

Interviewee: Kim French, Amanda Hines (River City Stitch)
Interviewer: Morgan Moe
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Abstract: Kim French is the small business owner of River City Stitch in the rural town of Prescott, Wisconsin. Both Kim and her lead Graphic Designer Amanda Hines had to make changes to how they conduct their business during these uncertain times of the pandemic. While they may not have suffered as greatly as some small businesses, they found an opportunity to give back to their fellow local small businesses in the Prescott and River Falls, Wisconsin areas.

MM: Does it say it's recording on your guys' end.

KF: Yep.

MM: Perfect. My name is Morgan Moe and I'm conducting an oral history interview as part of an effort to archive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and communities in the Midwest. For both the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 archive and the Journal of the Plague Year COVID-19 archives. Today's date is November 24th 2020. And it is 12:30pm. As of now, there are 380,000 cases in the United States, along with 2245 cases in Pierce County and 21 deaths. Today, I am with the River City Stitch team in Prescott, Wisconsin, Kim French and Amanda Hines. Thanks for joining me for this. Um, so first off, I kind of figured we could kind of just get an introduction on what you guys do at River City Stitch and your roles.

KF: Okay, I'm Kim, and I'm the owner of River City since we opened in 2007. We do screen printing, embroidery, promotional items, graphic design, pretty much anything you need to put your logo on, we can do that for you, we also have a location in River Falls, that opened a few years ago. Yeah, and we also have retail stores in both of our locations for local Prescott and River Falls, like the school's clothing. And then Amanda is my lead the graphic designer or will be the only graphic designer and she also is the head of the screen printing department and just kind of manages all that area. For me.

MM: So what we're kind of both of your day to day routines, pre COVID, if you can think of a day when things were back to normal.

KF: Um, it was a lot less, you know, structured on coming and going. timing of things kind of has changed, have for sure change things. Just when different people are quarantined and our families or whatever, like sometimes I have to work while nobody else is here. And then I make sure we'll talk about this a little bit later. But you know, there was times when I was by myself

for months when and then she was by herself for months when we were actually closed. So that's definitely the biggest change. For sure. Amanda?

AH: Yeah, um, before like, like Kim said, it was very not structured like a lot of us came in went as we wanted, and we didn't really have to worry about anything, you know, as long as someone was here during business hours and never had to worry about you know, like, who have I seen who is that I've been in contact with, I can just come in, do my job, leave, come back. Do whatever, as long as we met deadlines.

MM: Yeah, so in a way it kind of provided a more structure. Where's everybody what's going on? Kind of thing. Interesting, so when you first learned about the COVID-19 virus back in January, what were your initial feelings about it? Did you think it would still be around today in December as we approach December or?

KF: Um, I definitely don't didn't think it was going to be lasting this long. I guess in January, it was more of almost kind of like a joke, I would say just kind of like, you know, like thinking it's coming but wasn't really sure on the severity. And it was March I think when one there was like one case in Pierce County where it was like, Okay, now it's kind of getting closer. But then it was all summer, like two months. I think here like barely anything. The whole time we were in close long lockdown. There was nothing. So it's like, now now is when we need to be in lockdown. And we're not. And we shouldn't have been locked on that. Because then it was happening, which maybe that's why we were locked down but now things are going crazy with the lockdown again.

AH: Yeah, I just think that there's wasn't a lot known in January, you know, like that it was being compared to the flu. And then, you know, our people who were telling us like our government, you know, telling us like what was going on? They were downplaying it. I would say, you know, like, some people would be like, "Oh, this is really serious". And then people would be like, "this isn't serious". So when all of a sudden you know, we get a case in Pierce County, like Kim said back in whenever March and then we get put into lockdown, and we're just like, Oh my gosh, this is kind of serious way to you know, be careful. But then like she said, You know, like the lockdown worked. But at the same time, it kind of made it feel like like she said, like now when the cases are so bad as when we should be in lockdown. And back then when we were all staying home, we probably like, could have done like a little bit more social systems working. But at the same time, I'm like glad that we still took it seriously. I think it just like hit the Midwest at a different time. Because like when, when we were in lockdown in March, April, and part of May, it was really bad on the coasts, like in New York, California, but the Midwest had like nothing. So it really was like for us just like sitting here watching the rest of the country. And we were just like, well, we don't really have a whole ton of cases. So we were following the lockdown rules. But we weren't hit yet. And now we're getting hit and we're not locked down So

