

Unknown Speaker 0:00  
Ready anytime,

Caroline Zaelke 0:02  
okay. So I'm Carolyn Zaelke. I'm a rising junior at Wake Forest. And I am doing this interview from my home in Los Angeles, California. And if you could state your name, where you're doing this interview and your date of birth.

Rebecca Byer 0:18  
My name is Rebecca Byer, and I'm doing this interview from my studio in Winston Salem, North Carolina. And my date of birth is August 28.

Caroline Zaelke 0:29  
Okay, and how long have you been working in this type of business?

Rebecca Byer 0:35  
Well, we've been open since 2014. We I really started the organization in '09, I would say.

Caroline Zaelke 0:45  
Cool. Yeah.

And then the date of this interview is July 23rd 2020. And today we'll be discussing COVID-19 and its impacts on local businesses in Winston Salem. So, just think back to the beginning of all this. What were your first thoughts and concerns when you heard about COVID-19 for your business specifically?

Rebecca Byer 1:10  
Um, yeah, so for us, it was really scary really fast because as a glassblowing business, a large majority of our, of our revenue comes from workshops and classes and programs of people in person. And we had to stop all of that as soon as we understood what the virus looked like, almost immediately I cut off classes, I finished up whatever jobs we had left on the docket, and I closed off from I shut off my furnace for the summer. Normally, we shut off for about three months, but in this case, we shut off for almost six and will light up shortly after Labor Day. So it was pretty shocking and scary, but at the same time, I had to just make decisions very quickly to protect the safety of myself and my staff and My customers.

Caroline Zaelke 2:02  
How are those concerns evolved over time now? Is it getting closer to opening possibly and stuff like that?

Rebecca Byer 2:10  
Well, we've done a little bit of limited opening for retail purposes, people can certainly come here and shop and wear masks, we've figured out a way to do some better shopping online and through face, you know, through video. And we've spent a lot of time working on our online website. So it's a little bit easier of a shopping, you know, experience. But once we open back up in September for actual glassblowing it'll be very challenging and confusing to figure out how we can actually distance in here safely. So my primary concern is going to be for my staff and and my crew. As far as workshops and customers go, I'm not really sure I'm not going to make any decisions until probably sometime around Labor Day. I think that anybody who comes in here will be required to wear a mask. And that's going to limit a lot of people who want to take classes with us. Because obviously glassblowing requires your breath and your air. And I think that it's gonna upset a lot of our customers. So it's a bit challenging, but at the same time, I need to think about my longevity. So we're just going to shift our revenue and figure out how to limit the courses and the classes and that type of revenue, and really focused our revenue on sales and products. I don't know how long this virus is going to be around, and I have to expect that it'll be around a lot longer than we think. So I'm completely shifting my business model this summer.

Caroline Zaelke 3:41  
Wow.

So you said that like as a workshop, and now you're shifting your business, what measures specifically were you forced to take at the beginning of COVID-19?

Completely, or did you transition to more of an online

shop you'd mentioned

Rebecca Byer 4:01

well, because of the nature of the virus and how its transmitted, we knew almost immediately that we wouldn't be able to operate the way we have in the past until this really has an effective vaccine. We really understand what the virus looks like and how its transmitted. And I think it's just still a lot of speculation. So, right away, because of my understanding of viruses and science, I very quickly said, we're not going to be offering classes the way that we were. So like I said, we've been shifting our revenue or our I'm sorry, our customer experience to revenue of products purchased primarily online, and therefore, it's just going to take some education for the people who expect us to operate like we were. And that's just a lot of phone calls and answering emails and telling them, you know, hey, we've got a worldwide pandemic going on.

Caroline Zaelke 4:57

Yeah, exactly. Hopefully their understanding of the situation, yeah.

Rebecca Byer 5:04

glassblowing is not going to change. Yeah, there's no way that I can safely allow people to blow glass and keep my crew safe. There's just it's impossible. So I said, I've just been knowing that from the beginning, I've really expected that, that our revenue, our programs, and all of our our operations will shift into that kind of product purchase model.

Caroline Zaelke 5:33

So you just got like, Guys shifting your focus and like your choice of revenue. Could you discuss a little bit more about that about how that's been for you guys reshaping what your business kind of looks like and stuff like that?

Rebecca Byer 5:46

Well, it's funny you asked that because when I was 19 years old, I had an idea for a glassblowing studio where I could teach apprentices and sell product and I always wanted the product to be primary focus because I understand the difficulty and complexity and learning how to blow glass, it takes a really long time. When we opened in 2014, what happened was a lot of people came to us and wanted to learn how to blow glass. And we saw that money potential for revenue and as a start up, you really need to

make money.

