

Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. Interview with TJ Johan

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, pandemic, business, thought, vaccinated, adapted, mask, consistently, pizza, restaurant, open, customers, person, closed, indiana, flu, stay, wear, christmas party, shut

Jen Weidner 00:01: Today is July 15, 2022. I'm Jen Weidner with the Jeffersonville Township Public Library, conducting interviews for Pandemic Perspectives: Southern Indiana Residents Recount Their Lives During the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. This project was made possible with a grant from the Indiana Genealogical Society. I'm here today with TJ Johan, owner of the Charlestown Pizza Company in Charlestown, Indiana, and her preferred pronouns are she and her. How long has the pizza company been open?

TJ Johan 00:30: It was 15 years in the spring.

Jen Weidner 00:32: Oh, wow. I can't believe I've never been there. So do you remember when you first started hearing about COVID?

TJ Johan 00:40: Yes, actually, I, we were at work. And I guess it was, I think it was maybe early December or November, and one of the girls that works there said, "Yeah, it's the, it's this kind of strange, the COVID-19. The other one was the COVID-17 or something like that." And all I kept thinking was they're not going there. It's like the flu, and they aren't going to shut everything down for the flu because I guess they were starting, like maybe China was starting to shut down or whatever. And so then, yeah, that was the very first time I heard, and we were, I'll never forget, we were kind of, like, standing at the end of the register, bar area in the restaurant, and I was throwing something away in the trash can, and we were standing there having a conversation. And then...

Jen Weidner 01:41: So how long did it take before the restrictions and shutdown affected your business?

TJ Johan 01:47: Well, um, it's really been a roller coaster ride. At first, you know, I was like, "What do you mean, you know, us?" It just didn't make sense to me. They're gonna shut everything down.

Jen Weidner 02:02: Because it was unprecedented. We had never had anything in our lifetime that we can remember.

TJ Johan 02:05: Yeah. And then I thought, well, we won't be able to, like, you know, we're, like, paycheck, paycheck business. Like, we won't be able to pay our bills if there's no money coming in. And so they were like, but then they were like, "No, you can still do carry out and you're gonna do these restrictions." You know, you're gonna do like the, whatever it was the six, six feet distance and sanitize everything because the first few, the first, maybe the first week or two, we were still open for lunch, and maybe we didn't even have the restrictions in place yet, but I was, like, Lysoling everything, every menu, and then we were like, no, get rid of, you know, get

rid of the menus, like, stop, you know, stop touching. And then, just like sanitizing and all that, which I was already in my winter flu protocol with cleaning things like handles and the phone and all that kind of stuff. And, you know, just being hypervigilant about sick people come into work and, like, you know, that makes me crazy, people coughing and they just, like, didn't stay home. Like, we don't all want to be sick. Or they'll say, "I just got over the stomach flu," and they're saying, "You're really close to me just, like, you just got over the stomach. Please get away from me, seriously." But in the beginning, because everything was shut down and people were afraid to go anywhere, we actually did really good business. And we were, like, well, this is fine if it stays like this. And it pretty did, it pretty much did consistently stay like good business because people were staying in town, and then, everybody's trying to support, you know, the pizza company because they wanted to stay open.

Jen Weidner 03:55: Oh, of course. Yeah!

TJ Johan 03:57: So, and then, when everything opened up, we didn't open up because we didn't think it was safe to open up, and we didn't want to risk ourselves, risk our customers. So we stayed carry out only for almost an entire year. I think it wasn't until we started, until we were vaccinated, to all the main people in our restaurant are vaccinated, we then, we, and then, that we had that little, you know, sprint of everybody got vaccinated, and the numbers went way down, and we did open up the dining room, and, and, and then, it's just been consistently terrible. Oh, like, business has just really been good because I feel like people were like, "Okay, well, we'll just go sit through," you know, "we don't want to go to the pizza company anymore because we can't go in and sit down," and there was plenty of people that were mad at us about that kind of stuff. There were plenty of people that supported our decision to keep them safe and keep ourselves safe. And, you know, we didn't have too many run-ins with bad customers or complaining about, because we were like, you have to wear a mask. You know you, and we did the plexiglass. Once we had the masks and the plexiglass, you were really safe.

Jen Weidner 05:19: You felt a lot safer being open.

TJ Johan 05:21: I mean, we weren't vaccinated, and we were in the public the whole time. So we knew the masks works, and we knew the distancing worked, so, and we had, we installed the light, and I guess we have fairly good ventilation system and the pizza company, so we, we felt like, you know, we, we did everything we could keep ourselves safe, and we didn't, we never got, and no one in the whole restaurant ever got, COVID. I think I, maybe now, are the only person that in the restaurant that got it, you know, after.

