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Interviewee: Anders Brooker

Interviewer: Michael Larmann

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Michael Larmann: Okay, this is an oral history interview between Michael Larmann and Mr. Anders Brooker. I am Michael Larmann. I'm conducting this interview from my apartment in Missoula, Montana. It is June 14, 2020 and it is just past 10 a.m. Mr. Brooker, could you please introduce yourself briefly and where you are and what you do?

Anders Brooker: Yeah, my name's Anders Brooker. I am the owner of the Runner's Edge and I am currently sitting in my office at the Runner's Edge.¹

ML: Excellent. Mr. Brooker, do you live in Missoula, and if so, how long have you lived here?

AB: Yeah, I moved to Missoula in 1999 and have been here ever since and live about three blocks from work here at the Runner's Edge.

ML: And if you could just give us a brief description, what exactly is the Runner's Edge?

AB: Yes, great question. So, we are a brick and mortar running and walking specialty store who mainly caters to, of course runners and walkers who are trying to live an active lifestyle, but also a lot of our customers are folks who just need comfortable footwear for work or hiking or other activities and then the other part of our businesses is an event management business and that is based on kind of endurance events where we get people outside interacting with each other, whether it's running a local 5K or doing a fifty kilometer trail race, but getting people outside in groups and building a community around events.

ML: Excellent. Why did you decide to open a running store in Missoula?

AB: In the simplest way to say it is blind luck. I was actually in college and not everybody knows this about me, but I came to college here in 1999 and I grew up in a family of, they were self-employed, had a few businesses just up the road and Plains, Montana so, about an hour and a half from here and I came to school and first I was going to go into pre-medicine. That was my other passion is running and athletics and quickly realized that the sciences weren't for me academically and so then I moved into business which was my other kind of interest growing up having family-run businesses and I just kind of watched what was happening around the country with running stores opening up there's around 1,000 running stores now, but then there was only a couple hundred around the country and felt like with my kind of family business background and my excitement about running and my excitement about business that

¹ The Runner's Edge is currently located at 304 N Higgins, Missoula, MT 59802

Missoula needed a shop like this and so we opened up in 2001 after I dropped out of college.

ML: Excellent. I think you've already stated it, but where did you go to college?

AB: I was here at the University.²

ML: Wonderful. Always good to talk to another grizzly.

AB: That's right.

ML: Excellent. So, what are the challenges and rewards of running a family-owned business in downtown Missoula?

AB: Yeah, so that I would say this, start with the family side of it where, you know, you always hear from a business standpoint, there's people that would suggest that you never get into business with family or friends. I've been very lucky in that when I started the business in 2001, my parents are two of the most supportive people in the world and they, like I mentioned earlier, we were self-employed and understood what that took and so they were very supportive early on with from a financial aspect, but also from just an experience and operations aspect and we have all had our shares of ups and downs because they've been so supportive over the years, it's been able to work and I think we've been really lucky in that some of the ups and downs, maybe that other family-owned businesses have gone through that maybe they couldn't recover from, we were, you know, able to and things like, you know, the first five to ten years of the business were really hard financially and that can put us, you know, a heavy strain on a family or on a friendship and we were to work through those things or, you know, when you have a partner, especially a family partner when it's decision time, you know who's making those decisions and in most of the cases they deferred to me to kind of let me run with my vision, and so just having their support made a huge difference.

And then my wife Meg [Megan Brooker] came on as a partner when we got married and, you know, so my parents are still involved and now my wife, Meg as a partner and so that's added another dynamic, but it just continues to go back to, you know, I think, for my wife and I, continues to go back to, we have the support of our parents, we have to support each other and, you know, we've done a pretty good job of leaving work at work and not bringing it home, although, you know, as a small business, you're always talking about your business and living your business, but I think the hard parts of our business we've done a good job as a couple, knowing when it's time to not maybe talk about those things and leave them for another day, but it's not easy and again, I just feel so lucky and that Meg is not only a supportive business partner, but a supportive wife and I think she understands me and I understand her and we can read each other well and when it's time to leave things alone when it's when it's okay to talk

² Anders Brooker was referring to the University of Montana located in Missoula, MT.

about things and to bring those things home, but I would just say that it's kind of blind support that we all have for each other.

