

Community Conversations: NJ's COVID-19 Storytelling Project

Participants 57 and 58: Corey Michener and Taylor Krotowski

Facilitated by Beth Englezos

Beth Englezos: Hi, we're at the Paul Robeson Charter School in Trenton. I received a call a few months ago from one of their amazing and wonderful teachers. They were looking to pick up some groceries for some of their students, whose parents maybe were out of work, or their kids were now home from school. And, I was fortunate enough to be able to let them know that we not only had food for them, but we were able to distribute bags of groceries and deliver the groceries to them by next week, and that's where we are today, with our grant money we received from the Y Alliance which makes today's distributions possible. We are very grateful to be able to do this in the community, and thank you for your support.

Interviewer: How have your students, and their families, been impacted by COVID-19?

Corey: Our students and families have been impacted by COVID most dramatically in losing positions that they had before COVID. Uh, that impacts their income coming into the household and that's impacting the food that they can bring into the house.

Taylor: Also, we've noticed that transportation has become a severe issue with COVID. A lot of our families depend on public transportation, and being around other people while they are getting from their home to a grocery store, their home to any type of resource for them.

I: What are the biggest gaps in resources for your students and their families?

C: A lot of our families are currently not able to work because of COVID. So, we are providing breakfast, lunches, and dinners for our families.

T: Some other resources that we've noticed are a struggle right now during COVID have been childcare. We've also noticed internet being unreliable, and—which, that's now coming into a big concern with school starting online.

I: What are the biggest upcoming challenges?

T: We are on Week Twenty-Seven of serving fifty families. We started out really small with recognizing that there were a few families, like, about five the first week that needed food, and from that we've grown to pretty much sustaining fifty families for the last ten weeks, I would say. And so, yes, funds are running out, we're finding that volunteer time is also a concern because we've started school and we are full time teachers, but also trying to provide food for families at our school.

C: Beginning coming back to school with our students, uh, families are gonna run into childcare issues.

T: Another struggle that we see coming up in the future is just making sure that we are able to check in on students' mental health, and make sure that we have the resources as a

school with only one guidance counselor to provide services for students that are coming back and are struggling.

I: What resources have been the most helpful?

C: The resources, uh, in the Trenton community that have been the most helpful, obviously JFCS has come through for us once a month since this began. We really rely on them for the highest quality of food that we give out, uh, through the pantry. We also really rely on other food pantries, like Mercer Street Friends, Mount Carmel Guild. We basically emailed any food pantry within a 50-mile radius of Trenton, New Jersey to reach out for assistance, and programs like JFCS are the whole reason why we can do this.

T: Some of the places we go food shopping each week to provide fresh meat and produce are the Save-A-Lot right here on Olden Ave. We also work with Costco. We come in, we take all their boxes and we make sure that they understand that what we are doing for the community is impacting the families that live here. And so, we do have close relationships with those two food stores. And then we've also had random volunteers who have—saw our message on Facebook or on Instagram, heard through a family friend, and that have been delivering food.

I: How have you seen your students and families demonstrate resilience?

C: We have seen our students and families be extremely resilient in this difficult time, uh, especially because a large portion of our student body is English-language learning students. The virtual world is English-dominated, standard English, and the kids are navigating this with not a big grasp on how to speak English. So they're demonstrating resilience every day when they just log in, review class notes, listen to audio from the teachers—I can't imagine what they're going through to complete that.

T: And right now, at the pantry we are serving fifty families on a weekly basis. A lot of the families have shown resiliency by helping each other out, coming to pick up five boxes of food for people in their neighborhood, and making sure that everyone in their community is supported through our pantry initiative.

I: [Written: "Challenges: Food Insecurity, Childcare, Reliable Internet, Transportation"]

I: [Written: "Resources & Resilience: Adapting to Change, Building a Community, Collaboration"]

T: [Written: "This week was extremely difficult for the world as a whole, but the healing power of food and your generosity makes moving forward so much easier for our community. What you are doing is directly impacting the community and together we are doing the work. Thank you again and again for your help! – Taylor K., June 4, 2020"]