

Mike Shumake The Produce Project Raleigh, NC ***

Date: July 21, 2020 Location: Remote Interview via Raleigh, NC Interviewer: Ellen Brooks Transcription: Prodocs Length: Thirty minutes Project: COVID19

[Begin Mike Shumake]

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Mike Shumake: Wonderful.

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Ellen Brooks: Today is July 21, 2020. This is Ellen Brooks interviewing Mike Shumake for the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project on COVID19. And we're conducting this interview today remotely via Zoom and Zencastr.

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So, Mike, if we can just start with you telling me a little bit about yourself and what you do?

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MS: Sure thing. I--I am 41 years old. I have a background in education technology. I was a teacher for 10 years. I then became a consultant for 21st Century Teaching and Learning. Then because teachers aren't used to making money like consultants, I bought rental property, retired early, and started a nonprofit to help the community with help of the students who used to be in the classrooms where I taught.

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The nonprofit is called The Produce Project and now I run it as the Director, and I've been doing it for about five and a half years. We generate about 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of fresh produce every week through a sustainable business model where we sell shares of produce for \$18.

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EB: Okay; great. And can you talk a little bit about kind of your inspiration for The Produce Project? Obviously, you said you were retired, so you had some time on your hands, but like why this project?

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MS: Good question. When I taught, my last five years face-to-face, this was before I was an online teacher, I was an online teacher this year for the State of North Carolina and that's where-that's what sort of took me into consulting. But before I was an online teacher, I was face-to-face, and as a face-to-face teacher I taught at-risk--excuse me, Alternative Schools for At-Risk for Youth, the last four or five years of which were in Wake County, which is where The Produce Project is, in the same--kind of the same neighborhood.

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My students there had a hard time getting to school because they were transient in the places where they lived. They had kids of their own that they had--they had you know weird--weird backgrounds, difficult backgrounds, and a lot of times getting to school just wasn't the priority. You know if you have a kid and you don't have daycare, you know you have to prioritize that over getting to school.

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Eating healthy was kind of toward the bottom of their list. But the problem is that as they got a little older, them--themselves and their kids, they faced health issues as a result of eating you know corner store boxes of you know Pringles instead of eating--eating healthy.

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And--and I saw that over time. I still see it to this day. Lower income families being more expensive, having more challenges because of the lack of access and decisions and affordability when it comes to eating healthy.

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EB: Uh-hm; so if you can talk a little bit more about how it works? So, I--I've bought--

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MS: Sure.

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EB: --a box from The Produce Project before. I've paid my \$18 or \$20 and then how does what I do help you?

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MS: Well, let me--let me ask you a question back. You said you bought a share. What did you find when--when you came to pick up the share at--at our location? When you--when you opened the box for the first time and you thought to yourself all right, what am I going to get for \$18 versus what your reaction was, what was your reaction?

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EB: Well, I think I had seen online like an idea of what I was going to get, and I was like okay, we'll see how that goes. And then you--and--and I'm just--I'm a one-person household so it was far more produce than I could even try to use.

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MS: Right.

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EB: So I was just excited about The Project because usually if you do something like that, like a box like that, sometimes you just end up tossing or composting what you don't use, but I thought it was neat that I could leave whatever I didn't use and that it would end up being put to use.

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MS: That's right. So first, even though people see the pictures, it's--there's a very different reaction usually between seeing the picture and actually opening it up and--and pulling it out on the table in front of you and sorting out between what you want and what you want to leave for families.

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It's usually--it's usually fun for me to stand there because the--the wide-eyed reaction when people see how much is a share of produce, it--it just tickles me pink, right. [*Laughs*] So--so how it works is this.

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We are a 501c3. I don't really make any money doing this, so you know we--we make-we pull in \$18 a box. We take a little bit out for overhead and the rest of it we buy in bulk and wholesale at the Farmers' Market. It's not all local; it's not all organic. But it's much as local as much as we're getting because we can get, you know we--we put in the shares.

