

Ethnographic Fieldwork
Spring 2020 with Dr. King
Feast in a Time of Famine
By, BethAnn Decker

The week starting Sunday, March 8, 2020 was the first I really remember hearing of a “pandemic”, but it was mainly in Italy and China with only a few cases in Washington State and New York. I was concerned, but naïvely thought “oh, those are major hubs, we won’t get anything here”...then it *was* here...and everywhere. I don’t wear a mask and gloves in public, I *do* sanitize everything I bring home, but I did that before just because I know how disgusting humans can be! Now I’m better about not touching items in the grocery store unless I am *specifically* buying that exact product. I work in retail, and we had rumblings of “Clorox wipe everything down, carry them with you, don’t get too close to customers or each other”, but no real directive. I figured we would stay open, only to have several of us with weak immune systems and comorbid conditions fall ill, call in and subsequently be fired because we all know big corporations are all about the money, workers be damned! “You are expendable, you *are* replaceable” is the message most companies send to their workers, and so I prepared for the worst and began hoarding my meager checks and tax refund, if I had to live off that for a few weeks, I could. I also began to work on my resume as I had just visited “Career Counseling” on campus and had an eye-opening session with a fabulous councilor. My brother is a Johnson City firefighter and his wife works for the pharmacy school, they were much more concerned than I was, so that made me think they knew something I didn’t. We were all concerned for my mother who is 83, and a smoker, but there’s no keeping her at home.

I worked Sunday, March 15th, normally it's quite busy, but that day we were a ghost town, so I was finding projects to do, moving departments, cleaning, and getting help because bored associates needed things to do. I hate to admit it, but one day a week like that would be good. I got off work at 1:30, little did I know that would be the last day I would go to work, or see people whom I call family. Wednesday, March 18th all TJ Maxx employees got a mass text from our CEO explaining the direction the company was taking, we would be closed until further notice, but we would be paid for two weeks and if an employee had benefits they were extending certain parts of their packages. It sounded great, and hopeful. The best part was the CEO explained that the cafeterias in our European stores would be donating all their foods to local food banks, which I thought was the best thing ever. It gave me an idea, as a member of the markdown team I knew what we would be facing once we got back, so I passed my idea on to one of our store managers who said he would ask our district manager. TJ Maxx has everything from high end jewelry, clothing, luggage, shoes, and home decor to gourmet food at greatly reduced prices. I realized the spices and oils would be shelf stable and fine, but why couldn't we, as a company, send in two (2) or three (3) people to mark out the food stuffs such as the chips, energy bars, candy etc. and donate them to the local food banks, plus the company could write that off on their taxes! I realize some of the items we carry are not nutritionally sound, but we do have many foodstuffs that are healthy because the company, as a whole, pushed for healthier foods last year and our buyers have been great in complying. I heard nothing for days, until that specific manager called me on Tuesday, April 7th to say the company was furloughing all employees companywide. He said he had spoken to our district manager who loved the idea, but the company had removed everyone's security codes and access to the stores, so anyone going in would be arrested! So much for feeding the ones who need it.

As I mentioned before, the first I truly remember hearing of a pandemic was around March 8th, and I did start to wonder about the economic toll, then once the virus reached all corners and we could see the widespread hand of its grasp I realized what a monumental task everyone had in front of them. I just happened to have a Johnson City Press newspaper dated January 25, 2020 that I was saving because of the obituary of a friend. In reading that paper there was the first article I had seen, “Tennessee Tech student being tested”, my first thought was “what was this ‘novel coronavirus’, and why is it called “novel””? At this time there had only been 800 people diagnosed in China with 26 deaths, and only two (2) people infected in Washington State, it didn’t sound that bad. Once schools started to be called off I knew this was real, and it was serious. I sat at my dining room table crying because I could see our class discussing the children and feeding, and who *would* feed them? Would the state step up? Government? No, as we talked about in class, it would ultimately end up falling to private citizens and groups who are already woefully underfunded and stretched to their limits. Most school systems just happened to be on their spring breaks when most of this started, so “going back” meant going to school online. Great, their minds were taken care of, but if their stomachs and brains were not fed then “online school” would be a moot point!

