

Transcript of William “Billy” Cummings Oral History, 2020/07/06

Interviewee: William “Billy” Edmund Cummings

Interviewer(s): Stephanie Berry, Shanna Gagnon

Date: 07/03/2020

Location (Interviewee): Danville, California

Location (Interviewers): Danville, California

Transcriber: Sally Velez

Abstract: William “Billy” Cummings, an employee of the food service company, Choicelunch shares his experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. He describes the suddenness of the pandemic. Billy explains the impact COVID-19 had on his job and on the jobs of his co-workers. He discusses how the company he works for pivoted their business model to stay open. Billy expands upon the impact COVID-19 has had on the food service industry and food services workers. He details his initial reaction to COVID-19 and describes the pressures families are experiencing at home. And reflects upon how this experience may impact the types of jobs people have in the future. Billy calls upon the greater community to come together to ease the impact of COVID-19 on businesses and families.

Shanna Gagnon 00:00

Okay, and then we have some like audio recording things that we have to set up too. Okay, I think we're good. Alright, so I'm gonna kick off the interview. And I'm just going to ask you a few background questions. And then we'll go back and forth. I'll ask the first chunk of questions. And then Stephanie's going to ask the second chunk, I'll ask the third chunk, and she'll ask the final question. So the first question is, do you consent to participating in this oral history interview?

Billy Cummings 00:34

I do consent.

Shanna Gagnon 00:36

Thank you. Would you prefer for your interview to be under a creative commons license or an unlimited right to reproduce license?

Billy Cummings 00:46

I think I'll do the creative commons license.

Shanna Gagnon 00:51

Great. Can you please tell us your name?

Billy Cummings 00:56

My name is William Cummings. I go by Billy.

Shanna Gagnon 01:01

And what is today's date and time?

Billy Cummings 01:06

Today's date is July 3rd. And it's 4:35.

Shanna Gagnon 01:15

Okay, so last question in the background section, what is your position at the company that you work for?

Billy Cummings 01:22

Um probably jack of all trades, but I guess my official title would be manager.

Shanna Gagnon 01:33

Okay, so Stephanie is gonna take the next chunk of questions.

Stephanie Berry 01:37

Alright. So how has COVID-19 affected your job?

Billy Cummings 01:37

Cool. So well, it's changed the job for sure. Basically, being in a food business that specializes in school lunches, it pretty much abolished the whole operation. So that's definitely one way it's affected the job. The other way that it's affected the job is we kind of had to pivot to really save some jobs. So we had to come up with something else to do, so that we wouldn't fully just crash the whole company.

Stephanie Berry 02:22

How, has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the employment of people, you know? In what ways?

Billy Cummings 02:32

Yeah, I mean, mostly, for me, it's probably to relate to the job that I'm in being the manager of probably anywhere from 50 to 100. People, we essentially had to lay 'em off overnight. So it's definitely affected people that I know and people that I've employed.

Stephanie Berry 02:54

When you have to pivot, were you able to bring some of those people back in?

Billy Cummings 03:01

So when we pivoted. We did we, as a company, and and as a whole in the company, we had to probably lay off about 200 employees in Southern and Northern California. So when we pivoted the business, which we kind of had to do a couple of different pivots. Southern California did something different than Northern California, just kind of based on the demands of what we were pivoting to. We were able to bring back at one point, probably about a dozen people.

Stephanie Berry 03:37

So what what was the different pivots that you had to go through? Because you, you did school lunches before, and then you went to kind of like a pickup grocery situation. Were there other situations that you had to pivot to?

Billy Cummings 03:51

Yeah, so when we first, when it first hit, like it was just shut down. And then the owners of the company really started to, you know, try to go after things that were going to be community based, like, we started looking at World Central Kitchen, trying to maybe partner with them. Also looking at counties and like, homeless shelters like what are they going to start doing for food now? So in Northern California, yeah, we pivoted to doing like a pickup drive thru contactless grocery. And then in Southern California, we pivoted to doing homeless shelters. So kind of like in a broad spectrum. We were roughly doing about 15,000 school lunches a day. And then when we pivoted, that all went away and we started doing probably roughly, I think, maybe about 1,000 homeless shelter meals in Southern California. And then a whole different operation for or Northern California.

Stephanie Berry 05:03

What do you want people to remember about those working in foodservice during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Billy Cummings 05:13

For me personally, it was just kind of like the realization that I chose an industry that I never really realized that could be totally abolished in a matter of days, you know, you just heard about, I mean, well, for our situation, going from revenue one day and employment to zero revenue, no employment the next day, it was like overnight, things changed like that fast. And I mean, as you saw, in the news, with restaurants just going from, you know, serving to nothing it was, it was an eye awakening thing that like I never thought would happen in a business that I chose to or a career that I chose to go into where you always think that I'm in food, I'll always have a job, I'll always be able to eat and then in a blink of an eye, that changed really drastically.