MM: yeah, I feel like back then it was like, we should be worried about it. But more as like, not a long term thing. because like you said, it wasn't as bad back then now is when we should be in lockdown. So like back then we were really worried about it. And now people are like going out when it's so bad. And it's kind of a weird. Switch around that happened. Um, so being a small business in a small rural town, how has that affected how you guys operate?

KF: From March until June, we were close, like nobody could come in at all. I was just here, basically, every day doing orders, and we still were getting some orders via an email and stuff. And Amanda was in was working from home just doing computer work, and then would come every once in a while to help print. Part of it has definitely gone down. For sure. ... [inaudible] ... Right now, for actuaries. But the retail still is basically nothing. So we'll just I guess, see how that goes with the Christmas and stuff. But yeah, I guess that's what I think on that one. It's mostly just retail.

AH: Because otherwise, it seems like the community has been pretty good about still supporting us with other types of orders, not just know, they don't feel comfortable coming in, but then they're still placing orders over the phone or like, online or whatever.

KF: And there has been a lot of, you know, national and local, you know, efforts for small businesses. And I think people are really trying to trying to support them, which is nice.

MM: Yeah. When you talk about like, um, like we just mentioned with the local help, or even the government help, did you guys receive any government help during this time?

KF: Yep, we did the payroll loan right away. So that really helped when we were totally closed. And that was a really, I'm not saying it saved us by any means. Like, I wasn't worried about that. But it was a huge was a huge help just to help pay the payroll costs for my full time employees. And it was still able to pay, even though they were we weren't functioning normally.

MM: Yeah.

KF: And then there's been so that was federal, and then we got one grant from the state. And then I also got a loan from the city of River Falls at a very low interest rate, too. So yeah, that's been really helpful.

MM: Yeah, for sure. And it's kind of nice that they were able to provide that for small businesses. I think even with that help, there's been a lot of small businesses that kind of had to call it quits. And it's kind of see.

KF: Yeah, it's for sure.

MM: Yeah. What was that?

AH: Oh, and I feel really lucky for working for our business, you know, like where we did, Kim did get those loans, and then they were used so that we could stay home and be safe. You know, there are unfortunately some businesses took advantage of that. So it is nice, you know, to have these, you know, like what Kim did for me and the other, you know, people who worked here, just being able to stay home and do what we had to do. You know, that was, that was really nice. And it was a lot of help.

MM: Yeah, for sure. And especially in a design role, where you're able to work from home to see that being immunocompromised, you can help safe as well, so you can still do your job. Um, so you guys were able to kind of do a cool kind of way to give back to other small businesses with your T shirts that you decided. Can you guys tell me a little bit about how that came about?

KF: Yeah, I'm gonna let Amanda This was her baby so she can talk about that. We'll be doing that.

AH: Did you mute?

KF: Okay, yep.

AH: Um, yeah, so Right, right away when this all started, we started jumping on these online like seminars like webinars for screen printers and stuff like that, because there is like a pretty good community, you know, of people who share information share tips and tricks about being successful in the business. And, you know, we do trade shows, and we make connections with other companies like around the world. And there's a couple of guys who really kind of head, like the screen printing industry, basically. So we jumped on this like webinar with them or whatever with a bunch of other screen printers. And they just like talked through, you know, like, ways is that we could, like sir, try to survive and like updating, you know, like, because we were talking to people like from all over the country, like in California, where they went into lockdown for we did or wherever they were hit a lot harder, and then listening to their ideas of how they were going to try to help their business survive. And from that, like seminar webinar thing that we did, I kind of had this idea where we would, because we deal with all local businesses, basically, we would put these t shirts up on our website, and we would put the business's logos on those t shirts, and then people from the community could buy these shirts, and 50% of all the profits went right back to those businesses. So if it was like a restaurant or whatever, they could put up a T shirt on our website, sell their shirts, and then we would basically like at the end of it, we wrote them a check and said, here's, here's the money you raised by selling shirts on our website, we didn't charge anything for it. We didn't, you know, we obviously prioritized our own customers, but we accepted you know, anybody in the community who wanted to put a T shirt on our website and try to make some extra money on the side, waiting, you know, for relief or for lockdown to end or whatever. And then we offered an option for people to have a back put on. And if they did that, then 100% of those profits from that back print went to donations for local COVID relief in the community. Um, so basically, we just like wrote off, like, there's a couple of places in Prescott and River Falls, that we're doing things to help with, you know, helping kids get meals that were home from school and like getting COVID like supplies and stuff to the elderly in or falls like just that kind of stuff. And, you know, just kind of create, like a community like small business kind of camaraderie, I guess. So yeah.

