Russell Chisholm
Roanoke, Virginia
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Interviewer: Jessica Taylor
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: Thirty three minutes

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Jessica Taylor: So, this is Jessica Taylor and Emily Stewart interviewing Russell Chisolm on July 9, 2020. And sir, can you please tell us when and where you were born?

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Russell Chisolm: When and where I was born? I was born in July of 1968 in Mount Clemens, Michigan of all places.

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Jessica Taylor: Okay great. And what brought you here?

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Russell Chisolm: We relocated to Southwest Virginia in 1995 after we were discharged from the Army. I got married, and so we were looking for someplace to spend our GI Bill and to get away from a military life and get going on the next chapter of our lives. So, we looked at Southwest Virginia as being an area that we really wanted to live in for the scenic beauty and proximity to good schools and opportunities, so.

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Jessica Taylor: That's great. How long were you in the Army for?

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Russell Chisolm: Four years, just one enlistment.

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Jessica Taylor: Okay, okay. So, what were some of your first impressions of the New River Valley?

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Russell Chisolm: Well, when we got down here, Anna, my wife's sister was going to Virginia Tech, so we kind of landed in Blacksburg. Blacksburg was very, very different back then. So, we were happy with the decision immediately, small-town feel, but like I said access to schools, and because of our benefits we had that opportunity. That's not how things turned out, but all the other reasons that we chose this area also held true: proximity to the New River, outdoor recreational activities, just, it felt like a great fit. Obviously, we've been here ever since.

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Jessica Taylor: Yeah, can you tell me a little bit about Newport, just for people that are not familiar?

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Russell Chisolm: Sure. So, Newport is around twenty minutes outside of Blacksburg, west down 460, so we're closer to the West Virginia border than we are to say, Roanoke, from here. It is a rural community with a couple of major employers: the Celanese Plant, Mountain Lake Lodge, things like that. But otherwise, mostly rural kind of farming community. The section that we're in is called Clover Hollow, which is strictly farming families, maybe some retirees and things

like that. But yeah, a tight-knit community but spread out, wide-open spaces, and surrounded by national forest.

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Jessica Taylor: That's great. And how did you get into coffee as your job?

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Russell Chisolm: We started talking about it while we were still enlisted. We are Desert Storm Veterans, so during the lead-up to Desert Storm it was a lot of sitting around in the desert wondering what was going to happen to us. So a lot of conversations, and something with a little bit of travel away from our hometowns and whatnot. We were able to kind of encounter the coffee house culture and just that appealed to us in a way as a kind of a community center, certainly a commercial venture, possible way to make a living. But the primary thing that appealed to us about that industry was drawing people together in that kind of an atmosphere. And an academic town seemed like a pretty good spot for that, but we didn't know that opportunity was going to present itself when we got to Blacksburg. So, we were actually apartment shopping when we saw an ad for an existing business that was for sale at basically rock-bottom kind of entry-point price that we could get a loan from a local bank. The big banks all turned us down; the local bank did not. They recognized we were passionate about it and they gave us a go. And so, we were in business there for fifteen years.

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Jessica Taylor: Wow, okay.

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Russell Chisolm: And then so, when we closed the retail shop, we decided to keep the roasting side of the business going because the other things that we learned along the way about what happens on the farming side, what happens at origin, the producing side. Again, just so much care and passion that goes into producing that and being able to present it to people here, we decided that we wanted to stay connected to that in a way and roasting is how we do that.

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Jessica Taylor: Absolutely, so what's the scale of your business now?

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Russell Chisolm: [Laughter] It's very, very small. We primarily roast on a two-kilo roaster. We're very, very selective about the coffees that we choose, focusing on sustainability aspects but also where we can develop relationships with the growers and kind of be able to tell their story, so that people realize this is an agricultural product. It comes from farmers. Those farmers have names. The towns they live in have names. And kind of be able to present that to people. So, we sell it through a website and then to the few local restaurants and shops that kind of understand what we're about and put up with some of our idiosyncrasies on delivery times and other things. [Laughter] So it's pretty fun.

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Jessica Taylor: Ladies, do you have any questions at this point? [Off Mic Conversation] So, in terms of COVID, when did you realize that it was going to be a large-scale problem?

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Russell Chisolm: Well, I think being connected kind of to the barista culture still through the roasting business, we knew it was going to be bad. So, I spent most of my time working behind the counter when our shop was open and that never really leaves you. It's a life experience that-- I've learned a lot of lessons from that. Being on the roasting side, we saw concern immediately from our importers, farmers; they were putting out notices kind of trying to brief people on what the impacts would be. But then when restaurants and bars and their retail shops started closing down, again, everybody kind of on the front-end was shut out. All the workers that rely on their tips or their hourly shifts were immediately not working, stuck at home. We could see that that was going to be pretty bad. We didn't know at the time it was going to-- how long that was going to last but we certainly recognized it was going to be bad for the workers in particular. At every level. I think the farmers are kind of a panic mode, too, right now because not a lot of stuff has been shipping, not a lot of places are open or were open doing the kind of volume that they were used to doing. So, yeah.