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We bring the box back or we bring the--the box truck back after the purchase at the Farmers' Market the morning of pick up. So, if your--if your pickup is Wednesday, we bought your produce fresh Wednesday morning. If your pickup is Thursday, we bought your produce fresh Thursday morning. And we--it is in the hands of our donation partners by Friday morning.

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We--we do not donate the rotten stuff; that goes to families who have chickens and pigs. We donate--we donate you know high-quality produce that was bought fresh that morning. When we get the box truck to the location, volunteers show up and they unload the truck and they--and they basically divide it even. Let's say we've sold 100 shares, right? But when you buy a case of tomatoes there's 60 tomatoes in a case. So, you buy 4 cases; well that's 240 tomatoes, right. With me on the math there? [*Laughs*]

So---

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EB: Sure; I trust you.

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MS: --so well sometimes I go too fast. But what that means is there's 40 leftover tomatoes. Well 40 leftover tomatoes is almost a whole case. There's 60 tomatoes in a case, right.

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Well, so 40 tomatoes get--you know get sort of put aside. We do that with 20 items which typically our shares are about 15 to 20 items and--and then you end up with you know 40

tomatoes and you know 30 eggplants and you know people don't always like eggplants, right. [*Laughs*] I find that that's my least--that's my least favorite item.

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But you know we end up with 10 packages of organic strawberries you know. We end up with you know an extra bag of cherries or two, right. We--and all of those things go to the corner and they get donated.

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Now when people start to pick up between 3:00 and 8:00 p.m. at the location they do exactly what you just described. They open their box up; they bring their own bags, right. So, we're also low-waste and you know sort of saving the world at the same time, right. Like, we don't use plastic bags. We don't--we reuse the boxes that we make the shares in every week. People bring their own bags and they--they get their box off the shelf, their--their produce share off the shelf. And they move it into their own bags, and they take what they want and the rest-what they leave, it goes into the corner, right with the 40 tomatoes.

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At the end of the day after all the customers have come--customers don't always all come, right, like--like there's always [*Laughs*]--out of 100 customers there will be maybe 10 or 15 that don't show up. No big deal because they know that if they don't show up that I'm going to donate their produce. I'm not chasing them around the next day, right, like--like it's not how this works. The pickup window you selected 3:00 to 8:00 and our goal is to donate as much produce as possible.

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But if you don't show up you don't have to feel bad about it. Like, you don't get angry, like I want my produce. Instead you're like hey cool; I just donated like 40 pounds of produce to a hungry family right for 18-bucks.

Hang on a sec. Sorry; I had to blow my nose.

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The--so the third way that we generate produce over to the--over to the corner is if people don't pick up. That's in that way we end up generating about 1,000 to 2,000 pounds every week. That's how--that's how it works. It also means that we don't have to rely on grant funding, donations, or anything like that. It's always nice to have grant funding and donations, but it means we have a sustainable business model that generates this--this sort of donation.

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It also gives people who purchase the shares a ton of produce for their money. So, we're helping--we're helping families who are our customers and we are also--we are also helping families that are our sort of donations--donation targets, right.

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And--and that's how it works. Been doing it for about five and a half years.

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EB: Yeah and is pretty much everybody you work with a volunteer?

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MS: I have a--I have two volunteer coordinators. Those are people that are sort of in charge of corralling the volunteers and making sure that everybody shows up at 11:30, making sure

everybody knows what to do. When we get tip money in the jar, that tip money is turned around and we use it for things like sodas and coffees and lemonades and beer. I'm not going to lie; wewe drink a lot of beer with the volunteers. We have volunteer appreciation; you got to have--you got to have people having a good time out there.

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We--we buy pizza and food and donuts for volunteers. The tip money always goes back into the organization to sort of boost our volunteer appreciation and--and continuity.

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EB: Nice. Great; so, the next part of the interview, I want to talk a little bit about if and how things have changed since March since COVID19 has become a reality.

