

**Interviewee:** Brenda Sawyer

**Interviewer:** Alondra Harris

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**Abstract:**

**Alondra Harris 0:03**

Today is April 30 2021, and the time is 3:53pm. Currently, there are 32,091,429 reported and reported positive cases of COVID-19 and the United States and 572,190 deaths. In Wisconsin, the cases that have been reported are 598,147. With 6823 deaths. The current vaccination rate in the US is at 30.5% nationally, or is 101,407,318 people. Now, today I am here with Brenda Sawyer from 4:30am coffeehouse in Chippewa Falls. And thank you for joining us for this interview.

**Brenda Sawyer**

You're welcome.

**Alondra Harris**

Now, if you wouldn't mind sharing, do you have any demographic information that you would wish to share for the archive?

**BS 1:11**

I'm not that I can imagine. I'm not sure what you're after. Exactly. We're in the city of downtown Chippewa Falls. And we operate a drive thru coffee shop. And we have indoor dining. Also, we're a small shop and have about 40 seats inside 35 to 40 seats inside and then a very active drive thru the witches located right downtown Chippewa Falls.

**AH 1:46**

And what would you say would be your day to day activities regarding your business?

**BS 2:02**

Mostly, I mean, we're a full service coffee shop, so mostly coffee, and anything that comes with it as far as coffee drinks, teas, and any kind of drinks that you can imagine. And also, we do a fair amount of baking ourselves. So we have a lot of baked goods. And we also run a full lunch, which includes salads, soups and sandwiches.

**AH 2:18**

Excellent. What would you say? It's like being a small business in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin?

**BS 2:24**

What was the question?

**AH 2:28**

What would you say? It's like being a small business in Chippewa Falls?

**BS 2:30**

I would say that it's, it's fairly challenging. And I don't think that it's just because of Chippewa Falls, we have a very active Main Street program. And so we have a lot of support within our community as far as that in the chamber of commerce, which we're members of, but it's challenging to run a small business anywhere. And obviously, with COVID, it ramped it up pretty good. But yeah, it's very challenging. I have a business partner. And so the two of us share the responsibilities of the business, and I do the business end of it. And she does mostly the day to day running of the shop.

**AH 3:16**

And you as you mentioned, it's, it's already pretty difficult to run your own small business. So with a pandemic, how much or little has that necessarily made it more difficult?

**BS 3:34**

I mean, it's changed our business completely. We, we actually shut down the inside of our facility on March 17. Last year, and we've just opened it this week. So our inside dining has been closed for a year and a month. And as you can imagine what that would do to your business model, it's completely different. And so what we had to do was try and figure out a way to stay in business and stay afloat during a time that was super challenging. And so we promoted through Facebook and different venues, ways to keep our drive up busy. We came up with some ways to sell our products differently. We went to some six pack, cinnamon rolls that were really successful and some different ways to I don't know encourage people to try our product without seeing it in person inside the shop, which is very challenging. So the other piece of it is just because of COVID just all that it takes to be safe. And so, you know, we've always been a shop that's cared very much for the safety of our customers and we've always worked closely with the county health department, which I'd like to give a shout out to because they've worked really hard through this process. And we believe very much in that ourselves, but just what we had to do to purchase supplies, sanitizers, gloves, and I think what most people don't realize is we've always used those products, but just gloves alone have maybe quadrupled in price.

**BS 5:28**

You know, a case of gloves is at least four times as much right now as it was before COVID. So And plus, you're using a lot more, because you're just more aware of what we glove up for everything now. And it's just the way that you do business. And this isn't unique for us is for every restaurant that's open at this time, I'm just trying to purchase all of the supplies that you need to function in a COVID environment.

**AH 5:59**

And with like, a lot of friction, because of course, you have had to purchase different supplies with the pandemic, how, like, how difficult would you say that? Like your supplies that you typically have before the pandemic? And to have those become any more difficult? With a pandemic?

**BS 6:12**

Yeah, actually, you know, that was the beginning of the pandemic, it was almost impossible to even get some things and we've gone to two different food vendors, because it's the same way with food that we scrambled around every week, it was seemed like almost every week, even now, there's shortages and all kinds of different areas in the food market.