So we weren't turning that money away. But over the last six years, our workshops and our programs became very heavy of our operations. And it it prevented us from really operating in the way that I wanted to when I was 19. And I conceived of my dream business plan. So in a lot of ways, COVID is forcing us to turn back a little bit to what I really wanted. And what I prefer is this business to operate with a crew of a small crew of apprentices who make product and our customers purchase. Is that product in support of our educational mission in support of empowerment and entrepreneurship and in supportive community change. And because of COVID, we just simply can't offer the workshops that we were before. So in a lot of ways, it's given me a gift to run the business that I really always wanted to. And it's a challenge because of how we've been for six years and you know, shifting revenue and answering a lot of the calls and saying, No, we can't give you classes now is certainly a pivot but as an entrepreneur, it's really important to see an opportunity and take it when you can. If I tried to do things the same way that we've been doing them for six years, I think I would burn out a lot faster. So this is offering us and our crew an opportunity that we're going to take advantage of. And I think as an entrepreneur, it's important to look at that not only the opportunities, but also the challenges and try not to force things aren't working for you. We've been trying to shift this way for a long time because we knew what wasn't working for us. And, you know, this just came I guess at the right time. For us it sounds a little bit cold and callous in in some respects, because obviously I'd prefer this not to be I don't want a worldwide pandemic to,

you know, exist. And I think that it's really the way that our country's handling it is really shocking. And it's and it's sad because a lot of people are getting sick and dying. But the the alternative viewpoint is that as a startup business as a kind of unique, weird business, we've been operating under somewhat pandemic circumstances for a long time. So I'm kind of used to this I'm used to the stress and the tension and this is actually it's going to honestly do a lot of positive for us. So I'm just trying embrace that and work with that.

Caroline Zaelke 9:02

Yeah. Wow. That's really awesome that you're kind of like taking this as an opportunity to evolve. And not just I know some people will feel this is like a, like stuck, like sticking point, but just got to get over it and evolve and everything like that.

Rebecca Byer 9:17

Yeah, I mean, don't get me wrong, it's hard. This is really probably, you know, the biggest challenge that most people are going to face in their entire lifetime. But I think that it's also really important to stay optimistic and hopeful. I think it's important to not get too bogged down by the depression or the negativity. We have so much going on in our world right now. That is really hard. It's stressful and it's tense. And it's not just COVID it's, you know, systemic racism is, is really, you know, finally coming to a head, systemic oppression and systemic poverty and all of these things that we're dealing with, and we're really at a critical time, I think This is an opportunity for a lot of people to do things differently.

Caroline Zaelke 10:03

Yes, definitely, I think grow as a society, especially with like everything that's been going on. I know, one of our teams is focusing on specifically racial and justice in like, how that's all like being focused on this shining light on that during all this, because people have time to look at their phone to stop and like to see everything that's going on around them for once. Yeah,

Rebecca Byer 10:24

if things are connected to you know, how people are receiving care is connected to racism, how people are experiencing COVID is absolutely connected to poverty and oppression. And it's important that we look at it all as how are we going to make big changes for our planet for your generation and future generations to live sustainably and comfortably and peacefully? Yeah, because it's been going isn't working.

Caroline Zaelke 10:50

Yeah, exactly. Well, shifting that focus, like a larger perspective. How has How do you feel towards the government's efforts to support small businesses and local businesses With all the loans, opportunities and not opportunities,

Rebecca Byer 11:05

yeah, well, my local community was more helpful than the federal government. My local community has definitely stepped up and helped me. We received an emergency grant from the city. And my really core community of customers have stepped up and come to purchase and buy things and really helped us out through this crisis just to help pay my rent and pay my staff. But we haven't received any help from the federal government. We haven't received the PPP loan or the other VHDL loans.

We are not

of their concern, we can completely disappear and they won't care. And I believe that. I think that businesses

are what,

by and large, historically create the fabric of a community and our federal government is doing the exact opposite to support our communities. So I think you'll see a lot of local communities step up and help each other way, way more than the federal government will hear.

Caroline Zaelke 12:08

Yeah, definitely. How has your relationship with the community evolved since the beginning of this?