MM: That's so cool that you guys were able to, in a time where it probably wasn't so easy for you, but you were able to kind of go back and say, here, we're going to help you. Kind of a cool way to give back.

AH: Yeah. Well, our, our business, you know, it relies on other people's businesses, you know, if all of the small businesses around us don't succeed, then we don't succeed. Because that's, that's where our orders come from.

MM: Yeah. For sure. Um, so you mentioned a lot of like, online orders. That really helped you a lot. Was there ever because like I said, many small businesses were forced to close during this time. Was there ever that fear that maybe something would happen?

KF: Yeah, cuz right away there, we were unsure like, if you could, like, the rumor was that you couldn't even like be out anywhere. Like you were like, change your home. So like, it was almost like, well, I can't even drive so can I even work at all. And then once that kind of got that went away, then I was never really too scared about actually having to close. Um, there was a time that was, you know, a little scary, but it was never like, I never got to the point like where I had to think about stuff. So no, it wasn't too bad. Thank goodness.

MM: For sure.

KF: There was always enough rolling in and with other loans and stuff that I could that it worked out.

MM: That's good. Compared to other small businesses in the area and surrounding communities, do you guys feel like you're reopening safely and conducting business in a safe manner compared to other places?

KF: Um Amanda probably would say no, like no I don't I don't have a sign for requiring mass. I mean, obviously, most people wear a mirror when we help our customers. We're when we're back here working. Trying to disinfect. I don't have as much signage as other places do but always our square our retail area is very small at the same time so

AH: well and that to like our retail area is completely separate from our work area like there's a door and it's a completely separate room. So no, we don't have like signs up saying like please wear a mask but at the same times I based on like what other people have told me when you're dealing with you know customers coming in and being, like, rude and be like, "I'm not putting a mask on". Sometimes it's just easier to ignore that they're not wearing a mask, get them in, get them out as fast as possible. And then just, you know, make sure I'm wearing a mask, make sure you know. And because it's at some point, it's just like is it is it probably is worth the argument at the same time. It's like, I could just get in and out and the time it takes to argue with them about it.

MM: Yeah.

KF: And then just disinfect after they leave. Yeah,

MM: yeah. run around with Lysol?

AH: Yeah. Well, and it's not like anybody's enforcing it like the police in basically the I think the entire state have come out and said that they're not going to enforce masks, like they're not going to do anything to people if they're not wearing a mask. So it comes down to us arguing with customers. And that just isn't fun. That's not cool.

MM: Yeah. Has the customer response kind of been in between? with something like that?

AH: I'd say like 90% of customers wear masks?

MM: Yeah. So yeah. And so most of your business relies on shipping of supplies. And especially now with online orders. You're sending things out? Has there ever been like how has that happened with like mailing? Because I know during lockdown. There was a lot of shipping delays and stuff. Was there ever, like a replanting of your schedule? Or did you have more time in between getting orders out and stuff?