Stephanie Berry 06:11

Do you think it'll continue that in the same trend that it's going? There's been a lot of talk about, you know, the industry and how it's going to fare in the future. There's so many different facets to it, like, especially with schools and school lunches. Do you think that this is kind of like a trend that's going to continue? Or do you think that the industry is going to bounce back at all?

Billy Cummings 06:39

I definitely think it's going to change for sure for the for, you know, a greater year or so. I mean, I would really imagine until everything is back to the way it is. But as everybody says, it's probably never going to be the, the normal, you know, we'll definitely have a new normal. I know as for us, today, July 3rd, was our last day of doing the pantry up here. So now we, we are starting to focus on our school. And we've actually had to change our model from what we were doing. So our model was kind of like prepackaged individual meals, we would send a snack bin that would have, you know, maybe 13, or 14 different snacks in a different variety, we would send bins of different fruits. So we would probably do like three fruits a day, probably two vegetables a day, and it would all be in a bin. So now what we're actually doing is we're going to kind of like what you would call like an ala carte style. So the website has to be changed, everything has to be changed. So now it's going to be the parents will go online, they will order basically how whatever and how much they want of anything, you know, so they can

order an entree, or they can go in and they can order an entree and a drink and a piece of watermelon and jicama or whatever. And then it'll all be bagged with the kids name on it. And it'll be separated in like a cold Cambro and then be delivered to the school. So trying to give the schools less contact since, you know, actually we don't really know 100% What all the schools are going to be like whether they're going to eat outside or in the classroom. But now it's like we have to try to make it as easy for our customers to distribute than what it used to be of hundreds of kids coming through a lunch line picking their own snacks and you know, so it's trying to basically go ala carte touchless is, is, is our new model here.

Stephanie Berry 08:50

Do the kids get an option in the food that they're choosing? Especially like when it comes to older students? High school students? Or is it just-

Billy Cummings 08:59

Yes.

Stephanie Berry 08:59

Parents?

Billy Cummings 09:01

Um. Well, it's called Choice lunch. So we definitely have the choice in there for you know, whether the kids want to go on an order or the parents do it. But yeah, the kids definitely have a choice. Our menu usually ranges from roughly like eight hots to about maybe eight or nine colds and it, and it runs the gamut, kid friendly food pastas, mac and cheese. Really good salad sandwiches, sushi. So you know there's something an option there for everybody. We do like bagels and cream cheese for like a picky eater type thing, you know. So yeah, the kids definitely have a choice. And the website is pretty friendly that whether you do it on a desktop or an app like yeah, they definitely could go through and pick out what they want and it's definitely kid friendly.

Stephanie Berry 09:58

Alright, I'll turn it over to Shanna, Shanna.

Shanna Gagnon 10:05

Okay. All right. So Billy, we're gonna move into our final set of questions. And these questions are about how the pandemic has impacted you personally. And they can obviously include stories about your employment as well, if that makes sense for you. So the first question is, when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it? And how have your thoughts changed since then?

Billy Cummings 10:33

You know, when you first kind of hear about it, you just heard about it, you know, kind of this thing happening in China didn't really pay much attention to it until really, it kind of hit you in the face like, it was, it was quick, you know, like, I mean, one minute, I, I, I'm producing meals, and then, you know, you get a phone call later that day, and it's like, you have to lay off everybody in your kitchen. And it's like, you know, super quick and fast and like, just you had to make decisions, like, on the spot, and

immediately, you know, so it was, to be honest, it was scary, because I'm laying off a bunch of people. And now I'm like, well, we have no meals, like, and I'm in a business that is food driven, based on, you know, orders that are coming in, and there are no orders. So what's that mean, for me? To be honest, I immediately went on not not, not not having faith in the company, that they would try to think of something else. But you know, just for my family sake is, maybe I need to start looking at delivery jobs for like, Instacart, or whatever, you know, so that was kind of my mindset was like, survival is what I'm going to start doing.

Shanna Gagnon 11:54

Okay, um, what have been the biggest challenges that you have faced personally, during the COVID-19 outbreak?

Billy Cummings 12:03

I mean, I think for me, would be mostly family. And I'm just a sensitive person. So like, my employees like it, it. You when you work with the workforce that I work with, it's, you know, we're not all well, well to do well off people, you know, so to have to, my, my immediately thought is, like, man, what are my people going to do, but then also, like, on the flip side, it's just like, my poor wife, you know, she's at home. She's not a school teacher. And now she's having to try to teach her three boys different, different grade levels work, and I just more or less felt for her. And actually, I felt a little bit for my children, that man, this this year, just seems kind of in the drain, like, you know, and , and I actually worry about their education still going through. I mean, I know it's early, and I know it's gonna come back. But with everything about schools, it's just like, you know, I don't I, I, I worry about their education, and they're able, their ability to keep pace, you know, and if we have to be continuing to teach from home, it's just gonna put a lot of stress on the family as a whole.

Shanna Gagnon 13:39

Next question, and there are about three more questions left, just so that you kind of know where we are. How are people around you responding to the pandemic?