MS:	Right.	00:09:36
EB:	So just	00:09:37
MS:	Good question.	00:09:37
EB:	Yeah.	00:09:38

MS: Good--good question. Before the pandemic, a lot of people--we were competing with the grocery stores, right. The reason we're competing with grocery stores and I say it like that is because when people show up at the grocery store, a lot of people prioritize convenience and time. And quite frankly, if you're there to get your meat and your dairy and you're there to get your paper towels and your toilet paper, then--then you might as well grab your vegetables, too. And for convenience sake, I understand why a lot of people chose to do that.

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However, you can imagine you know if your neighbor--your neighbor Mrs. Crinklepuff, you know squeezing all the oranges and apples and--and sort of you know breathing and coughing all over all of the--all the produce at the grocery store, a lot of people are turned off by that.

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Second of all, the lines at the grocery store. Not all the customers are wearing masks. And I don't know what grocery store you go to, but the one I go to is obviously in my neighborhood and I'm by no means rich, so the people in my grocery store are--they're--they're low-income folks, try to survive, and I don't see a whole lot of masks--to this day; I still don't and it's the 21st of July now.

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We--on a side note that bothers me. Just last night, my wife signed up for a meeting with a lawyer to do a last will and testament because she's in education and she has to start school. And the mask issue for me is a very personal and serious issue. However, back to the topic.

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The--the grocery store also has you know this--this thing where you put your cart in and you have to hit the numbers, right. Bagging your own produce, you're--you're exposing yourself to a lot of--well, there's a lot of exposure at the grocery store. When you come to The Produce

Project, one volunteer with a mask and gloves has made your share. They've put it in your box.

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One volunteer makes every box, right and then the volunteers have different sort of sections and boxes that they make. When you walk in, you pull your share off the counter. You take your share and separate it into the bags you want or--or--or leave it in the box and then the volunteer coordinator will put it on the shelf. There's no--there's no--there's no credit card machine. There's no--there's only one or two people in the room at a time and everybody has their own sort of table. We even bought a couple tables for outside.

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It is a much safer process, right than the grocery store. And I think that people immediately saw that and our sales shot through the roof at the beginning of the pandemic. We were having--we went from two days a week to three days a week where we would sell out on like Sunday for the Wednesday and Thursday pick up.

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Now since then, my--you know just like a sociologist looks at data and makes interpretations, my interpretations is that we slow down a little bit because I think people are-are--people are acting a little bit less careful. And that's an interpretation but the data is that now we're not selling out every time. Our sales have still moved from I would say 70 on a Wednesday and 50 on a Thursday before the pandemic. Then the pandemic started, and it was 120 selling out every--every day. Now we're probably back to 100 a day. So, it's still increased more from where it was before the pandemic but it's not selling out every day.

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I'd like to sell it every day. I'd like to sell out to the point where I need a third day and then you go back to a third day. But--but right now, we have--we have plateaued, and we've grown but we've slowed back down, as well.

Yeah; would you let me speak to one other small thing that we did at the beginning of the pandemic? When--what, sorry; my dog is--just walked up to me and said hey man what are you doing? Are you okay; you're talking--

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EB: You're talking to yourself?

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MS: You're talking to the window again; it's weird. [Laughs]

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So--dude chill; you're interrupting. Go to your pillow. He's a good dog.

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So--so at the beginning of the pandemic everybody in the service industry in Raleigh, North Carolina got furloughed. All the restaurants and bars shut down and I mean these people are not--they don't have huge savings accounts, like these guys are living check-to-check. And when the--and when the checks stopped it took a while before the North Carolina Unemployment Commission was able to catch up because they were just inundated. It was--it was a political nightmare.

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So immediately we had--we had about \$16,000 to \$17,000 raised for us from our property management company which was jut phenomenal. These guys are great man. The--we took the money and instead of spending it on what we were going to spend it on, which was a new box truck and a new location, we turned around and just said all right, cool; sign up and we're going to donate--we're going to donate free shares to the Raleigh service industry folks until the money runs out.