Jen Weidner 05:55: And you don't think you've got it from work?

TJ Johan 05:57: Oh no, no. I think I got it at the airport. No, that's what I'm saying. We did keep our bubble. And, you know, we were not like social butterflies. So we weren't trying to go to bars after work. We went home. We went to work. We did what we were supposed to do. We stayed in our bubble.

Jen Weidner 06:12: You were being responsible because you knew you had to keep your business going.

TJ Johan 06:16: Yeah, so we knew that, you know, if we got sick and it knocked down, you know, knocked us out for a couple of weeks that that would really affect, you know, because business wasn't that great already, so, but yeah, it's just like it was, we kind of got this little, you know, great burst in the beginning, and then, it's really just been consistently, like, up and down, and then, was just still not enough to get you to where you are.

Jen Weidner 06:50: So you, you don't think you fully recovered from it?

TJ Johan 06:54: No, and I don't think we will. And actually, as a matter of fact, we decided to close in September.

Jen Weidner 07:01: I guess I better get there before September.

TJ Johan 07:04: Yeah, yeah, we're hoping somebody will take it over. But we just can't do it anymore. And we just had to basically fire our kitchen staff. And so, it's like, it's just one thing after another. The computer system is going to be obsolete. That's, you know, thousands of dollars to put in a new one and then reprogram everything. The costs of the food. It's not really going down, things like the gloves and that sort of...

Jen Weidner 07:36: Extra stuff that you weren't...

TJ Johan 07:38: Yeah, that's kind of come down a little bit, but the gloves, for a box of gloves was, I think it was like \$350, and you have, you have them. And that was, like, for a case, not for a box.

Jen Weidner 07:52: I was like, wow box, a box. That's really expensive, but that's the case.

TJ Johan 07:56: But that case used to cost \$60.

Jen Weidner 08:01: So do you think a lot of businesses are seeing the same thing?

TJ Johan 08:04: Oh, oh yes. And I mean, I think that, you know, it's a, there's a lot of things. It's, you know, it's our location, it's already hard to have a small business like that in a small town. And even though that Charlestown's growing, it's just, it's not enough, and it is consistently, you know, since we've lived there, we've lived there 20 years, it's consistently grown, but, and a lot of, of it is that, you know, you have to get support from outside Charlestown and nothing is just...

Jen Weidner 08:39: Right! Yeah, yeah, you're not in your just, a little Charlestown bubble.

TJ Johan 08:42: Yeah. And that's, and the more, you know, things open, that's, you know, more competition for somebody to go the other way as opposed to come in that way, which we have plenty of customers that come from the Knobs and Shelbyville and, you know, E-town, you know, crazy places to come eat at the Pizza Company, you know, all the time. But, you know, getting the people on my street to eat at the Pizza Company, it's a different story.

Jen Weidner 09:12: So what are some things that you have learned from the pandemic?

TJ Johan 09:17: Well, gosh, oh my gosh, like, outside of my business, I learned a lot.

Jen Weidner 09:26: What are some highlights of things you've learned?

TJ Johan 09:30: Um, oh my gosh, I don't know. I think, I mean, we believe in science. So we really like, you know, I don't, there was all this, like, thought of, like, the mask doesn't work and this will be over when the election is over. You know, we heard that so many times, and we really had customers say the most outrageous, you know, like, just reckless statements, you

know. And I'm thinking you know, that's how you want to go around, fine. But, you know, we, we know the mask works. And now, it's, I don't know what more evidence you need, you know, and I don't feel that wearing it is, like, restricting my freedom in some way. It's, you know, I don't, I didn't understand any of that kind of thought. But yeah, I just, just absolutely reckless things that, you know, people would say to us, and then the one person was like, like, "You guys really went over the top with the, with the safety precautions." And I was like, "Well, we don't have very good insurance so we can't afford to get sick." Let's just, let's be practical in what you're saying.

Jen Weidner 11:02: There's never anything, you can never be too safe. Or too precaution. I mean, especially in a restaurant where you're feeding people like...

TJ Johan 11:12: And I would never go into another business and say that. If I go into a business, I'm like, "What are your rules?" I'll follow them. You know, I don't care. I don't know what it is. You know, he used to go to the German restaurant that closed, and they don't want you to have your cell phone out, you know, so it's like, that's their, that's their whole pitch. Cell phone away, eat your dinner like...

Jen Weidner 11:37: Actually talk to people.

TJ Johan 11:38: Yeah, actually talk to people, you know. It's just like, I don't know that that's, it's not a big deal. You know, it's like, I don't know what people think. But it was just that kind of stuff. Just bothered, I think bothered me the most, and I, and I don't know if I already knew how people were so...

Jen Weidner 11:43: This just brought it...

