

Covid_berryman_jerome

Cara: This is Cara Vanderree, of the Ashland City Library, on May 12, 2020. We are interviewing Jerome Berryman, owner of Bison Mercantile in Ashland, Kansas. And Mr. Berryman, you give us permission to record the interview?

Jerome: I understand this interview is being recorded and I give my permission.

Cara: Thank you.

Jerome: Cool day, isn't it?

Cara: It's a lovely day. When did you first hear about the virus?

Jerome: Well, I kind of started to hear about it back in January, early January. I kind of seek news. I don't necessarily wait for it to show up. So, I was familiar that there was something going on in China and then there was something going on in Australia. And that's kind of when I started paying attention to what this was potentially going to be.

Cara: What was your first reaction?

Jerome: Well, it was pretty unclear at first. There was just not much information coming out of really either China or Australia, since they were, I think, trying to figure out what it was at the time themselves. But it's one of those things where, you know, this is something new, something noteworthy and potentially rather dangerous as it could be militarized, in which case we could be looking at something pretty bad. So, I started really paying attention about mid-January and the beginning of February for sure.

Cara: What do you mean by "militarized"?

Jerome: Well, right at the beginning, there were suspicions that it had leaked from a bio research lab, and one of the things they're supposedly noted for was potential bio weapons. So, like I say, you plan for the worst. I was kind of looking at that and it sure caught my attention, that's for sure. You don't make those things for fun.

These are designed to spread quickly and do damage. That's when I started watching what was going on in Australia, about the end of January.

Cara: When you saw...

Jerome: When I saw Australia, they were starting to take it really seriously at that point.

Cara: When we think about the people impacted by this, who lives in your home? You have family...

Jerome: I have a wife and two kids, 12 and eight.

Cara: Have you had to make any changes specific to who lives in your home, have you had to change your lifestyle because you have children?

Jerome: Well, yes and no. In a lot of ways, we were already prepared for it because we had just come back from winter break. Traditionally all those kids get together and travel the country and bring back whatever they've been exposed to; so, we're already, you know, keeping our fingers out

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of our mouths. In doing that, to begin with, of course, it's chili season, so we're cutting peppers and stuff like that. Maybe I'm being a little funny, but not too far off, because during that month of January, just the traditional exchange of holiday colds was canceling basketball games and keeping a large percentage of kids out of school. So, you know, in a way, we'd already unknowingly prepped for being just that extra bit more cautious in how we handle our food, especially if we're having finger foods, like pizza. Wash your hands, all that good stuff. So ok, we just kind of took what we were already practicing and tightened down just a little bit more.

It was March when we started saying, "Take this seriously, we're going to start shutting things down because something's coming. We don't really know what it is." During the month of February, I'd spent a lot of time here at work just by myself, because circumstances of life that already had that Wheel of Fortune rolling. But I could still eat lunch here at the store. As February went into March and things became a little bit more serious, one of the things I did stop was eating here at the store just to be extra careful, keeping my fingers out of my mouth here in the store, just taking those extra little steps.

During the 20 second handwash at home, when I got home, I was kind of joking around about making chili, but I think anybody who's diced hot peppers can attest that if you don't wash your hands for 20 seconds afterwards, and you rub your eyes, you know it! Yes, especially those of us with contacts. That's a good time. That is a teachable moment. I think it's what we call that.

Cara: So, you already knew how to wash properly.

Jerome: I had already been in practice.

Cara: When we ask, "When did the virus first become real to you or start to impact your life personally," you're saying March?

Jerome: March. In fact, I was kind of clunking around half funny, half serious, that I was tired of the month of March because we've had such poor luck with it the last few years, but it really was March when things started to become real, where we start to consider supply lines and businesses being closed. But even here in Ashland, what they were calling "non-essential businesses," which, I really have a disagreement with that term, even though I kind of understood what you're getting at, the gathering of large groups of people, and we're talking about a respiratory illness which could be incredibly infectious and we don't know how dangerous it is, it makes sense. So I'm not going to address that term at the moment. But things started closing down. People started traveling less, being more cautious, taking the extra precautions and then, yeah, in that first week in March when we first started getting into our fabric distributions. We have a fabric section here in the store.

