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Interviewee: Sylvia Sylvia
Interviewer: Gillian Demetriou
Transcriber: Rev.Com
Editor: Gillian Demetriou
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Gillian Demetriou:

Okay, cool. We are recording. Hello.

Sylvia Sylvia:

Hi.

Gillian:

My name is Gillian Demetriou and I am a research assistant for the Asbury Park Paradoxical Paradise project: An African-American Oral History and Mapping Project of Asbury Park. Today is Thursday, November... November? [Laughter] March 11th, 2021. And I'm here today with Sylvia Sylvia, the executive director of the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce. She has agreed to be interviewed for the oral history portion of this project. This interview is being recorded with the permission of both parties. Thank you so much for joining me today Sylvia.

Sylvia:

Thank you for having me and don't worry, November, March, time doesn't mean as much as it used to now.

Gillian:

It's all the same month. Really long month. So, can you just tell me a little bit about your early life? Where were you born and raised?

Sylvia:

Okay, sure. I was born and raised in Long Branch. I grew up... So, it was my mother who has a multi-generational Long Branch family on that side. My dad actually came here from Cuba. So I am a hybrid Italian Cuban. You would think that I would be a better cook. [Laughter] I grew up in Long Branch, went to high school there, went to college at Montclair State College at the time, now it's University. Afterwards, I started working in New York City in advertising and marketing and then came back down to the shore. You never really go too far from the shore. And I started working in development for family and children's service. From that time on, I worked in finance. My first husband and I had a financial resource business and I've been running nonprofits or at least being on a board of a nonprofit probably for the last twenty five years.

Those would be 501(c)(3) nonprofits. And then this opportunity came up with the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce which is a 501(c)(6), which I didn't know anything about when I got the job and came. I like to say I'm a quick study usually on things, but definitely if I'm going to be

embarrassed, if I'm not informed about things. And so, I guess that's the beginning of me and all the way up until this morning where I work. I'm still for the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce and I've been here now, I guess I'm in my fifth year. I don't think I've ever worked or lived more than three miles away from where I'm sitting right now. I actually worked on Cookman Avenue in Asbury Park back in the late eighties the minute I got out of college. It's a much different atmosphere there now than it was at the time, as you can probably tell.

Gillian:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I wasn't alive.

Sylvia:

But you wouldn't. You can ask your parents. It was a little bit different. I've been a visitor to Asbury Park since I was born. My dad brought me there every weekend growing up until things started really... There wasn't much going on the boardwalk after 1970 for a while. There were a lot of new starts and stops and a lot of things that just didn't end up manifesting until about 15 years ago when it started to come back for real.

Gillian:

Just for my own clarification, what's the difference between a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(6) nonprofit?

Sylvia:

Now, I should have asked that decades ago and then I would have entered into this position already being very aware of it. So, there are different kinds of nonprofits. A 501(c)(3) is a charitable non-profit and the major differences are they don't have to charge tax. They are tax deductible. When you donate to them you can take them off of your tax returns. I like to call them the good kind because it- as a 501(c)(6), while the mission that we have is a really great mission because we support the financial health and the wellbeing of the business community which helps support the community at large, we are not tax deductible on your taxes. So, it makes it a little bit harder to get donors, but we have a lot of things that we have in common.

We are... Most people think the Chamber of Commerce is a part of the municipality that it's in. It's not. We are not funded by the municipality, the states, the federal government, other than maybe grants that we could apply for and hopefully achieve, but we are self-funding. We do that by our membership. We are a membership organization. So, we do that with our membership fees and then the events that we run but we also have guidelines on our events. They have to support our mission not just produce the revenue that we use to do our mission. So we have a lot of similarities with the 501(c)(3), but really as far as the effects that I've seen, the biggest difference is the tax deductible portion. We don't have the ST-4 which is the thing that makes you not have to pay or charge taxes on stuff.

Gillian:

All right, cool. You said a couple of different numbers and I was like, wait.

Sylvia:

Yeah, there's a lot. As it turns out, there are so many different 501(c)'s. There are political organizations and that's a whole different thing than what we are. We don't lobby, we don't choose sides on anything but we will support certain things, like environmental things. If there's something bad happening that's going to affect the business community and the community as large, oil spills and things like that, we will write letters to our legislators. We represent our business community at our local county and state level and sometimes federal level. And we do that hand in hand with our legislators and our leaders.

Gillian:

Very cool. Thank you. How did serving on the Ocean Township Board of Ed and being an outreach coordinator for the Ocean Township Human Services Department prepare you for your current position at the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce?