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And we did that. We--we basically went until the beginning of July, so it was March, April, May, June, July where we gave away about 100 shares a week to service industry folks in Raleigh. And--and that was where our third day sort of came from--Fridays. And it was a lot of fun. Let me tell you man; those guys tip. The service industry folks, they have a reputation for being good tippers and boy, do they deserve it.

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But--but it--but you know we--we did it until we--until we ran out of money and--and we certainly don't regret it. We're glad we were able to help folks you know until the--until the unemployment checks could catch up.

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EB: Uh-hm. And can you talk a little bit about like kind of your personal initial reactions and kind of how you started thinking about how this might affect your business and your volunteers and the people you work with?

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MS: Well, we--we were affected positively from a business standpoint. We were you know I--I just got a note today from a--from a customer who has been with us for a long time saying you know I'm sorry. I have to cancel my subscription. We--I haven't worked in four months and I just can't afford it. And it breaks my heart because you know we're here; we're generating produce for hungry families in need and I'm going to see if there's some way that I can reach back out to that person and say hey look; I'm going to leave your name on the list even if you have to cancel the payments, because that's what we're here for.

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My initial reaction was happy that our sales increased because there's a direct correlation between our sales and our donations, right. The more we sell the more we donate--period.

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So, at the same time, you know I--I was distraught and concerned and took action for--for our service industry in Raleigh. Give me just a second--just a second to blow my nose again. I'll be right back.

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EB: Okay; yeah.

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All right; so, we're recording, and this is a--we're picking up with a second file with Mike Shumake.

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MS: Yeah.

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EB: And okay; we were talking kind of about your--obviously business was good, but you were not feeling great because obviously this is a pretty terrible thing to be happening. How did your--how did it affect like kind of how the process worked in terms--? I mean you kind of talked a little bit about like what you're offering in terms of volunteers--have their masks, faces covered. You have like all these tables and things. But like how did you communicate with your volunteers about those changes?

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MS: Man, the volunteers were very understanding. A lot of them [*Laughs*]--actually I had more volunteers because the service industry folks were like well shoot. I don't have anything else to do. I might as well go help this organization that's you know--that's giving us free produce. So, then we were inundated with volunteers. And--and the--and the simple fact is that--that I go to Next Door and I see all the--you know Next Door App and I see all these neighbors ripping up you know local businesses. Like, I went--I went to Harris Teeter and they didn't have a mask, so I'm calling Corporate and I'm never shopping there again. And I was like over and over again, I've posed, guys, will you please stop ripping up local businesses? Like, if there's a customer not wearing masks it's not really the minimum wage person behind the--behind the counter's you know goal to--you know to start a gladiator battle with that person over the mask.

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And if you think--and if you think they're going to then you don't know what it's like to--to work you know minimum wage and not really feel like pitching a battle for that company for \$7.50 that you're making. And--anyway, I--I apologize; I--I wandered off on a rant about that. It's pissing me off. I go to my volunteers and I go, look; we don't want Next Door, we don't want the Next Door, you know Mrs. Crinklepuff to do this you know to--to our business. And they go no; we totally get that. And so, they wear their masks and their gloves--out of fear of being bullied on Next Door. [*Laughs*]

EB: [Laughs] Well, I guess.

MS: By Mrs. Crinklepuff. [Laughs]

EB: Yeah; she's a pain, huh?

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MS: She is. She is like Karen's grandmother you know. [Laughs]

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EB: And also, just to confirm, I'm not sure if we--either of us mentioned this but when you buy a share of produce you buy it online, right? You--before you go in--

00:19:20 MS: Yeah; that's right.

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EB: So that's why there's no touch transaction?

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MS: That's right; that's right. There's--there's no money exchanging hands. There's no credit card. There's no pushing numbers in. And--and that's actually part of how this--how it works so well, too. And the--when a grocery store buys produce, they buy it by the pallet. What you're paying at the front of the store is roughly 300-percent of what I pay or what you pay when you buy it from me, which is basically the same thing.