It is funny because back in October 2019, we restocked our fabric section and one day I was like, "What are we going to do with all this fabric?" And here we are like six months later, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I'm glad we have all this fabric."

So that's when it really started to kind of drill home that, like I said, "Let's be safe and hope for the best." It was about that same time period, we cut our own hours from 9:00 to 6:00 to 9:00 to 1:00, for a number of reasons. One, it was just me at the store for a while and I was going to be worn out. 9:00 to 6:00 without food is pretty tough, so I needed to eat. We also needed to maintain the cleanliness of the store, restock the shelves... I needed daylight operating hours.

Cara: Why did you all of a sudden start selling fabric?

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Jerome: Because people needed masks. Suddenly everybody was out of masks. The N95, suddenly, everybody knew what one was, but nobody knew how to find one. And fortunately, in our community out here, a lot of people still know how to sew. And there were a lot of people coming in and gathering what fabric and elastics and straps that they could in order to make masks for hospitals, for themselves, for people that they thought were high risk. And a lot of them were just donating their time. We donated a lot of materials, in fact, we had a whole week there where anybody who was coming in and needed mask material, we donated it. I know we didn't advertise that very much because there are people who would take advantage of it. And I knew the people who were serious about it and was able to make that decision. And fortunately, we had the resources to be able to do so.

Cara: OK. Were there some things that were changing so gradually that you didn't notice what was happening?

Jerome: Probably the depletion of the supply lines, because that's still going on and still kind of catches me off guard here and there, "I can't believe we can't get that." But it wasn't necessarily gradual, it was just it was slowly, slowly, and then all of a sudden it was gone. The elastic for masks, freezers, chest freezers disappeared quick.

Cara: Because everybody's prepping or...

Jerome: Not just that, it's something that kind of dovetailed with the price of cattle. It was back in January. I don't mean to pick out a couple of my customers or whatnot, but, you know, but back in January it was like, "What are we going to do? Let's just go ahead and process the cattle." Well, that didn't come through until March. And suddenly, they're getting a phone call, "Hey, this is ready, and then, "Oh, we need a chest freezer."

But everybody else was getting chest freezers, too, because we were preparing for this. We didn't know how long this was going to last or anything like that. So fortunately, I guess it was that first week of March, I was talking to our distributor and we had chit chat back and forth, you know, "I think chest freezers are going to be a thing, it kind of is already, so send me what you got." And he did, and we were probably the last one through the window to get chest freezers of any decent size, and that's really come to play, especially just look over there right now. I think I have a couple five cubic foot hobby chest freezers.

Cara: That's it?

Jerome: It started with 25 cubic foot, 20 cubic foot all the way down the lineup, and that's what I'm down to. So that was something that kind of... It happened slowly and then all of a sudden, they were gone.

Cara: I didn't think about freezers; glad I got mine two years ago. What is your job situation, your business situation right now?

Jerome: Right now, we are just trying to maintain our inventory and provide a service to fill those needs of people so they don't have to travel out of town or wait two weeks or two months, depending on what they've ordered, for it to show up through the mail.

Obviously, mail-in shipping is very busy right now, so that's backed up even on a good day. Some of the major distributors said, "OK, we're going to prioritize essentials. Everything else gets moved to

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the back of the line and you'll get it when you get it." Well, that's fine until you start working from home and you realize that ink is an essential, instead of a non-essential, because your printer is suddenly doing 50 pages a day, when it had been doing 50 pages a month.

So people are running out of ink, but ink's not necessarily a priority commodity, according to who you're shopping with. So that's one of things we were able to do is help facilitate people going into their home businesses and getting that running. Among other things, like home schoolers, all of a sudden, we need paper, pencils, we need all the stuff that goes into usually the classroom. You know, people don't have that at home, especially if you have two, three, four kids, you're suddenly restocking two, three, four desks.