TJ Johan 11:52: Yeah. Was it really learning anything new? It just, yeah, it just kind of...

Jen Weidner 12:06: Solidified.

TJ Johan 12:07: Yeah. And was, you know, at this, you know, also to have all the racial justice stuff going on at the same time as the pandemic, you know, that puts so many things into perspective and you're just like, but the same, you know, those same people that were fighting the pandemic, you know, don't believe in racial justice either. So, man, that says a lot about that, goes hand in hand, though, but I mean, I didn't, I didn't see very many people that weren't on that side of the coin. Either. This, you know, you didn't believe that it was even happening. Like you don't, how do you even reason with people that don't think that a million people got it?

Jen Weidner 12:56: You can't, you can't reason with them.

TJ Johan 12:58: Yeah, I mean, like, I had the and I, you know, I need this repairman. He's the only repairman that can repair my oven. And, you know, they're like, they're exaggerating, you know, it's they're exaggerating things. And I thought, what if my parents had died because of COVID You're sitting here telling me...

Jen Weidner 13:20: What if you lost a family member, you know what,

TJ Johan 13:23: I'm glad you all didn't lose anyone. But you know, maybe other people have and actually we did lose a friend.

Jen Weidner 13:29: It's been very traumatic for a lot of people.

TJ Johan 13:32: And they you know, she was doing okay, but she had all these chronic illnesses and they essentially just sent her home to die, you know, that's not...

Jen Weidner 13:44: So what if anything, do you hope will continue when the pandemic is over when we are officially over here we are in July of 2022. And we're still seeing new variants come out. So once this is all over with, what do you hope continues?

TJ Johan 14:03: I thought there was a lot of things that came out of the pandemic that were just like, kind of like genius, you know, like people adapted like that drive-in concerts and we went to the drive-in Shakespeare and you know, we did the drive thru lights and I kind of liked all that stuff that how they adapted and you know, I'd like to see some of that I guess those things stay around even though they were a little bit you know, people I guess my everything would be exactly the same and and I didn't I thought like you know, I like to, you know, I like to be in outside more, you know, like, you know, having picnics, you know, we would go get our food at the deli and go and eat in the park. You know,.

Jen Weidner 14:52: Kinda like back to simpler times.

TJ Johan 14:53: Yeah, and that all that like that just kind of slowing everything down. I just, I just thought all of that. And like my life really never changed because I still went to work every day. You know what I mean? So it didn't, I didn't experience that like they were. I even heard somebody say earlier this year like we're finally coming out. You know, quarantine, I'm out like everybody's been out of quarantine since June! What are you talking about? Like, you guys have still been in your house this whole time.

Jen Weidner 15:24: People who were extroverts who were out all the time had a harder time because I'm an introvert. I had no problems. I was like, I can still go for my walks in nature every day. I can, nothing has changed.

TJ Johan 15:35: I like at home!

Jen Weidner 15:36: Yeah, me too.

TJ Johan 15:37: You know, and I did like ,like plants. So I was like, all the nurseries were still open and no one was there. So I mean, I was all like, I was shopping for plants, the whole pandemic, you know, and I thought, you know, people were like, that's irresponsible. I was like, well, I'm wearing my mask, and keeping my hands clean.

Jen Weidner 15:52: Nobody's here

TJ Johan 15:53: And there's no one here. So um, you know, or I got you know, a bunch of stuff on marketplace and that you know, bought a croquet set and just stupid stuff. You know, I just, I don't want to say enjoy the pandemic but

Jen Weidner 16:10: You made do with a bad situation, you made the best of it.

TJ Johan 16:13: I was at but I'm that sort of person. I'm a you know, bright side sort of person because, well, it's pandemic but at least we can still you know, do this and do that.

Jen Weidner 16:23: Outside wasn't closed. That's what I kept telling people. You can still go outside. I don't like outside. Wow, sorry. I'm sorry, maybe try something new.

TJ Johan 16:33: And I mean, I like being at my house. That's where all my stuff is, like I had no problem with any of that. But again, like we didn't live in New York City and a small apartment, you know, we have a yard and you know, so I understand that. You know that that was hard for people because I do know people that live in the city and

Jen Weidner 16:51: That would be rough. Yeah, we take for granted that you know, we live in Southern Indiana and we have outside Yeah, we have lots of outside.

TJ Johan 16:58: But even in the city, you know, there's plenty of outside there's plenty outside spaces. And I know a lot of people, a lot of places were more restrictive than we were because we were basically, we're never closed you know we tried it for two weeks and that wasn't good for and so they just went business as usual. I just say I disliked all the just the way people adapted to things and then also to like, you know, people, like artists would do it online and teachers would read you know, to the kids, I just loved all that stuff.