KF: Yeah, I mean, we definitely are still seeing that now with Christmas coming, it's worse is even more delayed. We just try to order things a little earlier, just to give the leeway. But we definitely have had some days that we've wanted something and it hasn't been here. So we've had to arrange a little bit. Not tons. But it does, it does still happen. And the shipping is definitely been one of the things that has changed. And the cost of shipping too has gone up a lot. So yeah,

AH: and like our stock to like when we ordered blanks, there's a lot of sizes, a lot of styles that are just out of stock, because all those warehouses had to shut down. All those factories had to shut down and start producing t shirts.

KF: So it's starting to catch up. Now it took a couple months to catch up. So yeah, so now that's hard when we have all these, you know, something will be in stock when we go to do an order online, and then by the time we're actually going to order it, once it's ordered, then they're gone. So you've tried to get it from different locations or get a replacement and you contact the customer. So it's just a lot of extra steps in there.

MM: Yeah, for sure. Have there been any positive changes that you've seen happen that you might keep up in the future? After all, this is over.

KF: Um, changed a lot and done a lot more of online marketing stuff, which is really been good. Amanda has done a really good job with that, you know, offering you know items of the week, which Kalie in River Falls did that more, but that kind of forced us to do it to get more people shopping on Facebook, and online? And you know, just email us and we'll we'll set you order outside on them if you don't feel comfortable coming inside. That's for sure. Been one. That's been a good change. I know there's been more than I'm trying to think. Manda Can you think of anything?

AH: Not really. I mean, I liked working from home sometimes. But like I did that before. I'm like, pot, I don't know, like positive changes. It's kind of I think our specific business, it's harder to see. Because the biggest impact has just been us interacting with each other, you know, like

staying six feet away or wearing a mask or keeping track of who's been in contact with who could be positive, you know? So.

MM: Um, so from a business standpoint, what has the pandemic taught you guys?

KF: Hmm.

AH: I think one is to trust our community. You know, I think I think when we started that businesses supporting businesses when the lockdown first started, I remember I was just kind of like, "I think this is gonna be good". And I remember Kim just just trying to I think she was being realistic just being like, "I don't know if anybody's gonna want to do this". And then when we started posting about it, and it went viral, and our, both our communities were falls and Prescott, like, you know, just really showed up for us and showed up for the other like, businesses that we were partnered with. And you know, like, that kind of just makes you feel thankful for the communities You are a part of, and it you know, just really solidifies that like, bond that you have with your customers, you know, because it also brought in a bunch of other customers customers that didn't have retail or uh food service industry, you know, and they saw what we did. And then they brought their business to us. Because they're like, hey, this business is doing something great for the community. They're promoting local support, local, whatever. And so then we've seen like a huge increase in local businesses coming to us with their stuff, which has been really, really great. And it's been very heartening, you know, to see people show up. Yeah,

MM: yeah, especially thinking times like these, like, we're all in this together. So the best way we can do it get through it is just support one another, be there for each other. So I think that's awesome that you guys have kind of seen that positive impact, where a lot of other businesses maybe aren't as lucky as that. So that's really cool. Um, so I'm kind of nearing the end of my list here. Um, has your experience transformed? how you think about your family and friends and community?

AH: Um, I would say, Yes, I think that a lot of people have seen division over this whole pandemic, unfortunately, you know, this whole thing has been politicized, unfortunately, you know, and there's a lot of people who aren't prioritizing the health of the people around them. And so it definitely just makes you thankful for the people who are prioritizing health and prioritizing the well-being of others. So I mean, I would consider myself very lucky and very grateful that most of my friends and family and my coworkers and my boss, you know, we all value health and safety over everything, and politics shouldn't be a part of it. And, um, I forgot what the question was.

MM: Just has your experience transformed how you think about your family and friends and current surrounding community?

AH: then yeah, I think it is for sure.

MM: Yeah. What about you, Kim?

KF: Sorry, I missed the beat. Oh, what was it?

MM: Has your experience transformed how you think about your family, friends and community just throughout the pandemic?

KF: Yeah, it definitely see different sides of people that you weren't sure of before. And also a lot of family time.

MM: Yeah.