Tuesday, March 17th saw the first article in the Johnson City Press that addressed feeding the children, “Groups look to keep children fed”, Assistance and Resources Ministry (ARM) of Elizabethton started a food pick up for their clients (suspending clothing distribution) on March 17, and asked for younger volunteers to staff food pickups. The fact they were asking for volunteers made me question the seriousness of this virus again, and/or question how seriously they were taking it. Head Start took meals to their client’s homes, the Upper East Tennessee Human Development Agency started a “drive though” for their clients on a first come, first serve

basis. Of course, Second Harvest answered the call, but in addition to shelf stable food items, antimicrobial wipes and non-food items such as “bathroom tissue, cleaning supplies personal hygiene products”, they asked for monetary donations so they could purchase what was needed in the correct amounts. The Carter County school system started their feeding program on March 18 with five pick up locations open to school aged children, ages five (5) to 18. Elizabethton city schools only opened three locations, with only a 30-minute breakfast pick up time and a 45-minute lunch pick-up time. I will admit, having that short a window in only three (3) locations did not sit well with me, but in my opinion, Elizabethton has always seen themselves grander than what they really are. There was one nice caveat they added, adults could pick up a meal at lunch for \$3.75. The article went on to give Washington County’s four (4) pick up sites starting on March 18, and lastly Unicoi County’s meal distribution program for children ages one (1) to 18 at four (4) of their schools. They also distributed meals via bus routes on Monday through Thursday. Except for “ARM”, all the school’s feeding programs started on Wednesday March 18. Johnson County schools are some of the most underserved in the state, having an exceptionally high poverty rate, this is underscored by the Johnson County school board reporting that they started their feeding program on March 17, and gave out 10,332 meals within their first week!

Thursday March 19, the Johnson City Press had two (2) articles on school feeding, the article on Carter County schools was the most telling to me, titled, “Carter schools provide 459 meals in program’s first day”, Lindsay Feathers, the school system’s director of school nutrition was quoted as stating “we served 459 meals, which is more than we serve in our summer program”, and their distribution sites changed for the next week and expanded to 10 distribution locations, mainly churches for that particular week. The second article printed on that day was about

Washington County's meal distribution to children and students. Washington County's Nila Babb who is the prep kitchen manager at Daniel Boone High School told the Johnson City Press "It's us being able to help the community and if there's a need out there we definitely want to fulfill it." When asked about how many they are feeding in their breakfast and lunch programs she responded with "...however many children that need it.", adding what foodstuffs were packed into each breakfast and lunch.

Finally, on Saturday, March 21, Johnson City schools announced their meal distribution plans, but they would not start until March 24. Having been a student in the Johnson City public school system from kindergarten until high school graduation, I can tell you this made me sad and angry that they waited so long to announce, then put their plans into motion; I feel it had to do with bureaucracy and some school board members refusing to admit that Johnson City has a population of poor, homeless and underserved families. Having disparaged my former school system, they did make up for their shortcomings by having 18 sites available for school aged children under the age of 18 to come and pick up breakfast and lunch! On Tuesday, March 24, the day Johnson City schools started their program, Sullivan county reported giving out nearly 4,000 meals to children on Monday, March 21 in their twice weekly meal distribution. The director of schools, David Cox, was worried about "flattening the curve" because so many of the county's school cafeteria workers want to help, along with educators-turned-volunteers. As of the date of this article they had discussed following suit of other school systems and using bus routes to distribute meals, but no other articles have been written about this subject. Also, on Tuesday March 24, Carter County schools expanded their feeding program going into the county with help from churches and volunteers from the churches used as pick-up sites. Lindsay Feathers, director of the Carter County Schools Nutrition Program said 929 meals were

distributed to children on Monday, with volunteers traveling to remote sections of the county to reach all the county's school children they could.