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Jessica Taylor: What were you hearing from the baristas and coffee shops that you have close ties to?

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Russell Chisolm: I think the first thing that people were kind of making known was that aside from the income loss and the stress that that was going to bring, there was also the isolation. A lot of people get into coffee for kind of how I described it, for social reasons, right? In an area like this, they know who their customers are. They probably see them pulling in and start making their drink or whatever. And you have that kind of connection with your neighborhood or your community. And so it was two-sided in that way where we had risks to your personal health that you were trying to be mindful of and your mental health and your safety from being able to sustain your living situation, pay your rent and all that, to that loss of the social connection, that coffee is kind of an important part of our lives in that way.

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Jessica Taylor: Absolutely. So, you came up with the idea for the Tip Jar--

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Russell Chisolm: Stole the idea.

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Jessica Taylor: Okay, well, can you talk a little bit about--

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Russell Chisolm: Yeah, stole the idea.

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Jessica Taylor: --how you did that? [Laughter]

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Russell Chisolm: Yeah, so I think like a lot of people I kind of have a love-hate relationship with social media, but every once in a while, something percolates up that is just amazing. And so you saw people in more urban areas banding together in that way either creating apps or just posting their pay apps out somewhere to let people know they needed help and that that was a way that their customers could find them and help them. And then that became far more organized. The Pittsburgh list was the one that made-- they set up their form so that people could see it and they included a link in there that was just click, click, click to duplicate that. So, anybody that's fairly proficient using like Google Forms and those kinds of things could produce one of these things relatively quickly. Then you had to get it out there and again, that's where social media played a big role was-- well, now the list is up. We need people to add their names to it. And then we need people who are still working and still have income to find it and find their favorite places and their baristas and their bartenders or whatever and try and help them out. So, it really was an industry community effort as much as anything else. So, I think that that Pittsburgh list, when I first looked at it, it had over five hundred people on it and that's an urban area again. And the Southwest Virginia list has topped off at around 460, 470 people now.

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Jessica Taylor: Wow.

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Russell Chisolm: And it's still at that level.

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Jessica Taylor: Yeah. Well, why do you feel like it worked here coming from a place like Pittsburgh?

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Russell Chisolm: It shows the connections of people in the industry I think primarily. So, in addition to sharing it on Facebook or Twitter, the people that were putting their information on the list were also texting or calling their friends and saying, "This is the thing that's happening." And then the media found out about it and that was really helpful. So, a couple of local news outlets, *The Roanoke Times*, WDBJ, a couple of others picked up on it and they were able to interview a few people that had lost their jobs. I think that was a key thing, to get those folks out there actually talking to reporters. And then these other community support, mutual aid-type efforts, like Looking Out for Each Other, Montgomery County Group, New River Valley Group, those started to gel and created a platform that was steered directly towards people who were like, "What do we do? Do we sew masks? Do we make our own hand sanitizer? What are we trying to do together?" Those folks connected with that effort, too and that's where we can kind of post regular updates and reminders, because you forget. Everybody is dealing with their own anxieties about this pandemic and you can forget. So, it's kind of nice to have a place to go to just remind people, "Go send your tips out."

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Jessica Taylor: Absolutely. Do you have a sense of how it has impacted people on an individual level, like the people that signed up with their Venmos?

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Russell Chisolm: In some instances yes, not specifics except for a handful of people who reached out because all of my information is posted on the page, so that I can communicate with people that maybe their situation has improved and they want to come off the list. And over the first few weeks I definitely had people reaching out to me that their situation was a little bit more dire. Their power was going to be shut off or their phone was going to be shut off. And they were asking if there was a way to get additional help. And then purely driven by the people who were giving-- on the giving side-- came a request for a fund so that people who were consumed with work or watching their kids-- now the kids are trapped home with them or whatever-- could kind of give a lump sum and basically asked us to manage sending those out. So as a result of that, I get to work through the list and send everybody something until it maxes out my debit limit each day. Then so I get these little thank you notes back on Venmo or Cash App or PayPal from those people. And sometimes it's just that; it's just, "Thank you. This means a lot." So we're able to kind of try to stay connected with people that way. As far as how much response other folks are getting, I don't know. I don't really know if people are just keying in on their favorite coffee shop or favorite bar or hair salon or whatever, but from where I sit, there has been a fair amount of back and forth like that, just to say thanks. This is going-- we launched it in March, so yeah. That's how long we've been communicating via dollar amounts and little heart symbols and smiley faces.

