**My name:** Emma Binks, Hot Honey Café

**My town**: Melbourne

**My COVID19 experience**

I have a café; so, initially COVID-19 hit us hard. It was the uncertainty. I remember talking to one of my customers and saying I don’t know how we can do this, that this might be the end of the café. I don’t know if we will get through this. It was tough; but our customers, and my amazing staff helped us get through. I am lucky I have had the café for 15 years, so we have some long-standing and loyal customers and their support was amazing. We saw them every day and we all developed a closer relationship with each other. When we were in the hard lockdown – coming to the café was an outing for a lot of people and it helped everyone feel connected.

When COVID hit we had to change our model to take away only and were trying to adapt to changes daily. We had international students and other staff who were not eligible for Job Seeker or Job Keeper. I knew I had to keep the cafe going because they all needed work and so did our suppliers.

We had to try new things. It was like starting two or three new businesses – trying new approaches and adjusting staff, applying for grants. It was time consuming and stressful. The toughest thing was the uncertainty. Increased restrictions. Easing restrictions. Worrying about how this will work. Not knowing if it was going to work. So much was unknown. I still have my guard up a little bit because I don’t know what’s going to happen next year – will there be another wave?

We got some assistance from Government Grants, and my landlord offered some rent reduction. Wages and rent are our biggest expenses – to get some help for both of those helped enormously.

I had huge support from my local customers. Within days of the news of the pandemic, one of the long-term customers came in and bought 10 coffee cards - almost $500 worth of coffee, which gave us immediate cash flow. Throughout the pandemic he and his partner would give me envelopes of cash to distribute to the staff and gave me a beautiful hand embroidered bag with the Hot Honey logo on it. This was accompanied with some lovely, thoughtful words about what a great job we were all doing for the community, and how it was so refreshing to see our smiling faces every day.

Another customer who is a doctor would give us advice about what was happening overseas and what could be expected to happen in Melbourne. We were wearing masks before everyone else was wearing masks. She would do welfare checks on me and she would feed her family and friends and neighbours with our food. Now she is buying hampers and Christmas presents from us to continue her support for our local business.

Let’s call the next customer ‘E’. E wanted to be able to help people that needed it the most and asked if there was anyone I knew of that would enjoy some of our food hampers. My partner is a social worker whose client base is quite high needs and complex and definitely would benefit from this generosity. So for several weeks E paid for food hampers for other people, which we would deliver. I know she also kept her apartment block going with food supplies to her neighbours. E also has spent her Christmas budget with the business on Christmas cakes and Hampers. This acts of generosity and kindness has really made a positive difference on the business, keeping people employed and hopeful.

Several customers have said to me how thankful they were that we stayed open, and how much they loved being able to come and get a coffee and interact with other people. It was one of the few outings people were able to have. My advice to staff at the beginning was that customers will be looking to us to gauge how they should feel, so as much as we can we need to put on a brave face and keep smiling. We also showed them our commitment to safety – we had to enforce distancing and mask restrictions – it had to be done without offending people -we were showing them our commitment to their safety, and also to the staff.

There was some other side issues to recognise, such as staff who didn’t feel comfortable wearing masks, or partners with compromised health, or my own mother and mother-in-law with respiratory problems. Another staff member had a newborn baby and was worried about taking COVID-19 home but couldn’t afford not to work. One of my staff members separated from his wife and had no other income but one a shift a week with Hot Honey. The best I could do was to give him food every week. All my staff were given food every week. In our community, like everywhere around the world, there were many who were experiencing tough situations- death of family or friends (not COVID related, just life related), cancer diagnosis, loss of employment, mental health and isolation struggles.

On the home front, we had big conversations about what happens if the café goes. I have a mortgage and four children- two being teenagers that could not bear the thought of not seeing their friends! Both our mums have lung issues and needed our support. There was a lot of anxiety about how we were going to make it work. The kids seemed ok. As time went on, we realised we would be ok, but it was a real worry for a while. Some of our friends lost work overnight – and some of them helped me out with the café social media and business strategy. There was no hesitation to put their hands up and help. So many friends checked in on us knowing that I ran a small business, that couldn’t operate the way it had done historically.

Reflecting back on the year 2020 reminds me that people want to help, people want to be supportive and people want to be kind.

Hot Honey Café: <http://hothoneycafe.com.au>

Story shared for thekindnesspandemic.org/hopecalendar