Sylvia:

That's a really great question. My school board position when I was on the local school board, that's an elected position and you serve three-year terms and your job there is to represent the student population and make sure that you're helping to govern the best possible education that they can get within the means of your community's ability to support the revenue of that. Certainly, but there's a lot of outreach in that position because you have to gather information from all of your stakeholders before you make any decisions. And basically the school board member is a policy maker. We don't make the rules of education. We follow them. They come down from the state but then we create the policies for how they're adhered to in the best interests of the students.

So you gather all the information. You have to be very aware of the voice of the people that you're trying to represent. And similarly, when I worked for the municipality, also in Ocean Township, where I lived, as an outreach coordinator, most of my job was getting grants to try to support the functions of human services. And a lot of that is also trying to listen to all the stakeholders, find out what they need so that I can help provide the funds that would make those things happen. And I was always very lucky to have staffing at every place where I was that helped make that a very cohesive and easy part of doing my job effectively. So when I left the local school board, I had gotten appointed to the state board of education which is not an elected position. That's an appointed position. You get appointed by the Governor and then you have a senate judiciary hearing. So, the senators interview you because you no longer now just represent your own community, it's a broader brush, it's the entire state and there are different needs in different parts of the state. So, you have to make sure that any policies that you create can be applied evenly, equitably, and make sure that everybody is being treated with the same equality. It's a bigger thing as far as making sure that I've got to reach every place and hear what is going on every place, locally of course I would see ... constituents in the supermarket. You never have to ask anybody more than once how things are going. They're very, especially with parents, their children are the most important things in their world so they will make sure that you're getting all the good information that you can.

So, having all of that stuff is really kind of bootcamp for running a Chamber of Commerce because my job is not to think I know what makes everybody's business run. I need to interact with them. I need to get their information and each industry is different. So, I like to say that it's like, between my husband and me we have six children, and you have to treat all of your kids the same, but everybody has a different need, and you have to take care of the one whose hair is on fire first. So, I use that approach in my work with the Chamber of Commerce Asbury Park, although it's only 1.4 square miles, it's got different personalities everywhere. And each industry, either retail, restaurant service, professional services and health services and personal services, they all have very different needs, and you try to attend to all of them equally.

But I don't know what their needs are unless I have the ability to outreach and get that information from them. So the years, the 10 years I had spent on my local board, I've been on this state board now for four years. And then in my position as outreach coordinator, I guess just in the title there it tells you a lot of it is just zipping up, listening; and that's the only way you can be successful in this job that I have now. It's to make sure that you've listened and then represent the people with all of the zealotry that you have

Gillian:

So, how did you come to be on the Chamber of Commerce?

Sylvia:

Honestly I was looking for a growth opportunity. I loved my job with Ocean Township Human Services but I was looking to do something with a little bit more responsibility and to apply some of the skills that I had gotten throughout my school years and my work years. And I had applied to several nonprofits because nonprofits are what I had always done from the time I was PTA president, which is another kind of 501(c)(3). And I had found some success in getting offered opportunities with a lot of the other nonprofits and really it was like a lark. I got an email from Indeed.com and it was the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce. And I said, "You know, I'm just going to send one over there."

And they called me up for the interview. I went in and I spoke with the executive director who was leaving. She was moving to another state and she was so pivotal in this renaissance that Asbury Park has seen that she wanted to make sure that the transition was going to be smooth. I met with her and the president of the chamber at the time was Roy Werts and a couple of the other board members. We interviewed and when I left I said, "Oh, Jesus. I really don't think I nailed it but I really loved those people." There were also... I had a different sense of what a chamber of commerce was. I thought it was more buttoned up and more, just very official. And they were so warm and so different. And then I got a call from Roy offering me the position and I was surprised.

But I was really thrilled about it because it's a very different... I like to say that we're a hybrid chamber. It's not like a traditional chamber and not that there's anything wrong with traditional chambers, that's just not my kind of environment. It's a social networking thing. It's a [inaudible 00:14:37]. Our business owners, many of them live right in town. So the fact that my board, the first thing I asked them was, "Is it okay if I start a scholarship program?" Because we didn't have one at the time. And I liked that idea of supporting the community as well as the business

community. And they were all like, "Absolutely. Go do it." They're just so warm and giving and so out of the box and everything is, if you can go to Asbury Park anytime recently, it's a button down community. You don't have to wear suits and heels, but the business gets done. They cut through everything else and get right to the point and I love that, and I love how committed the business people are to making sure that the community also rises along with the success of the merchant population. It just is a very different atmosphere than what I thought a chamber of commerce would be. So it feels very 501(c)(3) but in reality it's not. I'm able to do my job the way I love doing it because everybody else has that same feeling. We're all like half social worker, half business person. And it just works for Asbury Park. I don't know if the same thing would work for all of the other chambers in other communities, but it's what works here.