And then the other, I think, big think is patience and it's not something I'm very good at is patience, but luckily the people around me are and they've been patient with me over the years and that's, I think, if it wasn't for us being patient with each other and understanding maybe the business doesn't continue forward. You know, there was a time four to five years in where I was actually ready to close down the business. It was hard to kind of envision how it was going to be financially viable moving forward and so if it wasn't for my parents at that point I would have closed down and not from a financial standpoint, it was just I mean as far as the support from them, didn't come financially at that point, the support from them came through, you know, just encouragement and supporting me to continue and to keep moving forward. So, although being a family-owned business can be challenging, I would say we wouldn't be here today, if we didn't have those kinds of relationships to kind of help us forge forward as we encountered, you know, tough times over the years.

ML: Fantastic, and we will definitely come back to that later in the interview. We're going to shift our questions a little bit to talk more about the COVID pandemic now. If you remember, what was your earliest memory about COVID-19? When was the first time you remember hearing about it or the first time you felt that it impacted your life?

AB: Yeah, I think like most Americans I certainly, you know, kind of hear whispers on the news or in the newspaper about what was going on in some countries around the world, but I honestly, I guess, blindly thought, well, that's not something that America usually deals with and so that you know it won't be something we have to deal with. I have a really good friend of mine who lives in Vietnam and so he's still citizens of the U.S., but he lives, most of the year in Vietnam, and he pays a lot closer attention to what's going on around the world. Whereas my head is kind of stuck in the U.S. a lot of times or in Montana. And so, I remember the first time was really were it was like, hey, this, this is something that, you know, obviously he didn't know what it was going to look like and didn't know the role it would play in America with the effect it would have but, he was the first person that said, this is something that's it's going to come to America and it's going to be interesting to see, at what level and how America deals with it. And I couldn't tell you what the date of that was, but it was early on, you know, much earlier than I would have I guessed really put any thought into it, unless he had brought it up to me.

ML: Great. Now when the virus did reach the United States eventually it did cause several closures, especially for businesses throughout the country, and even here in Missoula. From the research I've done the Runner's Edge closed from March 28 to May 1, if I'm not mistaken. How did this closure affect your business?

AB: Yeah, so that those dates are correct and I would say leading up to that March 28 date, you know, we were spending that kind of the month, the month of March internally with our team here kind of week by week and almost day by day, you know, watching the pandemic hit the

U.S. and then watching it hit Montana or we knew it was coming, I guess at that point, and so, you know, and I know where I was at when the first four cases were reported in Montana and, you know, for those next few weeks we saw definitely a decline in business and, you know, made some small changes before we closed internally. We didn't know anything really much about it at that point, but we were just trying to, you know, put some safety measures in place.

So, our business was steadily declining those again, I would say, middle of March on and then once the business was closed, it had a drastic impact on our business. We were down anywhere from 65 to 75 percent over those five weeks. Four and a half to five weeks and like I mentioned earlier, up to even the few weeks before that our business was declining, but during the closures, if, you know, we didn't have an online shopping platform available at that point. We obviously had our website, but we weren't selling product off of it. And so, the only way we were continuing to kind of keep customers engaged was through free shipping if they would call the store, we would do free in-town delivery or we do curbside pickup. And so, we would have one or two employees come in a day, we'd be able to spread out and socially distance and be able to fulfill those kind of phone orders and those email orders over those five weeks.

ML: Great. Did you find these changes effective to any extent in terms of business success or just general wellbeing?

AB: You mean the curbside pickup and the in-town delivery and those kinds of things?

ML: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, yeah, of course. I think they, you know, if anything is... We try to look at things as opportunities which is hard during a pandemic when, you know, people are suffering and people are dying and having their, you know, lives affected at such a high level, but from a business standpoint it's what are we going to learn from this when we come out of it and so we were always did, free shipping. We always kind of tried to go out of our way to provide whatever the customer needed but we didn't have a formal policy in place that was in-town delivery or curbside pickup and I think those are things that will probably stick with us moving forward that we'll continue to offer for people that either just probably from a convenience standpoint, maybe not a health and safety standpoint, but a convenient standpoint, I can see those things sticking with us as we move forward and if we hadn't done those things during that closure, you know, we wouldn't have had much business at all. And so, it would have been even harder to come out of it. So yeah, they were successful and, you know, we're in a position where we have such a loyal customer base that we felt very lucky to have their support through this because the reality was especially early on, they could have bought any product we carry, you know, with a click of a button online and had it, you know, in their hands within a couple days.