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And I went and-and compared this recently and--and found that 300-percent was pretty typical. The reason that is--is because when you go to the grocery store, you're paying for the produce that's rot--that's rotting in the back of the store. You're paying for all of their overhead that's from marketing, transportation, you know personnel, location; all of those expenses I have basically chucked out the window. Even my rent is--is pretty low thanks to Hoffman and Associates and--and it's--it's nice to be able to chuck that stuff out the window, but that's why we're able to you know to get it so inexpensively is--is the fact that I know how much I need to buy when I show up at the--at the Farmers' Market, because everybody has--who is picking up shares bought it online. I know I have 100 shares, okay. I have 100 shares. Here's my budget. This is what I'm going to buy. There's--there's like \$1 credit card charge so we go from \$18 to like \$17 and then a lot of people are still grandfathered into the old price which was \$16. So--so we're ending up somewhere around--around \$16.50 a share total and then we take \$1 you know--a couple dollars for overhead.

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So, then I take my--you know I take my budget that I get and--and buy at The Produce Project, buy at the Farmers' Market. I know exactly how much to buy. None of it goes to waste because we're not letting it rot in the back of the store. We're donating it the very next morning. Make sense?

EB: Uh-hm.

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MS: That's why buying it online is so important.

EB: Yeah and has any of--anything throughout the last few months had an impact on your suppliers at all or your relationship with them?

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MS: Not at all; not at all. Our--our suppliers have--have continued to have the same quality and--and amount of produce they always have. I have noticed that there's been less corn and usually this time of year the corn is very inexpensive. But the peaches were just fine this year. I'm trying to think of things that are--that are pretty seasonal that have been through recently.

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I--I haven't noticed--I haven't noticed a--a problem for me, my supply side. But again, I'm not selling toilet paper. [*Laughs*]

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EB: Right; well there was that conversation early I think in the pandemic about how farmers were growing food but there was nobody to buy it necessarily, so the--a lot of stuff was getting tossed out. And I don't know how true that was or if that you know is something that you can speak to?

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MS: Well I--I think that they're--you know they're certainly--if you think about it, on a macrocosm, right, like there are--there's the same amount of people eating the same amount of food today as there was six months ago. So, when they say there's not people to buy it, I think what they mean is large buyers like restaurants.

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EB: Oh right.

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MS: Our--my--my yogurt is ready, or my yogurt is ready to be stopped--. All right; good. [*Laughs*]

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I think that large chain restaurants, a lot of the bulk buying is--you know obviously that-that dropped out but ultimately organizations like--like mine, you know grocery stores, probably saw it--they had to have seen an increase in sales because people have to eat the same amount of food they've always eaten and--and the restaurants were closed.

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So, you know when we say that there was no buyers and is that possible, like--like [*Laughs*] did we as a country stop eating? No; we didn't. There has to be some other explanation, yeah.

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EB: Yeah; all right. Anything else that you noticed that--that has changed that you want to comment on?

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MS: Man, I--I--from a food perspective, no. I think that the--the mask argument is--is getting weirdly political and--and it's changing and it's getting more volatile. And I don't know if that's the reality or the perception as a result of media. But--but that is changing and that is scary to me. And I think that schools are about to go in session and I think the--I think districts all over the country are making a terrible mistake in moving into--moving into adapted--adapted schedules, rotating a third of the students through like we're seeing in Wake County.

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I think we're going to see that go for maybe a month, maybe less, before we start to see infections spread from students to families and their homes, and the schools pull back and go full virtual. And--and I just wish we were as ready for that as we--as we should be. You know that's going to affect a lot of--a lot of students because our free and reduced lunch students all over the country are used to getting two free meals a day--breakfast and lunch at schools. And--and I certainly hope that while there's a lot to consider and a lot to prepare for, it's--as COVID takes on the 2020/21 school year I hope we remember that those students and those families, the ones I care about that started The Produce Project were--are eating and are eating well.