Gillian:

Wow. That sounds great. That sounds like a really positive working environment.

Sylvia:

It is.

Gillian:

So, how does a business qualify to join the chamber of commerce?

Sylvia:

They fill out my application. Most of my members, they fall... Because we're owner operated, a lot of our businesses are very small and our levels are like, one to fifteen. If you're a one to fifteen person business, then it's a \$200 a year fee. Non-profits are less than that and then if you have bigger numbers, it goes up just in small increments and that's really it. As long as you're, the business you run is a legal business, we want to help you, want you to be successful because your business successes are our successes. So, it's not a lot. Of course, you reserve the right. You have to have the board vote on accepting businesses but again that's just a matter of legality.

The truth is people that open their businesses and sometimes people that are long standing businesses, they don't realize that they weren't a member of the chamber because people still think that the chamber is the city. And we work very closely with the city, but we are not under that same umbrella. We support them. They are very supportive of us and it's a really good hand-in-hand relationship but sometimes I've had some businesses that have joined the chamber in the last couple of years that have been in business for decades and said they never had any idea that the chamber was an actual membership organization. And I try to help all of the businesses whether they are members or not, but I always have to make sure that I give some extra value for being a member.

I do ribbon cuttings and I even have the obnoxiously, comically large scissors and I will come and do the ribbon, the big scissor thing. I bring the mayor and council, the press with us, and that's a service that we give. I have a website and every member gets a link on my website but I also have opportunities for non-members. They can put their events up on the calendar, that doesn't cost you anything. I just feel like, again, their success whether they're members or not is going to help the whole community. And that's probably part of why I like our city so much, is

that I can do that without having like... My board, they agree with us. They're like do good for everybody. Just make sure you're paying a little extra attention to the people who do become members, but do good. Just do good. That's our thing. We just try to do good.

Gillian:

Yeah. Again, that just sounds so great. So cool. So, can you describe your job duties pre-COVID, pre-pandemic?

Sylvia:

Yeah. They've changed a lot. Actually, we're still not technically open. We stayed operating for about one month after the work at home order. On March 16th of 2020, we came home and - the staff is my assistant director and me, and we both worked from home for about a month and then when we realized we really couldn't function in our normal functions, because you couldn't gather and our revenue stream relies on the ability for gathering. We have events. I have the Oyster Fest, I have the restaurants tour, I have wine tours, and we do some other vendors shows. I do a big carousel awards gala. We do a lot of things like that and those are the things that generate our revenue, but everything switched obviously at COVID. I guess we'll talk a little bit about that afterwards.

But prior to that, my job was coordinating events, certainly getting sponsors for those events, doing networking events to help people get together with other businesses that might be able to be something that they needed at the time or make good business relationships. And also a big part of my job is to represent our business members with our elected officials at every level for their local, county, state... And so I would be invited to do press conferences with our congressmen and attend many events looking for support for things that were for the betterment of Asbury Park, and to keep up on all of the changes that happen at the state level and make sure that I communicate that all to our business community. And you find that you have to pack 40 hours into every 24 hour day.

It becomes a lot, but it moves so fast because there's so many different components and we do marketing. A lot of what we do is, my people join the chamber and they need their event or their special or whatever it is, just their business at large marketed. So we create email blasts. We have very active social media platforms and our website gets hundreds of thousands of hits. Another part of my job is forming partnerships with other organizations that we have a really strong partnership with, New Jersey Natural Gas, and with a number of the other larger organizations. We approach things with a lot of do good for the people and the electric company we have, there's so many that need to have that connection into the business community. So, they customer rally.

They will reach out to me and we will try to figure out what it is the community needs and how we can best meet that. I mentioned New Jersey Natural gas, we have a partnership with Townsquare Media and so I have a radio station actually on the boardwalk in the summer. We're open Friday, Saturday and Sunday and have the DJ down there broadcast live on 94.3 on off the boardwalk. And so every Friday.

Gillian:

That's really cool.

Sylvia:

It's really cool and people come by and stop because of the penguins, therefore its quite pleasant. It does a lot of cool things. They do interviews and also, New Jersey Natural Gas, what they really wanted out of that partnership is to be able to promote non-profits.

So, every weekend they let a non-profit come in and do their spiel and tell everybody what they're about and how they can be supported. And every Friday they let us go on there for like a minute and just say what's happening in Asbury Park over the next week. And then I always make my "I've got the face for radio joke." Which really nails it. [laughter] And so Tom Hayes, who is the vice-president of community relations for New Jersey Natural Gas, he's on there the entire time. And it's just another partnership where we have that every time. I think every time I leave there, he'll say, "Is there anything that the gas company can do for you guys right now? Is there anything I don't know about?" And that is a lot of my job. It's interacting with people and making available information to organizations for our business community and our community at large. So, that's pretty much my day.