Now as the pandemic went further on, you know, online companies were only shipping essential products and they weren't shipping things like running shoes very quickly and so

maybe it wasn't as easy for people to get their hands on product like that, but we just every time we got a phone order or an email order we just felt so grateful and lucky because we knew that that was even creating another step or another barrier for that customer so luckily we had a supportive customer base that kind of kept us going through that four to five weeks.

ML: Great. Okay. Next question. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has affected small businesses, such as yours, in the Missoula area or just the larger Montana area?

AB: You know, I think it's been wide ranging. Obviously, it had an effect on most retail industries. I would assume there's some retailers out there, depending on what they sold, you know, saw maybe an increase in business with things that people needed, essential products that people needed whether that was hand sanitizer or toilet paper or whatever that was, but I think the average small business in Montana was hit hard. The ones that I think the businesses that I have talked or that I noticed that that maybe came out of it better than others were ones that I think pivoted quickly and were very proactive or ones that have an online platform that could shift their customers too. So, we have a customer base and we want them to be buying products, you know, they can buy it from us online. I think those one saw less of an impact. I know small businesses in our area that didn't see a huge impact because they were prepared for it that way, but the ones who didn't have an online platform are the ones who, you know, maybe didn't have a history or, you know, we've been in business for 19 years and so we have a history and a customer base that we can speak directly to, but the businesses who are newer or didn't have that consistent customer base or lived off of tourism and tourist traffic, I think those are the ones that were the hardest hit at least from a retail standpoint and then obviously from a food and beverage and restaurant standpoint, they were all very hard hit because people just couldn't get out and come to their establishments.

You know, and then I guess the other quick side of that would be, you know, we made the decision early on that we were going to keep our team in place as long as we could, as long as we could afford to pay and we wanted to keep them engaged. And so, we didn't lose anybody over the whole up to this point and we feel really good about that and that allowed us to do some business because we had a team in place to do those things. But it also allowed us to work on things we hadn't been working on, you know, so we tried to use the time that we had away from the store to be better, you know, long term and having our consistent team still part of the business at that time allowed us to do that and if we had to lay everybody off, that would have been a different story. You know, I know a lot of businesses today are struggling. If they were in a position where they had to lay their team off, now they're trying to rehire, they're trying to retrain and so I think that we got lucky in that we made the decision early on that we were going to do whatever we could to keep our team in place.

ML: Great. You've been talking about your team in the past few questions. I'm just curious who you mean by that and you don't have to offer specific names, but is this team like the decision-making team? Is it like the more including all the employees that kind of team? Could you just explain that a little bit?

AB: Yeah, great question. Everybody that works at the shop, so from our sales associate to our leadership group to our managers, everybody who's employed with the Runners Edge we consider part of the team.

ML: Awesome. So, has everyone also like had a voice in like going through with the closures making decisions or is that more your decision to make?

AB: Yeah, I would say that everybody would agree that they had a voice. In the end, the decision falls on, you know, Meg's, my wife, and my shoulders, but we really try to gather feedback as much as we can and so we have we have a leadership team at the store, which is a group of four kind of our managers and then we have the rest of the team and so most of the time the leadership team would meet. I would gather feedback from them and then we would at our weekly staff meetings, we spent a lot of our time over the last, you know, well, two to three months. It's the majority of what we've talked about each week. What's our next week and a look like and what are you guys comfortable with? What is the team comfortable with moving forward? And so, there's been a lot of input from everybody.

ML: Excellent. That that clears things up. That's great. Okay, coming back to the topic of family, because since the Runner's Edge is a family-owned business as we talked about before, how did the closure affect to you as the business owner and as a family man?

AB: Yeah, so I would say that, you know, from a business standpoint, which we kind of touched on earlier, there was a lot of challenges and there's still a lot of challenges today and I don't want to, you know, I don't want to pretend it that we're in the clear because who knows what's going to happen with spikes going forward and where we're going to be in summertime, or even next fall or this winter, but it was a very challenging spring for us. You know, our business was way down, we were leading into the busiest time of year for our kind of business so our inventory was at the highest level of the year. So, when you have a lot of inventory and then your business drops off, you know, you have to find a way to pay for that inventory so it was a challenging spring as a business and as a, I guess, the leader of that business.