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Jessica Taylor: Do you have the totals available to you at this point like what you are looking at right now?

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Russell Chisolm: I do for the pool and so that's one of the things I think it-- if there was some way, better way to track what other folks are doing, hopefully we don't have to repeat this kind of effort. I kind of wish that I had better tracking. I can see the traffic on the page but just to give you an idea, on the donation side and how much of that has gone out, we have taken in $15,545 and distributed $14,060. So, we have a-- a small balance. And initially I was keeping a little bit of a balance set aside for new arrivals. So what we would do is if somebody was added to the page even after a couple of months, that means everybody else who is on there has been getting some tips here and there, some outreach, but then the new people arrive and, what do you do about them? So, what we tried to do is kind of give the entire average amount that we were sending out from the pool to those people the day they arrived, so as to say, "Hey, your payout works. We see you; here's some gas money." And so, that's all completely driven by the donors. And sometimes it just shows up out of the blue in my account. I'll get a notification that somebody dropped some more funds in the PayPal.

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Jessica Taylor: Hmm. Ladies, do you have any questions at this point?

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Russell Chisolm: Yeah, again, I've had some help along the way. I was having to call my bank. It's the National Bank of Blacksburg, who we've had a relationship with since we landed here in Blacksburg. They're actually the ones that funded our purchase of the coffee shop. So, stuck with the hometown bank all this time. And so, we got to the point [Laughter] where they knew what I was calling about if I called them. Why is my debit card not working? So, they offered at the time to set up a separate account for that to separate that out from any personal expenditures and things like that that I had. But I just decided to just leave it in my account because that was what was linked up to all the pay apps. And then let me step out for a second. I got to go unlock my front door; I'll be right back. Sorry about that. I'm trying to keep the dog from running off. And then as far as-- so some of it is a little bit labor-intensive. It's basically sitting there with the app. I created separate forms where I could just cut and paste people's pay app handle into there and then type in the amount and say hello and send. I do that until the automatic limit tells me I can't send anymore, and I start it over the next day. So that has let me fall into a little bit of a rhythm with it where I try to do it first thing in the morning or I do it if I'm on a really long conference call pretending to pay attention to the conference call. And yeah, just find a way to get it done. Then the rest of it like the bookkeeping side, it's all spreadsheets. As I work my way down the list, I punch in the amounts that I've sent to each person. That lets me cross-check to make sure they haven't asked to be taken off the list, or look for duplicates, check my email every morning and see if somebody has asked to be removed or has some other need that we can link them up, like I said, with the Looking Out for Each Other group. If somebody is in a really bad spot, we're not going to be able to do that with the Tip Jar funds because we're trying to spread that out among 460 people or whatever. But there may be other ways that we can help those folks, too.

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Jessica Taylor: Emily, do you have any questions?

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Emily Griffith: Yeah, I have a question. So when you create-- you talked briefly earlier about how social media kind of promoted this; was there like a certain week or two where you just received like an influx of donations to the Tip Jar? Since then has it been steady or is it tapering off?

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Russell Chisolm: Yeah, in the early going definitely. We got a ton of smaller donations. There's been a few large donors that have just-- it seems to me they're kind of on their own schedule especially around the first of the month. So, I don't know if they've set a reminder for themselves or what, but typically coming up on rent day is when I see kind of a renewed push for the fund. As far as the roster as I call it, itself, in the first couple of weeks it was probably twenty-five to thirty people per day joining the list. And then it tapered off. And then really tapered off towards the end. And so, I think a couple things were happening there. The news cycle had moved on. A lot of other aid efforts were starting up that hopefully some of these same people were able to connect with some of those resources. And in some cases places were cranking up curbside or delivery or some other way of trying to put people back to work. I think even when that was happening, people were not obviously getting the hours that they were used to, so that need remains. But I think that that cycle of kind of a big spike and then tapering off reflected some of those different factors.

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Jessica Taylor: Do you have a sense of how you want to keep going with this into the future?

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Russell Chisolm: Yes, I want a vaccine and I want everybody [Laughter] back to work and I want everybody going back out to those places and over-tipping for about the next year. That's kind of how I see it playing out. As far as like the logistics of it, winding down the list-- that list is created by the people that put themselves on it, so I feel like our role at this point is to maintain it. If people are still visiting it you know eighteen months from now, just they wake up one day or they had a particularly good experience somewhere and they remember the list and they want to go find that person then I think that should stay there for that. I don't think that we'll post reminders on Facebook or Twitter as frequently at that point. But yeah, I think what everybody is really hoping for is that we can get folks back to work and earning at the level that they should be, a living wage. And like I said that the patrons will continue to kind of let that sort of shape their values when they go out and eat and drink in restaurants going forward, as to say remember how important these people were to our community when everything shut down, and really carry that for a long time. It might be idealistic but that's what I hope.