Jen Weidner 17:31: Well it just shows that we can adapt when we need to. Some things that have changed, like I don't want to go back to certain things. I like having virtual options for conferences for meetings, so that way I can attend stuff that I wouldn't be able to attend, right.

TJ Johan 17:48: Yeah! And we always kind of did this already, like streaming like concerts and things like that. And my friends that I got my I don't really have friends in the area. I have friends all over but we started a chat in our messenger. And that went on fo,r till you know, I've just chatted in it, you know, a couple of days ago. You know, we still share stuff in it not as much as we did. But you know, that little group on that little chat got us through a lot, you know, all of us and we also ended up having like a Christmas party like through our you know, because of that, like we her favorite band was doing, again, adapting. Since they couldn't play concerts. They were doing DJ parties. So they, we had a Christmas party with one member of the band.

Jen Weidner 18:53: That sounds awesome!

TJ Johan 18:55: It was so fun. It was so fun. And so I mean, just like and we won't do that ever again. Yeah, I mean, but we got to, do it at that time. And so it's stuff like that. I feel like you know it definitely got us through and we did yoga too. I mean, all the stuff that we did it was so

Jen Weidner 19:01: Right? All the stuff people thought they could never do not in person. We did, we adapted to a lot of things.

TJ Johan 19:23: Yeah, yeah. And it was really good. Like all of that stuff that we did really did help. And, you know, and it made things better. And it since we can see each other that

Jen Weidner 19:36: Was like a lifeline, a support system. Yeah. So what do you want people to remember in the future, let's say 50-100 years from now about the pandemic. Like someone listening to this in the future, what do you want them to take away from it?

TJ Johan 19:51: It was handled very poorly. By everyone across the world, from the very top from the very beginning. I blame everyone, I blame all the leaders. A terrible, terrible job done by everyone. The only, the only people that were on top of the game were the scientists. They had already been working on this. They knew that this was coming. And they were the only ones that prepared for it. And I feel like people fought them every step of the way. And it is science. It isn't foolproof. It isn't. It isn't a cure all. But it saved a lot of people and it's going to continue to save a lot of people and I know like I have my very good friend that was just what she doesn't really believe in vaccines and all that stuff. You know, science, you know, but yes, you can you know, it doesn't care what you believe in. Science doesn't care what you believe. And I just that, that, to me is I mean, and that people fought them like your, your local health official and all of that stuff just is just really unbelievable to me. And it wasn't just here, you know, it was worldwide, that people like, were like you're telling us what to do what I was like they tell you what to do all the time. You can't drive your car without tags like what are you talking about? And then all my body my choice. I was like about this and about this but about nothing else. Nobody else has, has autonomy over their bodies, but you want to have it because you don't want to wear her mask or get a shot. So that to me, I just, I just think that no one did a good job except for New Zealand.

Jen Weidner 22:01: They were the poster country for what we should have done.

TJ Johan 22:05: Yeah. But, and I think that even Thailand ended up falling off the one when they opened up and it's just, it's a virus and it doesn't care.

Jen Weidner 22:14: It doesn't care who you are, how much money you have where you are. No it's a virus it doesn't think it doesn't!

TJ Johan 22:22: All it wants to do is grow and change and host, get in something and grow and change. And be more powerful. I'm like you don't understand that. You really are fighting an enemy and no one wanted to be on the same side to do that. And that's just that blows my mind like because I really thought in my nostalgic world war two brain that we would all rally together, that we would hunker down, that we would grow our gardens you know that we would we would step up and and really and we did not.

Jen Weidner 23:00: Quite the opposite.

TJ Johan 23:01: And I don't think that even if it hadn't been like for the person that was president. I don't say his name so the person that was president. Even if it hadn't been him, I don't think that people would have rallied together. I don't think that there was any one leader for us as a country, because we're so broken, that we could have united us and rallied us to be in there, too. There's too much pushback.

Jen Weidner 23:38: Was there anything else you'd like to tell us?

TJ Johan 23:42: No, I think that this has just been just I never saw this coming. Like there were so many like I'm a person that has a bug out bag. I didn't need anything in that bag. I didn't need

anything in that bag and that's what I've always been preparing for, you know to have to get that bag and go somewhere you know.

Jen Weidner 24:: Hide in the woods for a while.

TJ Johan 24:09: Yeah, go hunker down like we had we had a plan. You know, we have a plan. We didn't have a plan for this and I never yeah, I never saw it coming. I mean, I think we did great. I mean we lived

Jen Weidner 24:24: Considering right.

TJ Johan 24:26: But yeah, this was not what I was preparing for.

Jen Weidner 24:30: Well, thank you for being here today.

TJ Johan 24:32: Thank you.