KF: So which has been really good. And like, in the beginning, when you'd see like, I noticed, like the spring like you go places, and you see, like, families doing stuff together, which you've never seen before. And it's definitely gotten down a little bit from them. But I still think people are, you know, realize that it was kind of nice to slow down a little bit. Just enjoy things that you didn't, that you realize that you didn't do anymore. It just so I think that's been a really good change from this, for sure. Um, yeah, I was friends and stuff. It's, it is hard. Because if there's so many different opinions on things, and if it's up to you want to be careful on like, what you say and what and who you say stuff to just because you don't want to offend people. So does everybody has their own belief on at all? So unfortunately,

AH: politicizing shit is just ridiculous. makes it hard.

KF: Right? Right. Cuz it's like, if somebody doesn't feel comfortable going somewhere they should fit we find a fit, but if shame for it, um, it's just, it's just hard

MM: comes down to you just don't know what's going on in other people's lives. Mm hmm. family member at home that they just don't want to risk it. You just just don't know.

KF: Yep.

MM: And then one final question, just to kind of wrap this up, knowing what you know, now. What do you think individuals communities or governments need to keep in mind for the future?

KF: Hmm.

AH: I think just continuing about for our local communities, you know, just continuing to support local businesses. And then on a government level, giving local giving small businesses more support and giving individuals support to like, you know, we have been lucky where Kim has gotten a couple of loans and in grants and stuff like that, but there's not a whole lot on the horizon for us. And as regular like just citizens, we've received just the 1200 dollars so far. And so like, again, we're lucky where we've been able to stay in business and keep working somehow. But there's a lot of people who aren't working and are not getting by, and it's really sad.

KF: Can you say the question one more time

MM: knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals communities or governments need to keep in mind for the future?

KF: And then this was hard because it happened so fast, but there was so many people that took advantage of all the money too, which is really frustrating because then it hurts the people that really do need it, be it the PPP loans, the unemployment, that extra unemployment money that was needed a lot of people, but obviously not needed by a lot that took it or wasn't needed. But it wasn't, you know, it was more than they made normally anyway. So it didn't, it was it was hard to justify some of that, in my opinion. So, that I think, but I don't know, things happen so fast that it's hard to regulate. Um, that would be one thing. And then, I can't think of anything else for sure. But that's, that's one of the big ones that I've taken from it all.

MM: Yeah, for sure. Well, especially like the people that were on unemployment and taking it and saying I'm making more on unemployment than I did in my job. And it's like, that's very sad to hear that someone

KF: right

AH: into that, that kind of just highlights how low some people get paid. If the if the if the standard for living is this much. And that's what you got unemployment. But your job only pays you this much. That's kind of a testament to our know, like, everybody's like, the whole payroll issue with minimum wage and stuff like that, you know, instead of blaming the people who are stuck at home on minimum wage, you know, like, should be upset with the fact that there's all these huge companies that are making billions of dollars and are making a huge profit because of COVID. And they're not giving a whole ton of relief to their employees who are on the frontlines working, or whatever. And then turning around and shaming those who are staying home like they're supposed to, and collecting unemployment, you know, it's kind of backwards.

MM: I think there was also kind of a level of appreciation for it to because you also kind of heard the people who had to go on unemployment, and they're like, there are people that actually live off of this much. And then it kind of almost brings in a level of appreciation for what you do have as well.

KF: That reminds me of another thing then appreciation for teachers, knowing with my kids at home, like it's nearly impossible to teach a seven year old boy, your own seven year old boys. So I, uh, I mean, I appreciate them before, but it's tenfold from now from, you know, what they go through another having to do things like online and in school and you know, just that much more.

MM: Yeah, for sure. How has that changed your schedule with working and stuff and having your kids at home?

KF: My youngest is still in school. So fingers crossed every day that he goes is a good day. And my girls, they're in eighth and 10th grade, so that's not too bad. They're self sufficient.

MM: So yeah, that's, that's helpful.

KF: Yeah. And actually, my mornings are a little less crazy, cuz I just got to get one kid up for school.

MM: It's all silver lining.

KF: Mm hmm.

MM: Yep. All right. Well, I just wanted to say thank you again for allowing me to talk to you guys about your experience with the pandemic. It was very fun. I'm gonna go ahead and stop recording here.