Gillian:

Jam packed. Jam packed day.

Sylvia:

The days, at five o'clock at the end of the workday, my day starts over again because all of our events are usually at night. So my evenings, my job has become also my social life. Luckily it's a good one. Where else would I hang out anyway except Asbury Park?

Gillian:

Yeah. So, I know you talked about it a little bit already but just specifically, how else does the chamber of commerce help the city of Asbury at large? So, not just the business end of things.

Sylvia:

Well, I sit on a lot of boards. I sit on the... They're all advisory boards. I sit on the Salvation Army Advisory Board, I sit on the GACDI. That's Greater Asbury...h, and I always forget what the CDI means. Community Development Initiative, that's it. Which is an advisory board of all nonprofits and the police department, the prosecutors, the attorney general, and our mayor is the co-chair of that committee with the prosecutor's office. So, I sit on that. I sit on the Asbury Park Recreation Committee and help to devise things like the mayor's rodeo and identify recreation opportunities for the residents. And this is probably not part of supporting the business community, but again like I mentioned, the Asbury Park is a very different kind of community.

Doing that, to me, just feels like every part of my job, just like creating membership. Like how do we make sure that the kids are going to have their summer camp this year? Things that have gotten the senior citizens, they need to move. And we have a beautiful senior citizen center which is actually over by my office on Springwood Avenue. And they need transportation, there's needs. And so I sit on a number of advisory boards like that to try to help give them whatever it is that the chamber can possibly do. I became a Asbury Park Rotarian and that again, mostly what I can do for them is make connections with other organizations or other resources

for them and try to come up with as many ideas as I can find and whatever's left in here for helping them to achieve their goal.

So, if they are looking to try to do a barbecue for the community, I can reach out to food suppliers that I know wouldn't say, "We do a lot, I know you do a lot of business downtown. You need some donations for this." I can reach out to other supply companies and try to get things donated and donate certainly whatever we can ourselves. We don't want to run a huge budget but we are happy to give away every bit of it if it makes the difference in somebody's life.

Gillian:

So, what's your... Little lighthearted question. What's your favorite event that you guys do at the chamber of commerce? Like Oysterfest, anything.

Sylvia:

There are bigger events. I have fun with them. I'm not going to say I don't have fun of them, but they're a little stressy for me because I'm responsible for them. Like Oysterfest, that's 20,000 people over three days and it takes a year to put that one together. I love our Carousel Awards because that's us, just- we don't do it to make any revenue. We hope we break even but it's a black tie affair-ish, as much as a black tie affair would be in Asbury, it depends on what you're feeling wearing that day. Some people coming down, some people coming in a Hawaiian shirts and flip flops. But it's where I get to show off our business community and the special people that helped make Asbury what Asbury has become.

We do a lot. The Spirit of Asbury Award, that doesn't necessarily do business and I go to a person who just really has the spirit of Asbury. We try to do a big thank you. It's like a big hug and then we dance. We have live music and stuff. So, I do. I love that. It is again a little stressy for me, but I love it because it's just a big thank you and I know putting it on makes so many people realize what they've meant. So, it might be Carousel Awards- but then I also love Restaurant Tour! When else do I get to go to 30 restaurants in four hours and try something at each one of them? But yeah. I guess I'm going to go with Carousel Awards just because I like to say thank you to people.

Gillian:

Very cool. I actually hadn't even heard about Restaurant Tour until I started researching questions to ask you. Definitely going to go.

Sylvia:

Definitely. When we can put it back up, It is the best day. It is a four hour, we get anywhere from 25 to 30 restaurants, eateries and venues that will just serve that day. And you go by and you grab a bite of something that represents that business the best as they can. And we get- it's a 1500 person event, it has sold out for the last three years. Last year, it actually sold out. Well, last year we weren't able to have it. We had to cancel 2020 but '19, it sold out before the day of. Usually at the day of we have like 300 left, but it was like a week or two beforehand and they were just all gone. And I provide bus transportation so you can get on any one of our buses, get off up and down all over the city.

And what that's devised for, is because a lot of people will do a taste of the community, but they'll have everybody come to one central location and you walk around and try it. And those are fun too. But the reason I like to do it the way we do it is because you actually see where the restaurant is. While you're walking from say Brando's to Taka, you're going to see that there is a frame shop across the street, where there's Heaven. Heaven is this gallery that I bought my purse. I love my purse. Our retailers. So, you pass by all of our retailers when you're going and then there are people who come by and as they go over to the boardwalk participants they'll go, "Oh my God, there's the Stone Pony." And there are people who have never seen it in real life.