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EB: And have you been in any conversations with folks about that or any plans to see what can be done?

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MS: Man; I'm a--I'm a small fish in a--in a--and that's a gigantic pond.

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EB: Yeah.

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MS: The--I'd--I'd love to help. I'd love to be part of it. There was a project between Wake County and--I tried to get involved in because I think I have--I have the right heart and motivation for it, but I think a larger produce company got the contract. And I think we could have done a better job, but I think [*Audio Fades*]--they needed a larger outfit. So, I think that-that--that project got picked up by [Ford's] Produce. And I just hope that taxpayers are getting a--getting a fair shake for the dollars they're spending, and that students and families are getting-are getting you know healthy produce that's in good shape as a result.

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EB: And what do you see--if you can just kind of think towards the future--how do you see this having a long-term impact on the food industry?

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MS: Man, I think that [*Laughs*] right--right now I'm--I'm politically like skeptical but I'm still a patriotic American. I think that we will adapt. We will overcome. And as a country when---when still face-to-face we are good people to each other. That country will adapt, overcome, and figure this out.

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EB: And do you see an impact on your business long-term or is it--do you think it'll still kind of keep going up and down?

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MS: Man, I just--I'm in the process of signing the lease for--for a one-year--for a one-year new location. So, if I didn't have faith, I wouldn't be doing that. I have faith that we will continue. We will grow slowly, and we will continue to have fun doing it.

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The Produce Project will be around and--and while I hope we grow; I hope we get found by somebody who wants to help us make a good impact and--and maybe has the pockets to do so. I hope that--I hope that we sell more shares and can donate more as a result. Most importantly, I hope that our--our volunteers stay safe and healthy and that--and that we can continue plugging on and doing good work.

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EB: Uh-hm, great. Well that kind of covers all the questions I had. Was there anything you want to add that we didn't talk about?

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MS: No, man; I think--I think you had great questions and I think you got me--I think you let me talk about all my favorite things with The Produce Project.

EB: Good.

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MS: And I love--you know I'm passionate about it. I love The Produce Project, so I love being able to talk about it, just like you know--just get grandma with her grandkids. You know it's like ooh; you'll be so happy to see the shares of produce. They're so big. [*Laughs*]

EB: Yeah; yeah.

MS: So--but I love talking about my babies.

EB: Sure thing. And what--what you said it's been going for five and a half years, so what year did you start it?

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MS: Right around 2--2015, somewhere in there. I retired at 35 and I'm 41 now; 35 is when I started it, so--. Yeah; we're somewhere around five and a half years.

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EB: Awesome.

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MS: And I say retired, but I'm semi-retired. I still do contract consulting work. I'm just an independent contractor consultant. I don't do full-time gigs. So you know when work comes around, which again, as a--as *Online Teacher of the Year* and a--and a [head] tech consultant, 21st Century Teaching and Learning Consultant, you can imagine there's a lot of need out there for my skillset right now. So, you know I am--I mean I'm waiting for the helicopter to land on the front yard. We got to get out. Open the umbrella for the important person behind to get out and walk through the front door and say Mr. Shumake, your nation needs you, right. And then I fly off into the sunset. But you know it hasn't happened quite yet. It hasn't happened quite--.

[Laughs]

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EB: Well, keep waiting.

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MS: Yeah; also--also umbrellas under helicopters are not--it's not--it's not really safe.

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EB: I was going to say that doesn't--

MS: Not safe but you know it's the vision. It's the vision I think that's important. [Laughs] 00:29:19 EB: You got to have that visual. You've got to visualize what you want. 00:29:22 MS: That's right; that's right. The helicopter-- [Laughs] 00:29:23

EB: Great; okay. Well I'm going to--I'm going to stop the recording on Zcaster but stay with me on Zoom if you will.

MS: All right; all right, cool. All right; I will go--

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[End Mike Shumake-07212020]