From a family standpoint, you know, the other things in my life that also were put on hold. I also coach cross country and track and field and a big part of what I do in the spring and in the fall is spend time coaching. And so, you add that business was slow. There our track season got canceled and all of our events were either cancelled or postponed this spring. I've never had more time in my hands in the spring, I mean, in the last 15 years of my life. And so, my wife and I have a one year old. He just turned one last week and I will say that as a family man, we got to spend a lot of time together and we spent a lot of time with grandma and grandpa. And so, there was a lot of positives from a personal standpoint that are going to come out of this for us. You know, selfishly, if this had to happen, you know, it probably happened at a good time for us personally. We got to spend time as a family and with our young son and spending a lot of time with his grandparents, of course, we didn't get to spend a lot of time with much other people,

but a lot of time together in, you know, it was important and not easy but important to try to leave the stresses of work and what business was going to be like through this time at work when we could. I wasn't always good at it, but I tried to and just enjoy that the spring we had because, you know, from a professional standpoint, I hope I don't have another spring like that in a long time. You know, we hope we're putting on events and going to track meets and are busy at work. So, we tried to really enjoy the time we had together.

ML: Excellent. To build on that just a little bit, has the pandemic affected you in anyway, just thinking about, you talked about this briefly, but just thinking about family or specifically you and your wife as parents, for example? Does that question make any sense or would you like me to reword it?

AB: Yeah, maybe you can reword it if you -

ML: Okay. Let's see. Well, with all this new time that you were just talking about, I'm curious if it has affected you in a positive way or challenging ways of being a parent, especially with your younger one year old.

AB: Yeah, I think there were challenges and positives that came from it. I think that, you know, being new parents, he's our only child so being brand new parents and being at home a lot, I think, you know, that added some stress of, you know, as any parent knows. You know, being at home all day with a one year old can be pretty stressful. So, I think there were some challenges there and we saw, maybe an increase in stress and some things we had to continue to work through, but I think outside of that, I just can't think of, you know, outside of that other personal challenges besides, you know, financially and both Meg and I tend to do a pretty good job of dealing with the financial stresses that we either during this or other times that we have and so I think outside of the financial stresses of your business not kind of being there at that time, I think we handled it pretty well and so I can't think of any, you know, challenges outside of just being at home all day, day after day, or not all day but between both of us somebody being home you know more, excuse me, more than we're used to with a young kid.

ML: I'm glad it's mostly positive. That sounds great. Talking a bit again since you've been mentioning that you had much more time to yourself, you're using that time. How do you think the pandemic has been an obstacle or opportunity for you to work on your personal training physical health, whether that be running related or not running related?

AB: Yeah, great question. I think overall from a personal health standpoint, early on, I would have said it wasn't a healthy situation for me, personally. You know, when this all happened again, we were going to what would have been our busiest time of the year, business that we count on, and then things outside of the business that I really love doing like coaching and putting on events weren't happening and so I struggled early on, personally and I actually was, you know, some people in our industry or in our life when they're under stress they exercise and some people go the other way and, in this situation, I actually just kind of had a pity party,

a little bit I think and I wasn't as healthy as I could have been, you know, emotionally and mentally and even physically. I will say once I kind of got out of that and said okay we need to look at this and see what are going to be the benefits and the opportunities, then, yeah, I think I've taken more time for myself than I have in a long time. That's been really helpful over the last four to five weeks is taking more time for self-reflection and growth.

And then, to be more specific, you know, I've been running more the last month than I have in a long time, pretty much getting out every day. I've been, you know, as a coach, trying to be a better coach and taking the time away from the kids, which is the time I really enjoy for growth as a coach. So, whether that's podcasts or reading books or, you know, there's never been more information out there. So just, you know, taking the time to take in some of the information I've just haven't made time for in the past. And then from an event standpoint, that part of our business, you know, not being at the events, we've been able to take a step back and say, well, how can our events be better or how are our events going to be different. So, I think just using that time for growth has been really important, but it wasn't easy and early on I wasn't doing that. You know, early on I was kind of in panic mode and worrying about what was going to happen and none of us knew, you know, none of us knew that in June, we would be back in, you know, our doors reopen again we kind of be back to normal business. And so, it took a while for me to get there, but once I got there and stopped kind of the pity party, I was able to, I think, get a lot of things done that I hadn't made a priority over the last couple years.