So, they get to see the lay of the 1.4 square miles and then say to themselves, "This is only 1.4 square miles." But they go around the entire town, try things every place, but they see everything else. And so that's why we do ours that way, but it's also not like a weeklong thing. I know that there are some restaurant events where you will go to a restaurant, sit down for a full meal during the course of a week and try something like a pre-fixed meal. And that's nice too but this is four hours. It starts at noon. It's over at four and you're done. And you've been all over and some people walk it, some people skateboard, some people ride their bikes, some people obviously they take the bus to and I'm hoping if things start getting better sooner, maybe we not only have that the last Sunday in April but maybe we can pull one off in the fall when it's still nice out. I would love to do one then. It's a lot of fun.

Gillian:

I'll totally be there. Put me down for tickets.

Sylvia:

You will be my guest.

Gillian:

Thanks.

Sylvia:

You will be my guest.

Gillian:

I'm looking forward to it. Only thing on my calendar as of right now.

Sylvia:

Well, I can't wait to get it on a calendar but you will love it. You will love it. [laughter]

Gillian:

[Laughter] All right. And so just weaning off of the subject of Asbury. So, can you just describe your duties as of what you do at the New Jersey Board of Education?

Sylvia:

Sure. Similarly to our local board, we form policy. We create policy for the 1.4 million students of New Jersey. It's a little bit different than our local board in as much as we don't do anything with the budget at our local board, you create what the budget's going to be. And that is you go line by line and say, "This is in, this is out." You do the negotiations with your education union. On the state board, we don't do any of that. The budget is created through the administration. That would be the governor's side of the aisle. We don't touch any of that. And then the administration makes essentially the rules for how to run and we create the policies to make sure that we are in compliance with those rules.

And again, listening and taking stakeholder input and seeing what the students at large throughout the entire state, what will help get their education to be where it needs to be for them. And New Jersey has for the last three or four years at least, has always been rated the first or second best quality of education for public schools in the country. And so once you get there, you don't want to lose that. So, we work very hard to make sure that our students are getting the best quality education that we can possibly provide. And also again, making sure equity and equality is addressed because it's the right thing to do but it's also the law.

Gillian:

Yeah. All right. So my next question is, thinking back, what are your earliest recollections of hearing about COVID-19?

Sylvia:

Jeez. Honestly, and this is again how the community where I work is so proactive and they take so much to heart and so seriously, our mayor there had been... We had all heard about this virus that was coming, that was going to be here. And initially, obviously it wasn't taken as seriously as it was going to be because it was really just a week before the shutdown. All the St. Patrick's day parades were happening. And then the following week, and I had spoken to our mayor several times and he was so just beside himself with worry because he has family that was out in that Midwest working in healthcare and saying, "Listen, this is what's happening here and it's coming." And he took it seriously. And so it was March 14th, it was a Saturday, I got a phone call from the city, said there's going to be an announcement - and I was in Costco at the time! And could I be there? And I was like, "Absolutely." I never got a call like that so I ran there and what happened was our emergency services. It's the OEM, I guess, for the city, that makes these announcements and our mayor and council. They announced restrictions on time and crowd size for businesses. And in the state there was none of that yet. There were only three cities in the state who did that on their own. Asbury and it might've been Red Bank and Hoboken, I'm not really positive of the other two but that's how serious they already knew it was. And when I saw how they looked, I said this immediately- that was March 14th- I knew this was going to be huge. So March 16th, the governor came out and that's when he issued the stay at home order. And so I guess my first inkling that this was a big deal was John Moor's face, Mayor John Moor. His face told me what this was. And so the 16th, we had a shutdown. It was exactly 30 days after that my mother was already dead from COVID.

Gillian:

Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that.

Sylvia:

Thank you. So certainly the impact hits home, literally. But I was... So last night there was a council meeting in Asbury and they've really been so active with making sure that the vaccines are getting to people in town. There's a large impoverished population there. Nobody makes any false claims that Asbury is doing great now, everybody's happy and rich. It's just not the way it is but nobody's ignored and they've been working so hard to get those shots in the arms of people who maybe don't even have computers or have any idea that it would be available. And so during the public portion last night, I said again, you guys saved lives by enforcing restrictions even ahead of the state and continue to save lives now after more than a year. It's going to be five more days until we're an entire year from the stay at home order. And so back to your original question, the impact, it was the mayor's face and then within the month our lives would never be the same.