So, it seems school aged children are covered, but what about everyone else? Doesn't everyone else have a right to food, especially if they have been laid off? Well, I never thought I would say this, but I am thankful for Facebook to keep people connected. I started saving articles, not only on school systems feeding their students, but what cities and agencies were doing to feed the masses. The first non-school related article I was on Facebook was on March 20, "Cabazon Band of Mission Indians donates over 10K pounds of perishable goods to FIND Food Bank". First I had to look up who the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians were, and found out, The Cabazon Band of Mission Indians is a federally recognized tribe of Cahuilla Indians, located in Riverside County, California. While I realize this is not local, I have seen articles on how the indigenous peoples are being even more underserved during this pandemic, and to have a group *donate* food, to me, speaks to the indigenous peoples love and spirit for their fellow man, despite the atrocities they have endured. Chairman Doug Welmas of the Fantasy Springs Resort and Casino was quoted as saying, "This is a challenging time for everyone in our community, but there are also opportunities to make a positive impact. The food being donated would have otherwise have been enjoyed by our guests and employees, so we're happy to partner with FIND Food Bank to provide nourishment to others in need.", now while I am sure this donation was also a tax write off, but I chose to see it as man helping man.

Locally, we had Meals on Wheels making changes to their routes and to the safety of their clients. The previous way of delivering meals would be for the driver/volunteer to step into a client's home and help them if needed, spending time talking and visiting with each client. Now the drivers/volunteers are leaving a cooler on the porch of their client and it will not be handed

directly to the client, except for the rare exceptions where the recipient is physically unable to access the cooler. It would seem there is plenty of food to go around, and that warm and fuzzy feelings of help and love abound, no? No. Sadly, there will always be hate, racism and stupidity and it rears its ugly head at the worst times. Case in point, the Johnson City Press reported on the locally owned “Magic Wok” restaurant. Personally, I am not a fan of many of their dishes, but their eggrolls are life! But, thanks to President Trump calling Covid-19 “the Chinese virus”, many Asian-American businesses have suffered, along with Asian Americans being attacked. Chao Wang is the current owner of Magic Wok restaurant in Johnson City on South Roan Street, and despite having racial slurs and threats hurled at him, his family and staff, he managed to keep this 30-year-old restaurant open until Monday March 23. There are several other Asian themed restaurants within Johnson City, and thanks to xenophobia they have all had to close until this virus has run its course, with hopes of people coming out of their stupor to understand this virus is not the fault of these businesses, or the Asian Americans within the United States.

Let us focus on the help rather than the hate. More Johnson Citizens are reaching out to help others within their city, and downtown hosts the most vulnerable population, the homeless. Local artist and gallery owners Nik Bang and Eric Inskip were almost immediately without jobs because, sadly, during economic crises the arts suffer first. Instead of letting their misfortune get them down, they stepped up and began setting up tables across from the Johnson City Public Library where they knew they would encounter many of the homeless. They gave out sandwiches, fruit, water, personal hygiene supplies, and art kits. Their idea was to start out as a “First Friday” food drive event, then they saw many of the homeless resources’ shut down and knew they needed to help. Bang felt he needed to keep his mental health in check and said “I don’t know where my next few hundred bucks is going to come from, but I’d rather be doing

something like this to keep my mental health good and connected to the community”, adding “It’s been, like, the only thing good, honestly.”, and to see citizens not concerned about money, but their fellow man is a wonderfully refreshing point of view.

Continuing with the positivity and helping spirit, on March 22, WJHL news, through Facebook reported that Girl Scout Troop 978 transformed a “Little Free Library” into a “Little Free Pantry” near South Side School on the historic Tree Streets of Johnson City. While getting close to downtown and the homeless, the reality is people do not know their neighbors anymore, and it is easy for people to put on a fake smile and pretend everything is fine. This little free pantry offers neighbors a chance to share, and for anyone in need to hopefully get some food to get them through. This was one article that made me say “who don’t more people do this?”, but you have the critics who will say it only encourages strangers to travel to a neighborhood, it encourages theft, drug use and illicit activity and it encourages people to not work and not help themselves. Many of these claims can be disproven, but they fall upon closed minds and deaf ears. Local restaurants have stepped up and many began serving meals, free of cost, to school children before the schools started their programs, and now we have people on “the front lines”, medical professionals, firefighters, police, EMTs and essential personnel. Chick-fil-A in Bristol at the Pinnacle shopping center began offering free meals to these individuals from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. from Tuesday to Friday in hopes of thanking them for their sacrifices. Granted, it was only for one week and while supplies last, but I think it might have sparked other business owners into action.