ML: That sounds great. Just a few questions for specifics. Where exactly do you coach for cross country? Is it a local high school or an institution?

AB: Yeah, local high school. Hellgate High School. It's a public school in town. And then in the track season, which would have been the spring, I'm just the assistant coach so I just coach the distance kids with another assistant coach and then in the fall, which is cross country season, which is what we're going into now, I'm the head cross country coach.

ML: I've always found cross country fascinating. I never had the stamina for it, but it's just, it's amazing.

AB: Yeah, it's pretty fun because we have a fairly competitive team, but we also have a team that we try to make feel all inclusive. So, we get, you know, 100 to 130 kids out every fall for the cross-country team so it's a lot of fun.

ML: Excellent. In terms of other things you've been doing to fill your time, such as reading or podcasts. I'm just curious, do you have any personal favorites? Anything you've been enjoying particularly?

AB: Oh, wow. Most of my stuff is around coaching. Most of that kind of thing and so it probably wouldn't be anything that unless you're a coach that would go out and listen to. You know, so, **Jay Johnson, the Morning Shakeout**, a lot of running and coaching podcasts that I've been

listening to more than anything. And then I mean, you know, some, as an example, a couple books that I've been reading that pertain again to well coaching, but also just to running one called *Finding Your Sweet Spot* and one is called a *Supple Leopard*, but again, these are books that unless you're in that kind of small wheelhouse, you're probably not going to be interested in picking up.

But I will say that, you know, the other side of that too is from a business standpoint and, you know, I've read or listened to plenty of business podcasts and those kind of things over the years, but from a business standpoint, I think what's been helpful is I've spent a lot more time talking to other business owners. So, we've had weekly meetings with running specialty stores around the country. I spent a lot of time a couple times a week, communicating with another running store over in Bozeman. We've taking more time with our kind of leadership team here at the store so our kind of managers of the store. So, that when it comes to the business side of it has been more about a lot of one on one. A lot of kind of talking and listening to what other businesses like ours are doing around the country.

ML: Okay, what kinds of things are you discussing with these other running stores? Business techniques? Issues? Solutions? All the above?

AB: All the above. I mean, you know, it's been interesting to conversation has shifted, you know, as more and more stores have gotten open, but what's been really interesting and learning from these other stores is we're all in such a different place. So, you know, we might be talking on a on a Zoom call with a store in Chicago and might be some stores in Washington D.C. or, you know, Bend, Oregon all around the country and so normally if you had a conversation with groups of stores like this around the country, a lot of the conversation would be the same. Obviously, we have different operations and your customer base might be slightly different or, you know, we might do more trail business versus road business or something like that, but we're all kind of trying to do the same thing. Today, the, the weekly conversation was wide-ranging because of how much COVID had affected each stage and each region differently.

ML: Great. Is this like voluntary? Is this an organization of running stores that plans to meet together, or is this just like personal communication?

AB: A little bit of both. So, I'm part of a couple different we're part of a couple different groups. One is a group of around ten stores that we actually pay to be part of throughout the year and this happens every year where we have monthly conversations. We have a consultant we work with. We share numbers and we do a lot of kind of stuff you wouldn't share with other businesses, but it helps us grow and they're from all around the country so we have that group. And then we have this group that's come together for that kind of a national organization has kind of started just to set up a Zoom call and see who will join and it's been really fun to watch. I mean, it's 100 plus running specialty stores each week jumping on and just, you know, there's always a subject in mind. Somebody is, you know, taking the lead on that and you know they might have four or five retailers that they know they're going to kind of lead the conversation,

but it's open for discussion and people can jump on and say what they want and make comments and that was something that was not happening before COVID, and I could see that continuing. That's another thing that as a business community in our industry around the country, I bet that's going to continue. Maybe not weekly, but I can see every month, the same retailers, saying, Hey, if we're not talking about COVID, what are we talking about next? And so, I think that's something that's going to come from this and it's been fun because a lot of these retailers have mutual respect for each other and we see each other at a conference once in a while, but that maybe don't have the kind of emotional, you know, [inaudible], the emotion or the face to face that that you have in a situation like today and so it's been good really good to be part of.

ML: Great. Do any of these conferences or groups have any names, by any chance, or is it more informal?