Rebecca Byer 12:14

Well, I've had a lot of people reach out and ask how we're doing. We're trying to stay active on social media, so people know that we're not going anywhere. It's important that we shift how we talk about things. We have an annual clearance sale every summer. And this was the first summer that we advertised it that somebody was worried we were going to close because we're having a sale. So that makes us you know, we really want people to know that we're going to survive, we're going to be okay, we're going to do everything we can because we are scrappy, we're resourceful, we're creative, and we're willing to work hard. So I think that it's important that people have optimism, but also that people step up and help each other out. You'd be surprised how much a 25 or \$30 purchase can make a big difference. First of all, business, your favorite restaurant that can't reopen, they might need some help your local boutique, most of the retail stores right now can't be open. And it's really important that people figure out ways to be creative and support businesses that they care about. Because we're the ones that make communities fun and interesting. When you bring people to come and visit. You want to show them the cool places. You don't

want to show them the CVS. Right.

Caroline Zaelke 13:28

Exactly. I'm taking for a glassblowing class.

Rebecca Byer 13:31

cYeah. So I hope that people know we're going to do everything we can just survive, but they have to help us out too and eat every little bit helps, even if it's just simply coming in buying something off of my sale, right.

Caroline Zaelke 13:47

Yeah, no, that's awesome that the community has stepped up for you when the government clearly hasn't. And I've heard that definitely with a couple businesses already. And it's heartbreaking to hear that when you put your faith in government, they just kind of Made swipe out on you and make you feel as if they don't. They don't care. And that's tough. Have it? Has it changed your relationship with any other businesses? I've definitely had a couple stories of businesses being together and stuff like that. That may be hard with glassblowing. I understand. But

Rebecca Byer 14:18

well, yeah, we're kind of a weird business in that we sort of hit all industries, because people from all walks of life come to us looking for, you know, ways to engage with the arts or entrepreneurship. And so we have all walks of life come here. So we've, I mean, I would say that, that we're, we've always been really strong with our neighbors and our business friends, and we've always found ways to help and support each other. But we're also all scared. So sometimes it's hard when I hear another business, you know, having some trouble I'm not really sure what I can do to help other than Maybe just be there as a sounding board or maybe, you know, tell them about a grant that I heard of that they could be eligible for. I think the more we talk to each other and help share our fears and our role more vulnerabilities as business people, not only do we help empower future generations, but we really help empower each other. And I think it's important so I have found a real sense of comfort and kindness and talking to other business owners throughout all of this and even if it's just chatting for a few minutes on the street,

Caroline Zaelke 15:31

yeah, that's awesome. Looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently to increase the amount of business or revenue at the beginning of COVID?

Rebecca Byer 15:43

I don't know. Um, I mean, it was you know, what is it now four months? We've been a while some here man it's just survive financially. I'm not sure we've we've literally had no revenue coming in since March. So it's It's been scary.

But we did have a little bit in the bank, which is always good.

And, you know, I'm pretty resourceful and frugal in general. So that's just a piece of advice I'd have for every business

owner, make sure if you have a little bit of a buffer, don't spend the keep it there, because you never know what kind of emergency is going to come up. And that's really true for life. So I think that in the beginning, I don't know, I'm not sure what I would have done differently, but considering we made it this far, I guess, clearly doing something right. Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's certainly been stressful and I'm sure I could have had more money in the bank and you know, whatnot, but you just do your best and you hope for the best and you try to be as open and resourceful as possible.

Caroline Zaelke 16:56

Yeah, exactly. Um, is there anything We haven't discussed yet that you would like to talk about today. Or anything you would like to kind of share with the world. I guess in our podcasts, I thought the whole world is listening. But there was Winston Salem or

anyone out here

Rebecca Byer 17:14

Well, I mean, yeah, I guess the one perspective I have is making it through what feels like really hard times over and over again. And I think if you're careful, and you're calculated, and you take risks, and you're open, and you're honest with yourself, I think you can make it through be successful. So that takes a lot.

Caroline Zaelke 17:47

Yeah, I'm sure. Really, yeah,

Rebecca Byer 17:50

yeah. But I think a lot more people have it in them in them than they realize.

Caroline Zaelke 17:55

See, definitely I think this is a time for people to see just how strong they are. So

well, thank you for your time. I'm so happy to hear that your business is still doing. Okay. It's a float and everything. I really appreciate you doing this as well, thank you. Just to go over again, some logistical things. You've received a document previously that you had to sign, I'm going to send you another one. It's just permission for saying it's okay for us to have this recording of you and destroy it in the University Archives. You just sign it the same way you signed the last one just by clicking. And if you'd like I could send you this recording if you'd want to listen to it, or I can send you the link to our podcast once it's up so you can hear that.

Rebecca Byer 18:44

That'd be great.

Caroline Zaelke 18:44

So I'll send that over. Once we get we get it all together. Okay. And besides that, that's all I have for you.

Rebecca Byer 18:52

Okay,

Caroline Zaelke 18:52

thank you so much. Have a great day. You too. Bye.

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