While more local than The Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, it still is not within the tri-cities, but something I wish our community would undertake. Junction 35 Spirits, US Food and the Sevier County Food Ministries hosted a “Community Curbside Breakfast” on March 27.

This was a free to the public, curbside-to-go event where they served a breakfast burrito with hash browns, or fresh produce and fresh cut fruit, and these options have been the healthiest I have seen within most of the feeding programs. Also in Sevier County, a local family “just wanted to help”. Brandon Headrick of Wears Valley decided to give back to the community and seeing how tourism is Sevier County’s main source of income, he saw how hard his hometown was hit by Covid-19. He, along with two (2) friends, started “Wears Cares”, and set out to give meals and supplies to his community. They started out helping 28 families the first week, the second week it grew to 60 families and has grown every week since its inception. Kroger in Knoxville donated food boxes to currently unemployed restaurant employees. With both the Wears Cares and the Kroger food boxes this also made me ask why is there not a business in town that would step up to help in this way? We have restaurant employees, salon technicians, retail employees and more without jobs, some only qualifying for \$40.00 a week in unemployment benefits, which is not enough to take care of any bill, much less food!

Getting even closer to Johnson City, the family-style restaurant “The Farmer’s Daughter” in Greenville on highway 107 decided to close until further notice, so on Sunday March 22 they announced on their Facebook page they would be giving three boxes of food to each car that was in line from 4:00 p. m. until 5:00 p. m. that day. The boxes included fresh produce, meat, vegetables, along with assorted desserts. My first thought was “*three boxes?* that’s a lot of food”, immediately followed by “I hope the people who need this get it and not hoarders or people taking advantage of the system.”, which is a horribly, but sadly often repeated though in these times. I mentioned salon employees, here in Johnson City on March 30, the employees of “Salon Bilancia” pooled their resources and purchased chicken, the salon owner purchased all the other ingredients and served free, to-go traditional Vietnamese Pho. The employees said they

needed to do something and wanted to help; and while they were not getting paid, they were blessed to know they will have work when the government allows people to gather again, other people do not have the luxury of knowing wither they will have a job. They served about 100 meals.

Now on a personal note, Dr. King asked about the hoarding of toilet paper, and the first thought I had was, “people are going to be stuck at home with small children, who usually use too much toilet paper, so they’re probably stocking up”, then came reports of foodstuffs, cleaning supplies, soap and hand sanitizer being hoarded. Sadly, my thoughts went to people selling supplies on the internet at greatly inflated prices, and what do you know? It happened! There was the case of the two brothers in Tennessee hoarding hand sanitizer gel, purchasing something like 17,000 bottles. They might have paid \$3.00 to \$4.00 a bottle and sold some for upwards of \$80.00! Thankfully word got out, they were arrested and made to donate the rest of their hoard. My mother’s friend, Laura, works for Lowe’s in Johnson City, she told my mother that starting around March 15, their stock of refrigerators and stand-alone freezers started to dwindle, fast. By the end of the week they were completely out, and even if a customer ordered one to be delivered or picked up in the store they could not guarantee delivery by the end of April! They decided it was all the people hoarding/selling food. I personally have run out of gel hand sanitizer and had to switch to some liquid spray brand and a foam brand, which, if I may be honest, I do not totally trust. I am thankful my boyfriend always has a “store cupboard” of cleaning supplies, and with my allergies we do “hoard” the few brands I can use.

With all the school feeding programs, restaurants, and private citizen helping, one would think that “oh, there’s enough food to go around, nobody should be hungry”, but, as a class we have discovered that these initiatives are just a drop in the bucket. The hills and hollars in east Tennessee hide more families than we could count, and they are usually too proud to accept help, so it is quite possible that the most vulnerable among us are still not receiving any nutrition at all. As a class we asked the question over and over, “what’s the answer?”, and sadly we never did have one. We know this is up to the government to stop the hunger and the bleeding of funds, but we also know that with the current power struggle being what it is we will not see an end any time soon, so lets keep hoping for an end to this pandemic, fir more volunteers, and for the ones who need it most, to be fed.

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