**BS 6:45**

So you know, we wouldn't be able to get, let's just say, for instance, romaine lettuce or something like that? Well, that's, that's mainly what we sell our salad. So I mean, if you can't get romaine, what do you do? You know, so it makes you scramble around. And when you can't get something through your vendor, then you're paying a higher price for things too, because then they become very expensive. So, you know, everybody laughs about, you know, the shortage of toilet paper. But that really was the start of all of it. And obviously, businesses use that too. So that gave you an idea from a household staple or it point what it would be like to run a business that has to try and come up with supply all kinds of supplies. It's not just toilet paper. But a lot of things we really had difficulty finding, and even today, we will scramble around a little bit. Every week is something different that we're looking for. So

**AH 7:45**

And with the shortages, have you had to alter your menu?

**BS 7:58**

we have been able to figure it out. Um, there were some times that in the springtime, I would say between March and June, where we didn't know from week to week, if we would have to take an item off the menu or something like that. We just tried to be creative. But it's stressful. And it's hard for owner owners and workers. I mean, we're really small business. So it's hard for us. But

even the big businesses, it's really hard for a large restaurant to and a lot of them were closed during that time. But it's a unique kind of stress that is put on on business owners. Right imagine.

**AH 8:43**

And for at the beginning when the beginning of the when the pandemic began. How exactly what is your on your business partners reaction? or What did you think when it first started?

**BS 9:01**

Well, weirdly, we were on a trip when it first started to come out. And we we got we were getting spotty kind of news coverage on it. And so we got home right before the shutdown. And so we were we got home the week before and we came home, and we just decided to shut down the shop and that was like I said on March 17. Excuse me. And actually I think we were pretty fearful. I mean, I remember being quite afraid. We were afraid of obviously our health and especially the health of our employees. We have a small crew but we're very close we have a few of us that are in that age group that that had concerns about our health. And so our main goal was, obviously to sustain the business. But really our main goal was to keep everyone well.

**BS 10:13**

So it was not that hard of a decision to close the inside of the shop just because of the risk of it. And we stayed closed a lot longer than a lot of places, that's for sure. But we really, it got to the point where we just decided that we would stay closed until our crew was able to be vaccinated. And he said that, even though the indoor seating has been closed, you've been conducting all of your business through drive thru. You're very, very fortunate. And we are very grateful that we, unlike a lot of places, we had developed a pretty good drive thru brisk business, if we would have had to rely on takeout, I think it would have been pretty rough. But because people were pretty used to coming through the drive up for their coffee, and in food, it wasn't that much of a transition for them to go through the drive up to get lunch and things. So and in fact, actually, what they found, I think, is that it's actually a lot easier. So I think our business model has changed somewhat, you know, some good things do come out of out of this type of situation.

**AH 11:28**

And since opening up your indoor seating, and have you experienced any, like automatic changes as far as customers business goes?

**BS 11:05**

um, no, not really, it's been a little bit slow. Um, actually, I think people are still pretty hesitant about going in and eating in places, I really feel like, we did a soft, what they call a soft opening, we didn't really announce it that much. We just wanted to ease into it just for our own sake, and just to get used to having people inside the shop. And then it was, it was a good week, a lot to get used to just having people around. You know, it's good. I mean, we have a lot of, you know,

being from a smaller town, you have a lot of really good friends that come in. And so it's good to see their faces, for sure. But it was an adjustment this week for just, you know, learning how to make sure the tables are safe. And you know, all the all the things good keep everybody safe.

**AH 12:35**

And would you say that transition has been more on like the smooth side or the rocky side for your employees?

**BS 12:40**

I think it's been pretty smooth. Actually. We, we talked a lot about it, we're, we communicate a lot, probably more than most people do with our employees and team. And so you know, we had a meeting beforehand, I think we had a good plan in place. And like I said, we've always been, we've always been aware and strongly have sterilized and our standards are really high when it comes to those sorts of things. So it isn't that much of a change. It's just kind of being more aware as really. And we're already used to wearing masks all the time. So it really wasn't that much of a change, just kind of getting used to having people in there again.

**AH 13:25**

And, yeah, Chippewa Falls has many small businesses. So have any of your decisions as far as how you conduct business then influenced by other businesses around you?