AB: Yeah, so there's a couple groups. **RIA, Running Independent Association** and then there's the **Running Event**.³ So, the Running Event is an event we all go to in December and it's an Austin and they're the ones that have kind of taken the lead on, Hey, you know, we don't know when we're going to get together again, but we want to provide value for everybody who's part of this industry. And so, they're the ones that have started the kind of weekly calls and that was the Running Event and if you just Google the Running Event in Austin, you would see that for **IRA**. If you just search **IRA**, you would see their website also.

ML: Awesome. This is fascinating. Great. I'm going to move on to the next question, if that's okay. Excellent. That was wonderful. The Runner's Edge's mission statement is "to enhance the lives by building community developing relationships and having fun." How has the pandemic affected your ability to fulfill your mission statement?

AB: Great Question. In the one thing we always point out about that mission statement is it doesn't say anything about selling shoes in there and, you know, those are truly the three things that we're interested in and obviously we're interested in shoes and were interested in product and without those things we wouldn't be in business and we think that those you know help make the experience better for people, but we're interested in community were interested in the relationships we have with the people around us and then if it's not fun, why are we doing it? So, those are the three things we're always kind of thinking about when we're thinking about making decisions. I think that our community is going to be stronger when we come out of this. I think that it's forced us to communicate in a different way to our community. So, whether that's through virtual events, whether that's, you know, through in-town drop off or in-town delivery or curbside pickup, I just think the shift has been like we're all kind of in this together and you know those are kind of things that people have said over the years in different situations, but I think that resonates more with people and I think that what we're going to find is that, especially in a town like Missoula or a community like western Montana, that, you know, people are going to continue to support each other, maybe even more than

³ Does this mean the Running Industry Association? The Independent Running Retailer Association?

they have in the past because they see their neighbors and they see their co-workers and they see the people around them suffering and so I think that the support of our community is going to be really high as we move forward. I don't just mean our community, but the whole community. So, I think if anything it's just changed the narrative a little bit and how we're able to talk to them.

I will say that we missed our relationships, you know, we've missed the one on ones and the time with our friends. I was up for a run this morning and I ran past five guys, you know, now that we're in Montana and small groups and get together and five guys that I haven't seen those five guys since January and some of them longer, but like, face to face, and I ran by on a trail this morning, and that's the relationships we miss. You know, we're still trying to develop those other ways, but they're just different than what we enjoy doing which is the face to face interaction, whether that's in the store or at events and now that we're open back up we're seeing more of those, but it's still on a limited level. And then the fun part of that mission that's been the most challenging part I think is, you know, it's not as much fun. It's just not. It's something we are dealing with right now and, you know, we again tried to create fun through virtual experiences and through interactions, but for us, the fun comes from the other two, the being around your community and the physical building of relationships. So, I would say that, you know, in that order, the community we're still trying to build, relationships we miss, and the fun, it's been a little non-existent sometimes during this time.

ML: Excellent. Since we were talking about community in a wider sense, I'd like to narrow it down just a little bit and talk about the running community, specifically here in Missoula, Montana. How do you think the COVID-19 outbreak has affected the running community? Yeah, let's just start there.

AB: I think that the running community that was used to getting together at events or in groups group runs training classes events, I think it's had a varying impact of those people. Some have been fine and will work through it and be ready for the next event and for a lot of people, there's a lot of runners out there that the motivation from the group, the accountability from the group, is a big part of why they do it and how they do it and so I think there's some of those people that are struggling right now. They miss their groups and they miss their community, their running community. And again, now that we're starting to come out of it, they're starting to get back into smaller groups, at least so I think we're seeing some of that.

I will say, though, that the maybe less engaged running community or the maybe the person who hasn't ran in a while and took a break or maybe never, we're seeing a lot more of those people now get into the sport, and I think that might end up being another one of these for our small niche community of really positive things that comes from this and that. You know gyms were closed, maybe other activities they were used to doing, maybe they had more time on their hands because they weren't working or maybe they needed a way to relieve some stress from this whole thing. I would just say, anecdotally, the experience I have and others is there is more people on the trails running today than there's ever been in Missoula, and it's because of

what we've experienced with COVID. People, for the reasons I mentioned before, are getting out and it's faces that I haven't seen in a long time or ever out on the trails and they might never shop at the Runner's Edge, we hope they do.