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Jessica Taylor: Well that was one of the things that sparked this project was the idea that like mutual aid has a long history in Appalachia specifically because of…I guess a lot of different factors, but we don't really talk about it when it comes to food. How do you see this fitting into

Appalachian culture? Do you think it's a natural fit? Do you think it's something new and innovative like--

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Russell Chisolm: I do think it's a natural fit. And I do think that it builds on that history that you've described. Again, in some parts of our region, we're geographically remote. That doesn't mean that we are isolated, at least before the pandemic. It just means that people have different social centers in their lives. And maybe a little bit too much of that individualism, but I don't think it's entirely just individualistic; I think that just people either focus on their church or their schools, normal social structures. We have really terrible internet down here, so even trying to stay connected in some ways that way, is not the easiest thing to do. So, when we were first setting up the page, one of the things that we looked at was, well, what do we even call this thing? And that's why we decided on Southwest Virginia Virtual Tip Jar as opposed to a specific town or even New River Valley for that matter, because I just was imagining you know people in Pulaski or Wytheville or down in Wise not being able to connect with that kind of stuff. Maybe that was…maybe I misread that a little bit, but I think that by having it kind of everybody in one place it created a little bit more of a connection between people who patronized the food service industry or all service-type businesses across our region and the people who work there, you can recognize how regional that impact really is. But it does definitely draw from that history that you described of particularly when there is a crisis, people just respond, and maybe don't rely so much on government to do that but each other and I think this reflects the way that people have responded to it.

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Jessica Taylor: One of the things that you chose to do that has gotten a lot of attention is to not ask people to demonstrate need, to prove it. How does that fit into the ethic that you're describing?

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Russell Chisolm: Well first, we just didn't want to kind of be gatekeepers on that because if somebody puts their name on that list, they're trying to reach the people who had been supporting them, particularly-- when you think about the difference between the impact on other services like barber shops and hair salons and thinking about what a different type of skilled labor that is, bartenders, baristas, servers, different type of skilled labor, we wanted for people to just kind of basically be able to find each other. And then it could regulate itself in that way, and to let us know if they want to come off, same sort of thing. We did, once the Roanoke Tip Jar got going, and we started steering people to that list but that was only motivated by making sure people could find them. So, if they were looking for a specific Roanoke business and it wasn't showing up on the Southwest Virginia page, they might think, "Oh, well maybe they're doing okay." Also recognizing, I think that list is about the same size; we would be looking at about nine hundred people right now. With the pool funds that wouldn't do anybody any good. It would be a couple of dollars here and there. So, I think that some of that also came from feedback from people doing some of the other mutual aid efforts, like, "How are you going to determine who should be on here or not?" They're going to determine if they should be on there. And that was really helpful to have those conversations with people that were doing other work.

It was like, “We’re going to collect food and hand it out; if you show up and you say you need it, you need it, and that’s up to you to make that determination.”

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Jessica Taylor: Hmm. Ladies, did you have any questions you wanted to throw out there? Okay, well, what are your predictions for the summer? Because we have to also interview you at the end of the summer, too, to see how everything goes especially as we’re transitioning to the next phase.

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Russell Chisolm: Yeah that’s a tough one because if you had asked me that a couple weeks ago, I probably would have had a different answer. And then you started seeing some of the places that opened up too soon and what the COVID numbers are doing in those regions. In our area things have stayed pretty stable for the most part. There are obviously exceptions but I think if we…that’s another thing to consider about, what is the timeline for the list itself? How long do we keep this going? What if we end up shut down again? If we end up shut down again, we’re going to get new people on that list, because there will be people who have come in looking for summer jobs or whatever as places start opening up again, and then lose those. And now they’re here trying to make rent just like everybody else is, so. Like I said, I think if people just keep doing the basic decent things-- wearing their masks, staying home as much as possible, and being safe when they do go out, then hopefully we will be okay and I’ll start getting more requests to come off the list, which is another part of managing it that is just-- like I feel really good when somebody reaches out and says, “I’m good. Thank you. Can you take me off?” I’m

like, “Congratulations, and if that changes, come on back.” But I think by the end of the summer, it would be great to have this conversation again and be able to update y'all and say a hundred people asked to be taken off and said things are going pretty good for the shop that they’re in and whatever.

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Jessica Taylor: Uh-hm. Awesome, well, I’m going to hit stop real quick.

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[End Russell Chisolm]