**BS 13:44**

somewhat but I mean, we do kind of take our own road. As far as I think we're more conservative when it comes to at least we have been during this pandemic. I think that like I said, Our main goal was to keep our staff safe, and ourselves healthy. Yeah. And I think that we were able to do that though, because we did have the drive through. I mean, I think that I felt really bad for businesses that had to open because they have no choice. And we have so many unique and really cool shops, downtown Chippewa Falls, we have such a nice downtown area and and I think it's been hard for everyone trying to get traffic into their shops and things and it's you know, having to drive up we feel very grateful for that, because I think our situation is a little bit different than someone that just has a storefront.

**AH 14:51**

And, of course, you mentioned before that Chippewa Falls is a very close knit community. And so have your relationships with the community Been?

**BS 15:00**

Alternate all, over the time with everybody, I feel like everybody's trying to work together to get good solutions. You know, we try to support, we try to support all our friends downtown that own businesses. I mean, we made a good effort to try and do takeout food at least once a week or

more, to support all of our friends that own restaurants. We know what the struggle is. So we are very, very aware of that and didn't stay open longer in the evening or anything. Because I we really felt like that, you know, they should go somewhere else for dinner. And I know that's kind of a unique kind of model. But I mean, we're more of a morning shop anyway. And I don't know, yes, I think that we all tried to support each other. A lot of them come through the coffee shop, obviously. And so it's, you know, it's like, how you doing? You do? are you hanging in there? Okay. And I'll just try to support each other that way. Because we all have the same look on our face most days, like, What is going on? You know? And when is this going to end and get back to some kind of normal? Yeah. And would you say that being a predominantly morning stuff has been to any benefit or hindrance? What was that? I'm sorry?

**AH 16:20**

Would you say that being a morning shop has been a benefit or a hindrance?

**BS 16:27**

no, I think that's just our model. And that's just the way we've always operated. And we're running and working a couple hours before the rest of the world gets going. So we, we really cater to everyone going for work. So you know, by four in the afternoon, when the other restaurants are opening, or really getting, you know, up to speed. We're finished for the day. So we are downtown open, you know, in the middle of the night, practically. So yeah. And we didn't change, we changed our always just a little bit during that time, but not too much.

**AH 17:06**

And would you say that any of your alterations to your business for the pandemic are going to continue on once the pandemic has run its course?

**BS 17:17**

Um, yeah, I think, you know, like I said, there were some things that, actually there's good that comes out of every bad. And I think that I think not just for us, but for everyone, they're gonna find that life changed a little bit, and or a lot, and some good things to come out of it. And for us, it may be was we, we sold some of our bakery goods a little bit differently. People really like that. And I think just developing our drive thru business and in how we manage that at the time, I think, I don't think we'll change that too much. I think it's going very well. And we were pretty fortunate.

**AH 18:05**

And do you have any hopes or predictions for the future? .

**BS 18:14**

I see. I do really feel that things are really gonna bust open here now. And I think that as, as people get vaccinated, I think we'll see not just us, but our city and state, I think things will really, really come to life. And I think financially and socially and as people are more comfortable going to things I think you'll see that business will really start to boom. And I think that I think we'll come out of this just fine. I think that it's kind of an exciting time in the way because you know that, you know, I think things are going to get a lot better. And I think it's going to get better pretty fast. I mean, I think as our you know, uniquely in Wisconsin, as summer comes, we're busier, especially in Chippewa Falls. You know, we're kind of a destination city, I think, in some ways in the summertime. And so I think we'll see some of our bigger businesses like line and kugels that brings in, you know, a lot of people on I think that'll happen again this summer. And I think that that's good for all of us.

**AH 19:36**

So currently, you have positive thoughts for the road ahead.

**BS 19:40**

I do. I'm very positive. And I and I, you know, I think that we've all been through something that's really been crazy, and I don't think that we'll see it again for a long time. And I think that I hope everybody's kind of learned from it and I'm You know, we all handle that a little bit differently. But challenge is good sometimes. And I think it makes you grateful for what you have. And at least that's the way that we feel about it. So. So I think it'll be, I think the next year, I don't think it's going to happen next month, necessarily. But I think in the next six to nine months, I think we'll see a lot of things going on that are for the good.

**AH 20:29**

Yes, I agree. Is there any other final thoughts that you would like to bring to my attention?

**BS 20:42**

No, not that I can think of look forward to the future, that's for sure. Keep healthy. Stay safe.

**AH 20:44**

Well, thank you for joining me for this interview, and for giving us a new insight into what a small business is like during the pandemic. All right. Thank you.