Gillian:

Yeah. So, I know you talked about this a little bit before but how did your day to day operations get impacted by this?

Sylvia:

Well, initially we just came home and kept... Everybody back then was saying in a couple of months this is going to be over. We will be back in the office before you know it. Thankfully I saw John Moor's face and when we went home I took everything I needed from my office and brought it. It's right here under my desk. And I brought everything home so I could operate from here. And a lot of our stuff was web-based anyway so my assistant director and I, we worked from our homes and then a month later I finally had to shut us down because we couldn't just bleed payroll. And I refer to myself as the volunteer director for the next year but the job became very different because it wasn't putting on events and getting consumers down to Asbury Park and then make sure that they were going to become repeat consumers and maybe even residents, that's my job most of the time. Get people here, support the local business.

Now I had not only this enormous amount of people that were going into hospitals and people who were their businesses were closed down, they couldn't do anything except for essential things. The restaurants could do take out, the retailers, there was no revenue stream for retailers initially. So, everything had to switch. I had to try to gather information. Things were changing fast, what was going to be allowed, what wasn't allowed was changing very fast. I needed to be on top of all of that and then the needs, the financial needs to try to make sure that all of the businesses knew what was available to them as far as the PPP and grant opportunities. And I got very, very, very fortunate that throughout my time at the chamber and even prior to that, I'd built good strong relationships with some of our leaders like, our used to be called freeholders now they are the commissioners.

The commissioner president is Tom Arnone. So Tom O'Neil and our Senator Vin Gopal, I think I spent more time on the phone or texting with them than even speaking to my own family who had me in the middle of the house all day for the first time in a really long time. They were just feeding me all the information I could possibly give out and creating programs. That was where they both were, just - and interestingly they're both different backgrounds as far as Democrat,

Republican. And they work across the aisle with each other flawlessly which is the most beautiful thing in the world to see. They created programs like grant opportunities, the CARES Act. Monmouth County, the commissioners, they did our CARES Act money here in the County instead of handing it up to the state like most of the other communities did. Tom Arnone said, "We have 500,000 people in Monmouth County. We're going to get this money out to them faster and we can do it ourselves."

Vin Gopal created grant opportunities with his own nonprofit organization. And then he partnered with iStar which is one of the biggest developers in Asbury Park. They own the Asbury, the Asbury Ocean Club, Asbury Lanes and a lot of those townhouse developments, those are all iStar. And I think it just shows you again that you would think big developer, they don't care. They came up with this grant opportunity just for Asbury Park businesses and gig workers. Gig workers is a thing nobody else really knows about, but these are day workers in the restaurants or musicians. They have zero now because they can't go to venues. And so they created these grant opportunities and invited me to help administer them and to get the information out, make sure I was gathering information and make sure that we could get as many of the applicants as we possibly could the money in their hands immediately. And then the interesting thing about iStar was the vice president of development here in Asbury, Brian Cheripka, he didn't even want anybody to know that that was his thing.

And I was like, "Are you kidding me? You're like the nicest guy in the world and everybody needs to know that." And then that man spends 40 hours a day trying to help everybody that's suffering. And so my job turned into being on Zoom. I live on Zoom. Vin came up with this LD11 recovery committee very quickly and he has legislative District 11. He had invited a number of different people. There are 60 in total, 20 on three different committees. And he invited me to be on this committee.

And that whole committee was about getting information to the governor, letting him know what we needed to help us just survive until we could get back to thriving. And every day, even today, this morning, I'm listening to the news with my husband and I said, "You hear that?" I said, "That was from last week's LD11 meeting that reached the governor and how things need to open. What the help is." So, all my job has become was COVID recovery, it's all about COVID recovery. We opened up everything we had. The first thing I did when we went home is I sent emails out to all of the businesses. I said, "If you're a member and you received a bill throw it away. I'm not billing anybody. If you're not a member, consider yourself a member and avail yourself of all resource that I have."

Most of what I have is marketing. I will do social media, promotions, email blasts. I made a new calendar or a new homepage, put up on our website that says, what is open. Where can you get dinner takeout? That was all people did in the beginning. And so we tried to provide as much of that relief, but I found out quickly that I can run a lot of stuff from my phone. So, my whole job became that. Everything was just trying to help everybody not have a business death. All of these other tragic actual deaths, because eventually we're going to need to be back. There just has to be. It just has to. We have to be ready for it when it gets here.

Gillian:

Yeah. So in your professional opinion, have any businesses been hit harder than others? For example, like businesses run by women and businesses run by people of color?