Billy Cummings 13:50

You know, I think everybody kind of has their own thing. I think I think most people around me are, are , are responding in a way that we technically all should kind of be, you know, shelter in place. You know, you keep your bubble, you try to like, limit your risk. Yes, some people get more extreme than others. And, and you know, it's I think it's to each his own. And sometimes I don't think you realize what's going to happen until it really hits (inaudible) I think that's how people around me are dealing with it, many different ways.

Shanna Gagnon 14:34

Okay, there's just a couple more questions. I, Stephanie, are you going to take these last two questions or am I apologize? I can't remember if I'm supposed to keep going.

Stephanie Berry 14:46

If you want to take the last two since your- it kind of flows with what your talking about.

Shanna Gagnon 14:49

Okay. Perfect. Thank you. Okay, so, um, so you sort of started to touch on this, but um, what do you imagine life is going to be like a year from now?

Billy Cummings 15:06

I would hope, I guess what I would imagine is, it's still probably going to be s- more the same, like we're still going to be doing like our ala carte things. People will, hopefully we'll be able to start, I think it really all depends on like, the, the pandemic itself, you know, and I think like, if we can try to keep it at a at a minimum, or or just do our part and do our best to try to slow this thing down, then hopefully, we can start getting back to some kind of normalcy that we thought but I would say probably in a year from now, it's still going to be a little bit of how it is now.

Shanna Gagnon 15:54

So from your perspective, if you could be maybe the person making policy right now, or if you could just tell everyone in the community that you lived in, how they should behave to get to a point where you you kind of foresee us hopefully being in a year, what would you say to them?

Billy Cummings 16:24

Probably say, wear your fucking mask, I mean, like, just, that would probably be the biggest thing. And and you know, I know it sucks now. But we just got to, we just got to keep keep on and keep keep staying the course that is going to limit this to hopefully finding a cure or finding a vaccine. And just, you know, we just got to look out for each other. Because I think that's the biggest thing like humanity and people being kind and and doing everything that we can to help our brothers and sisters out to make sure that we're all safe and healthy is would be just the message that I would try to put along.

Shanna Gagnon 17:06

Okay, this is my final question. And then Stephanie, I'll have one more for you. So, oh, I guess I kind of asked that one, knowing what you know, now, what would you say to future generations? So we kind of talked about, you know, what we'd say, to get us to a place where you would hope we are in a year. But what would you say, you know, 20 years down the road, 80 years down the road, about the pandemic that we're living in, and?

Billy Cummings 17:34

Yeah, I mean, I think, as a father, I think I would give my children advice that, you know, career wise, you probably want to try to look at a career that like, and who would have ever thought I would, I would start to be thinking like this, but could survive a pandemic, you know, and and make sure that you are able to continue to work through and financially support whatever you're supporting at that time. But yeah, I think that's kind of the biggest thing that, you know, I, I don't know if it's a weird mindset to, to start thinking about that, you know, if I knew a pandemic was going to happen, would I have chose foodservice as my career? Probably not, I'd probably have looked to doing something that I know could do from home or computers or something like that, you know, or doctor, you know, what-whatever it is that that can just keep you employed through something. Like what is happening now.

Shanna Gagnon 18:40

Thank you. Okay, Stephanie's gonna ask our final question.

Stephanie Berry 18:45

Is there anything else that you'd like to share or like us to know about your experience?

Billy Cummings 18:52

Yeah, you know, the, like I said before, it was scary. I'm actually fortunate to work for a company that they have empathy. They, you know, Choice Lunch has definitely rose to the occasion for the the amount of people that they could bring back if they could have figured out a way to bring back everybody they would have but you know, it's just it's nice to be able to work for a company that can pivot as quick as we did and try to co-continue to have some employment for people that you know that they know they needed down the road as well to keep keep the company afloat and keep it going. But you know, it's it's a testament to those guys that the three owners if they were able to figure it out quick and get us back on track, and you know, keep keep the company afloat, essentially, while also keeping some of the people float as well.

Stephanie Berry 19:57

Well, that wraps up our questions. Do you have anything else Shanna that you wanted to add?

Shanna Gagnon 20:04

Alright, I kept muting myself. No, Billy, I just wanted to thank you. We're really, really grateful for your time and for your voice and for your contribution. It's such an important part of the archive. So we're, we're grateful. Thank you very much.

Stephanie Berry 20:18

Yes, Thank you.

Billy Cummings 20:19

Yeah, no worries. Thank you, you guys for asking me.

Shanna Gagnon 20:21

Yeah, we'll be in touch. We'll definitely give you access to the transcript and audio and let you know where it hits in the archive. And if you have any questions for us afterward that come up, you know how to reach us. So just (inaudible) let us now Okay?

Billy Cummings 20:37

Sounds good. Thank you, Shanna.

Shanna Gagnon 20:39

Thank you.

Stephanie Berry 20:40

Stephanie. It's nice to meet you. Me too. Thank you.