Cara: Are there any other items that usually you don't sell this time of year and you really see a surge?

Jerome: Oh, other than those mentioned, we sold a lot of electronics, routers, mice... stuff that goes along with the... these kids get these little notebooks, which is all fine and good, until you realize that losing that little trackpad can ruin your day.

So now we're selling mice, webcams... Ever since the webcam became a standard piece of equipment in the portable electronics, we hadn't sold one, and now all of a sudden, we're selling them because people are trying to utilize these computers that they have laying around that don't have webcams. That was kind of interesting.

It's been wild, but it's almost like week to week. People would spend the weekend trying to figure out what was necessary or what the next big thing is to gather and then come in on Monday and that's what everybody's going after. And then we would be out. But we've been very good about replenishing, or even having it to begin with, and if we didn't have an item, like always we're pretty good about going out and getting it for them.

Cara: So, if we all take up fishing soon...

Jerome: Yes, fishing. We're just about out of lures. I think we've sold more fishing stuff in the last two months than the previous eight years combined. And, you know, of the services we're accommodating to our customers, if they want to shop curbside, it's, "Yeah, absolutely." Whatever they're comfortable with. And I'll say it, curbside shopping for fabric. That's pretty tough, especially for somebody like me, who's like, you know, "That's blue, that's blue, that's and that's blue." And they're like, "No, no, that's four different blues."

OK, whatever. "Here's blues and here's patterns." So, you know, I'm going back and forth, and of course, it's a half block every time I bring something out like this. Tougher than that is shopping for lures.

Those guys get out there and they're looking for lures. It makes that fabric shopping look easy. "I want something glimmery and kind of the blue, and I want two treble hooks, not four, but not too big." Oh my gosh. But it's fun, like I said, I'm glad we have the options there for people to shop around for.

Cara: And lucky we didn't have to order it on Amazon and then wait six months for it to come.

Jerome: Which was the case for a lot of things.

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Cara: When do you think that we might get life back to normal? And why would you think one time might work?

Jerome: Hmm, that's a good question. We still seem to be trying to figure it out. You know, they can't seem to figure out if it was released in January or February, or if it was released back in October, that makes a huge difference, it really does.

I don't know, I think people are ready to. I think at this point, people understand what's going on. I don't think you'll find a single person around who isn't at least somewhat aware of what's going on.

Even the old hermit in the cave, I'm sure, has been listening in and knows, "OK, let's be cautious and follow the rules, let's do the old chopped jalapeno drill where you don't stick your fingers in your eyes, your nose, or your mouth. You wash your hands for 20 seconds.

The mask, I understand that. Nobody likes to be sneezed on on a good day. Especially this time of year, we're talking allergies and all that anyways, we're talking about bronchial infection, so that all makes sense, but I also think people are ready to kind of... "I'm aware, I'm taking my precautions, so let's go play some golf.

Cara: Is that going to be our new normal, having to stay aware and keep taking precautions, or do you see that ending?

Jerome: I'm not much of a fan of that term either, and mostly because it's basic hygiene. That it is news is interesting, but I'm glad that we're coming back to learning not to pick our nose after using the guardrail at the grocery store, that's important. Wash your hands before we eat pizza. That's a good idea. You know, hot wings, sauce, I get it, I'm guilty, but just wash our hands before we start doing that. But yeah, I think it's just a matter of time before people kind of ease back into how it was, but I think it should be a while before people forget these lessons or re-lessons of the last three months here.

There's going to be some people who, and perhaps rightfully so, are going to want to err more on the side of caution than others, and we don't know the underlying conditions or if they're pre-disposed or just don't want to get sick. I mean, who wants to get sick?

But I think people are kind of getting the cabin fever and are ready to start exploring and being around other people; there just really is not a substitute for human interaction. As neat and as accessible as technology is today, there's just no substitute for it. I think there's just enough people who are ready, especially the young and healthy. Gosh, I couldn't imagine being 19 and locked in my house at this age...

Cara: With your parents.