Sylvia:

Well, interesting. Asbury has got boatloads of businesses that are run by women. We are a really strong woman town and everybody certainly has been hit hard, but what breaks my heart is we have an indie movie theater and the Showroom. And when we lost that, because they're last on the list to be able to open and when they could possibly show movies, the percentages of the number of people who could come in at 25%, they're three tiny little rooms. One of their rooms, 25%, would have been two people. And they can't function at that level. And obviously, it's safety precautions, but where restaurants and retail they could function with the indoor and the outdoor in the summer months and even until it was way too cold to be sitting outside, restaurants were able to serve outside, retail could have their things outside, we closed the downtown street so it was just a pedestrian mall, really outdoors, but a movie theater, you can't do that.

And so we lost them and probably that was at the end of the summer. And that was I think among the saddest days for us to see the Showroom closed. There wasn't going to be any relief for them until full capacity was returned. So, that business and certainly there's a lot of other businesses that had gotten hit hard. We lost that one. We had a sub shop that was fantastic and he chose to close. He just couldn't really function anymore. We had a business up on the boardwalk that closed for the winter, but he'll be back. He made that announcement on Watermark. They will be back.

And now what he does is he does live music from the Watermark just to have it, you know it's Asbury Park, you miss live music. So, he just lets it happen. That performance happens on social media there just to bring people up. He's not functioning in his revenue stream anymore but he is bringing art back. And the Stone Pony not having any shows, I mean, it's not gone for right now, the Stone Pony will live kind of like Cher. They say at the end of time, there will be Cher and roaches for the Stone Pony. [laughter] That stays lit no matter what. Through Superstorm Sandy the only thing that was still... It just makes you feel like life will be back to normal, but not having a show there for all of this time, that's heartbreaking. I know they'll be back. There's no way that they won't.

Gillian:

Yeah.

Sylvia:

But it's sad to not be able to go in there. On the upside we did gain businesses there and that just floors me for people to have that kind of entrepreneurship, that they would open a business during a pandemic. I'm like good for you! That is dedication to your craft, to your commitment, to whatever it is that your business is, but we probably had eight to 10 businesses open. The first time I did a ribbon cutting during COVID, it was a little odd because we had a super long ribbon because we had to put enough space between people. But it was just so uplifting to have business open.

Gillian:

That's great. That's really great. So, how else have you been able to uplift businesses during this time?

Sylvia:

Honestly, sometimes it's just a matter of they need someone like... Again, we're a very personal community, so my business, I'm very close with a lot of our business owners and I become even closer with more of them. Sometimes they just need to get it off their chest. Sometimes just express how scared or sad they are. And they'll call about, I need this. Is there anything you can do about this? There's the garbage pickup or something or whatever it is. And I'll shoot a text out to the city manager and just say while I'm on the phone and the next thing I know, it's an hour later and we're still chatting and it's not about that specific business thing. It's just because they needed somebody to talk to. A lot of times it's hard to keep talking about the things that scare you to your family or your closest friend. They're all scared too.

And I'm happy to be and blessed to be able to be that outlet for some people. And I think I probably feel as though that connection, especially when you feel so remote, having some connection, having somebody pick up a phone and call somebody. And on every one of my email blasts, I send out my cell phone. I'm like, we're still not in the office so if you need me, call me or text me anytime. And that goes to like 10,000 people and I get calls from people and that's good. And I look forward to the day, not because I don't want to talk to them, but I look forward to the day that they don't need to have that opportunity to them because that'll mean that everything is back on track.

Gillian:

Yeah. Do you think that you've gotten what you needed, or Asbury has gotten what they needed, from local authorities like county authority, state and federal authorities?

Sylvia:

That's a tough question because I don't know all of the things that the governing body knows. I don't know what everybody needs. And what I do know is that we have really good strong relationships, the governor and Asbury and our ...and our congressmen...and our Senator and the Freeholders or the commissioners. And they're very comfortable, casual ability to make a phone call when something is in need and not have those big rolls of red tape. But this whole thing came without a roadmap. There was no, "Okay, last time the pandemic hit we didn't do this right so let's do that right now." The last pandemic was probably, I want to say 75 to 85 years ago. And I don't know about it.

The only reason I really know about it was because there's a 103 year old woman that I know who said I lived through the last pandemic 80 years ago. And I was like, "Oh." So, I got a little bit of information on where there have been other pandemics, but this is the first time in my lifetime and there was no roadmap. So, I think the governing body was learning what they needed as everybody found out what they didn't have. And I think that we've had very responsive representation with our county and some of our state leaders, but I'm sure there's plenty that we felt should have been done differently. I don't think Asbury should have probably ever had to be ahead of the curve on making those restrictions because it makes a statement, but I don't know

how much the boundary of one city does to stop the advancement. But it makes a statement that this is something big.