We hope that they feel comfortable coming in and being part of this community, but that's one of the things that's made me feel better about being out is seeing all these new people on the trails and, I mean, it was even at a point where there was a time in Missoula where there was too much trail use. Right when we were all supposed to be socially distancing and keeping six feet apart and not being around other people. I mean, the Parks and Rec and the Forest Service and local agencies were dealing with like trying to, you know, have less and less people using the trails, because the trailheads were full, they're as busy as they've ever been so the question is will those people, the new people keep being engaged in this sport as things kind of open back up and, you know, that's the question we're continuing to ask internally and not to get more customers, although we'd like more customers, but how do you keep these new people, like how do you keep them excited and show them that there's a community around them once we can all get back together that is here to support them and that even elevates their experience of getting outside and running or walking?

ML: Great. Excellent. I'm also curious again, as you're talking about more people coming into their own community, I'm interested in the Runner's Edge's participation encouraging runners to stay active. Looking at your website, I've seen that you have been posting Quarantine Q&A's with certain runners, how they've been dealing with the quarantine, staying healthy, both physically and mentally and you've also been posting digital run challenges, trying to challenge certain runners to post their best time. So, how do you think the Runner's Edge specifically has been trying to keep runners connected and active?

AB: Yeah, and I wouldn't say that we were perfect in this area, but we try. We spend a lot of time saying, Okay, how do we keep people connected and active? And so those were the two things you had kind of mentioned where most of our interview was put in, you know, the Quarantine Q&A was about picking runners out of our current running community that we know and showing, you know, interviewing them in a way that would show other people that, Hey, you can still stay active and here is how these people are doing it and they're dealing with the same things you're dealing with, you know, they're dealing with the lack of runner friends or, you know, whatever it is the same stresses you have they're dealing with it. And so, we hoped that was kind of either a fun way to stay engaged or motivated to say, okay, these guys are able to do what these ladies were able to do it. I need to do that also, or I can do that also.

And then the virtual events, again, it was just a way to keep people connected and to keep people like engaged. You know, you don't have a race to train for or you don't have a training partner that's helping you kind of get up out of the door in the morning? Let us create some fun kind of events that will maybe just give you a little extra nudge to keep things rolling and so, those were both important things that we did. And then we ended up doing some bigger challenges. One is called GNAR [Great North American Relay] relay where that one just finished

up well a week and a half ago or so and that one, you know, we had almost 300 people participate in, and it was a group goal so, you know, you can track how far you ran over a week or you hike. You can hike, you can walk, you could run it. We wanted everybody to be able to be involved, but we set a group goal and that was a lot of fun to watch the people kind of be engaged to try to help out, you know, their fellow, you know, runner, walker, hiker to try to hit that group goal so that was a lot of fun.

ML: How important do you think technology is for runners, just with like these group exercises, we've been talking about?

AB: I think it's more and more important. What we're seeing is, you know, there was this kind of division in our community between people who had a watch on the wrists that would tell them how fast and far they're going, you know, it had GPS on it and a lot of the runners said it's not something I want to do. You know, I don't want to go there. I don't need to go there for whatever reason. But now the shift has been like if you didn't have some kind of, and not even social media, necessarily, although a lot of this stuff was kind of done through social media, but if you weren't participating in some kind of online running platform like a platform called Strava, if you weren't on there, some of these things you just couldn't do which made it kind of challenging. And so, we had some people that were disappointed that, Hey, I'm out here doing it, but I can't really feel like I'm part of the community because I'm not on those platforms. And so, what we saw was there are still those people that don't want to be part of that and that's fine. You know, personally I'm okay with that, you know, I don't spend a lot of my time on those platforms, but the community shifted from in person to now virtually and if you weren't willing to shift with it, yeah, you were going to miss out on some of that and for better or worse, I think a lot of people, maybe this was this forced them to make that transition like. Okay now I got to have Strava. Now I have to have my Garmin, you know, whatever it may be. Maybe it was just enough to get them over the hump so now they're spending more time using some of those platforms.

