit family across the world. Every time I walk in the guy at the counter just has the biggest smile on his face. And he's just so happy. [Laughter] So I love supporting them and being there. And there's also a really phenomenal barbecue place again on Williamson that I've actually

made a point to try to patronize more as I make an effort in my own life to patronize black-owned businesses more frequently.

00:31:35

Jessica Taylor: Uh-hm.

00:31:35

Katherine Wilkin: And the food is amazing, so. [Laughter]

00:31:40

Jessica Brabble: Awesome.

00:31:42

Jessica Taylor: Well, thank you so much and please do not touch anything on your computer until it uploads. Hold on.

00:31:52

[End Katherine Wilkin Interview]