We're lucky that we have smart leaders and that we have a very integrative community of residents and businesses. I don't know if they feel that they've gotten every... Certainly everybody needs more vaccine. And I know our county and I know our Senator are doing everything they can but until it gets here and we've all got all the things that we need, I don't think we're ever going to feel like we've had all the opportunities that we wanted, but sometimes it's a little difficult to be patient when people are still getting sick.

Gillian:

Yeah.

Sylvia:

Especially now. I don't want to see... I feel like nobody should be dying now because we have a vaccine.

Gillian:

Yeah

Sylvia:

Almost makes it worse. I know I lost my mom but there was no preventative cure for it at that time. Now there's a preventative cure and every time I see a loss, if they had their shot three weeks ago maybe they wouldn't have gotten sick. That just is hard. It's even more heartbreaking now but I think everybody's doing the very best they can. That's a good question. I think I might even post that next time I run into one of our council people- like, how do you feel like you have responded to...? I think Asbury Park is often on the forefront of things and I think they've brought the attention of needs before. Many of our elected officials even knew that that was the next thing coming.

Gillian:

Yeah. So, how do you think once this is all over, hopefully soon, knock on wood, how do you think the pandemic will affect your day to day operations? Will any of the changes that you've made to accommodate these times that we're living in stick? What do you think?

Sylvia:

I think that I'm always going to be very mindful of keeping my hands and environment disinfected. I don't want to always live like I think that I'm going to get a deadly disease if I hug my friend. So personally, I will let people take the lead on that when they feel confident. It's going to take a while before confidence is here. Even though you can gather or it's legal to gather I think people are going to need a little bit more confidence. I don't know that I hate the mask thing because I think I can live with the mask thing for it keeps my face warm. I never have to have lipstick on.

Gillian:

Exactly!

Sylvia:

I could live with this and I'm not a full-fledged germaphobe, but I never touched carriages with my bare hands or elevator rails anyway. So, that kind of stuff. I like having the availability of wipes at the front of all the stores and hand sanitizer. And I like that. I could live with that. That can stay. But I'll certainly comply with the laws and the CDC and then other things I'll let the community take the lead on if they're comfortable with indoor events of lots of people or if we should keep things outdoors when we can.

Long-term, it's certainly nothing that we're going to forget and I'm betting people are going to pay attention to the news a lot more. They're going to pay attention globally a lot more. And that's good. We're going to take what we need to and carry that with us. We're going to keep the education that we got here and keep that with us just in case. But I think that with a little bit of time behind us, people will feel confident. I think people are very hungry right now to get back together and see other faces, like see smiles. I'd love to give a smile from across a room but you can't tell if somewhere in a mask, but I think that people are hungry for those things. Ballgames, coming to a concert.

Gillian:

On that note, what are you most looking forward to when this is all over?

Sylvia:

Oh, geez. So much hugs, smiles, music, live. I've actually been teaching myself guitar. I'm terrible. That's how much I miss live music, is I bought a guitar, a second hand guitar and I've been YouTube teaching myself. I miss facial recognition on my cell phone. I miss my brother. He lives in Vermont. I miss making him feel guilty if he hasn't been here in a couple months instead of saying you can't come here. So, him. I want my brother here. I want my phone to recognize my face, I want to walk from my table to the front door in a restaurant without running back and putting my mask on. Those little things I miss but mostly I miss smiling at people and letting them know that it's there.

Gillian:

Yeah, I feel the same way. I've got two guitars back there.

Sylvia:

I like Zoom though. Zoom is cool. I see you've got guitars back there.

Gillian:

Yeah, I do.

Sylvia:

Do you play?

Gillian:

I do play a little bit. I take classes at school. I've played since I was like six.

Sylvia:

Oh get out!

Gillian:

Not that good. [laughter]

Sylvia:

[Laughter] Oh, I bet you are. You've got guitars in the background. My guitars' in another room. You can see my Danny DeVito pillow but I don't want anybody saying, "Hey, pick up your guitar and play me something." But you can if you want. Is that an acoustic? You can pick it up and play something.

Gillian:

Yes. That's it for my scheduled questions. Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

Sylvia:

No. Thank you for including me in your study. I know I can be... as much as I like to listen to people, when I get talking sometimes you're like, "All right. You've used up all your words." I should have told you in the beginning when I've used up all my words like this.

Gillian:

No, please. This is all for you to keep talking. Don't worry, I'm just here to listen to you.

Sylvia:

So, when you're not listening to like... What is your... Are you going to be in music? Will I be seeing you on stage in Asbury?

Gillian:

I'm just going to stop recording, one sec.