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COVID-19 Personal Reflection

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By Yolanda Sly Kozuha '97

Greenwood Lake, New York. 50 miles from New York City in the Hudson Valley. Home to many NYC commuters, and a quick escape from the city for day trippers with the Appalachian Trail, wineries, orchards, and vacation homes for those who want to stay.

My husband and I own Greenwood Lake Roasters, a craft coffee roastery. We roast over 30 different coffees, sell online, at farmers markets and wholesale to cafes and food stores. Visitors can enjoy a cup of coffee or a latte and buy a bag to take home. Ultimately, our coffee roaster distinction and diverse business model deems us “essential” under multiple categories during the shutdown and reopening.

We're extremely fortunate. At times I feel guilty. Many of our small business friends are hoping to survive. We've tried to pay it forward wherever and however we can. While stocking up on beans to minimize trips to our importer, we discovered many craft roasters, weren't roasting at all as they solely relied on wholesale to cafes and restaurants. We are extremely grateful for our UMaine and other friends who would order coffee to help keep things afloat. I didn't account for dealing with customers stress, especially since we've gotten to know many really well. At times there are no words to comfort, so you just listen when you hear first-hand about the refrigeration trucks being used as makeshift morgues filled in the overnight before the media reports it or the Bronx building of DOAs found, most likely COVID-19 patients. Let's be honest. I'm dealing in coffee. The worst is “No, you can't have a 2% latte since we don't have access to low fat milk in the middle of a pandemic.” Or “No, you can't go inside to watch the roaster roast.” Our customer space is 4 feet by 6 feet. There is no social distancing. We now have a walk-up window that we're upgrading and using indefinitely.

Every day, customer perceptions and beliefs seemed to evolve. My new role was the “nice coffee lady” who said, “be mindful” and a “good neighbor.” Many village residents went from “it's all a hoax” to making almost 1,000 masks in a week for locals who lacked PPE at their frontline jobs. The “it's not a problem here” folks became incensed at returning vacation homeowners and the renters seeking shelter. At the same time, I assured some of my UMaine friends that I'm in NY and urged them to take this seriously.

Bags, bags and more bags. The week leading into the shutdown started the great shift to brew at home. People didn't know if they'd have access to coffee, so our online, wholesale and retail bag sales exploded while our drink sales plummeted. As the shutdown continued, this trend continued. We shipped as fast as possible since rationally or irrationally, I feared the Postal Service would shut down – due to the risk of the workers. I can't stress enough how vital they were and still are. We developed a contactless method of them taking my packages so as to minimize risk for everyone.

At the start of the shutdown we reduced hours. It made sense since the majority of my 5am commuter traffic now worked from home. Frankly, it also reduced risk. We reconfigured displays so customers can view coffee bags and other merchandise from the window. Instead of

self-serve, we now make everyone's coffee to order. Customers have made us their designated coffee break, their 10-15 minutes away from their desk at home – a pleasant surprise for sure. But like the great shift to bags, all of this required adapting and adjusting for us and the customer.

While farmer market managers were proactive and seeking feedback to ensure safety, we ultimately decided to take April off from the markets. We returned in May and much had changed for safety purposes. The farm market became the safest place to get groceries causing a huge influx of new customers. With the safety changes, we are not able to give out samples which has made it hard to target the new customers who were used to grocery store pricing vs our specialty grade pricing. However, those who did take a chance on us rave about the coffee and word of mouth is spreading fast.

We're now in Phase 2. Summer markets have started, people are tired of masks. I'm appalled I'm now again the "nice coffee lady" telling everyone to "be mindful." Some customers are returning to offices, others don't know if they'll ever see their office again. We're still evaluating, still adapting, trying to improve and plan for the unknown. Through all this we will try to keep perspective, remember we're fortunate and look forward to our next trip to Maine.