Jerome: With the parents. Yep.

Cara: What is your reaction now to knowing about the virus? How do you feel about it? Are you afraid, are you cautious?

Jerome: And the question is, how do I perceive how the last two, three months have gone by and how do we go from here, I guess might be the question. I think at first the shutting down was appropriate, I think that was the right call, especially when we talk about an aerosolized

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transmission. You know, buy some time, find out what's going on, err on the side of caution. Here we are, middle of May. It's hard to say that it's maybe not as dangerous as predicted. We just didn't know, back in February, what we were dealing with. I've said this a couple of times, "Plan for the worst, hope for the best." Unfortunately, it seems like we've fallen on, "Hope for the best."

Are there areas affected? Yes. Is this contagious, as people originally thought it was? Probably not, unless you catch it. If you catch it, it's 100 percent contagious. Was it as deadly as people thought it was? Well, I don't know. If it sends you to the hospital, it's 100 percent deadly, especially if you die from it. You know, if you catch it, it's 100 percent.

It does seem to be affecting certain groups a little bit more, which is not unusual for any disease. The young seem to be rather resistant, where those of us who are older or have underlying conditions or cramped workspaces or whatnot, yeah, we're more susceptible. That's how it is with any disease, especially a coughing one or an aerosol version.

You know, I think in a lot of ways, maybe staying inside is, I don't want to say part of the problem, but not part of the solution. If you go to a place and you cough, it just sits there, suspended in the air. So, getting outside and doing things might be the right thing to do.

I understand there are some hot spots in places which we should look out for, especially nursing homes, as we should have been doing already. They already had proper precautions and we're just tightening down a little bit more on that because they are susceptible, there's a reason why people are in hospitals. There's a reason why people are in nursing homes, as they are already afflicted with something. So, yeah, they should be taken extra caution. Those people with lung conditions and all that, yeah, take extra precaution.

18-year-olds going out and playing baseball, I don't see necessarily having a problem. You're outside, young, healthy, spirit of life right there. I think another thing people need to take into consideration in situations like this is morale. Morale has as much of an effect on people's health as a lot of other aspects, even food, diet, rest. You know, if you just sit around feeling depressed, you don't feel very good.

People think that they're sick when they're not sick and they convince themselves, and then all of a sudden, they're sick and nobody should be surprised. I think depression, boredom... Just what we call cabin fever, these are all unhealthy anyway. I think the more we just kind of keep clamped down like this, especially in areas which really don't seem to be affected, like these rural areas out here.

I know. We got some poor marks, I think that was mid-March, about our own self quarantining out here in western Kansas. Wait a second. Somebody could go check their cattle, drive 15 miles in a day and not see anybody else. But somebody in Johnson County might go a half mile to the grocery store and come in contact with 200 other people.

So, I think at this point, we know enough to not just blanket everything and kind of concentrate on the areas which do need help. Other areas which don't seem to be as affected, for whatever reasons, can start loosening up. Going back to how we'd normally be doing our days, and that's getting ready for baseball season, stuff like that.

Cara: You're ready for baseball to start?

Jerome: I am. It's a sport I really enjoy and I've watched both my kids and their peers grow up from tee ball. I've been watching them for however many years now. My son, he's getting out of tee ball,

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so it's a community thing of getting to know each other's children and help coach. It's just a sport I really enjoy.

Cara: Do you have anything you would like to tell somebody in ten years about what we went through in our first pandemic?

Jerome: Keep calm, plan, observe. Plan for the worst, hope for the best, stay tight. Do good in your community, that's something that we learned three out of four years now here in this part of the world with Starbuck fire and the Oklahoma Fire, and now this. You have to come together as a community. You know, you may have some disagreements, but when it comes down to it, I couldn't be more proud of the people I work with and live around.

Jerome: Again, in these last three months, it's been it's been really amazing.

Cara: It's good people.

Jerome: It is truly good people and a lot of that comes from how we treat each other when there's not a problem, and that's important to remember, so that when there is a problem, we come together.

Cara: Thank you, sir.