ML: Interesting and we were just talking about some runners struggling because their events have been cancelled or postponed. One larger event in which I've mentioned with you before is the Missoula Marathon, which is hosted by Run Wild Missoula. This is the first time in 14 years in which they've actually decided to cancel the marathon and move it to a digital format. I'm going to leave this question open-ended because there's many ways to go about it. One, I'm just curious what you think in terms of planning large events. Two, I'm also curious because the Missoula Marathon was a very large event. From research I've done, in in past years it's attracted over 6,000 runners and has generated approximately two million dollars of revenue for this city. So, I'm curious from one, a runner's perspective, the effect of races being postponed or cancelled and two, the effect of the cancellation of the marathon on businesses such as yours because I can only imagine that a running store would have done very well with a large marathon in the city. You can go about that whoever you wish. I'm kind of leaving it open.

AB: Yeah, let me start with the Missoula Marathon. So, you know, back to one of your earlier questions that we were talking about the Runner's Edge and the Missoula running community kind of getting going, there was a big shift in Missoula when the Missoula marathon started. You know we had some big events here. The River Bank Run and a few others, but nothing that moved the needle like the Missoula Marathon and it was very clear shift for people in Missoula when the Marathon, the first couple years of the marathon. It brought a lot of new runners out. People that, you know, maybe don't do any other run of the year, but they want to do the Missoula Half Marathon. It's something they want to be part of and so, it became a very important part of our community in Missoula as a whole, which was some things you mentioned the economic impact to bring tourism here in July and now what would be June and then just help our running community. There was a time where we'd have 300 people just doing one of the training classes for the Missoula Marathon and it really made a difference as the Missoula Marathon picked up steam and is sort of winning national recognition.

To not have the marathon in Missoula obviously has its impact, you know, over the weekend for restaurants and hotels and so, that weekend there's going to be a hole there and it had a big impact, like you said some years up to two million dollars of impact over that week. For a business like ours, who, you know, was part of some of those earlier training classes, you know, Run Wild Missoula would put them on, but we'd help partner on them and a lot of our business was driven by people who were training for the marathon. So maybe January 1 would hit. They're starting to train for their June or July race, which would be the Missoula marathon. Excuse me. And so, we would start seeing traffic early on in the year and all the way through the spring and then of course the week of the marathon was our largest week of the year, by far. Like it's the week we talk about all year long at the Runner's Edge. It's our biggest week and, you know, the way our industry works and the way a lot of retail works is we buy our inventory about six months in advance. So, the inventory that we were planning for the summer around the Missoula Marathon we've already purchased and some of it we already have, some what we canceled, but it's going to have a big impact in our business in a lot of ways. It's a lot of our customers who get excited about the event might not come see us. So, the community side of it, or the relationship side of it. Back to the fun part of our mission like we all, although it's our busiest week of the year, it's something we all look forward to. We really do. Most of our team here, all of our team at some level, plays a role that week, whether they play a role in the store or whether they're volunteering in the race or participating or pacing and we have a lot of people here that that it's a big part of their life and so to have that whole there is hard.

And then, you know, we'll see a big loss in revenue. You know, you look at COVID through the spring and then we're going to miss out on a lot of summer revenue that were used to getting. So, it's something we'll deal with and something we'll kind of quickly pivot and try to adjust our numbers and our projections, but it'll play a big role for us. When it comes to these events as a whole, I mean, it's going to be really interesting to see what happens. You know, we put on as the Runner's Edge we put on, you know, two or three really large size trail races, two in the spring and then one over Labor Day called the Rut in Big Sky and it's actually one of the largest

trail races in the country, which gets 3,000 participants, which for a trail race that's almost unheard of around the country and, you know, it's been one of the things we've been working on over the last two months is if we're going to put that event on and if so, how we're going to handle it and we've been doing a lot of kind of things to take the temperature of our sponsors of our partners and of potential participants in that event. And just to give you a sense, that event is so popular that we put a cap on it of around 3,100 participants and it fills up within minutes. So, it's that popular that the first day that registration opens on the kind of first week of January, it's full after one day.

AB: So, there's a huge demand for this event that we put on Labor Day and it's a very, very engaged group of people from around the state of Montana, but also from around the world and it's been interesting to get people's feelings through surveys on, you know, what do they think about racing and Labor Day? Do they, you know, how's their training been affected by COVID? Are they comfortable? Are they going to be comfortable getting together with 3,000 other people? I think a lot of people outside of our sport and just people in general are leery of group sizes going forward and they might be for a long time, even after maybe this, you know, as the numbers continue to drop there's going to be that concern for a lot of people. So, I think it's a wide range of people and their kind of desire to continue to be part of large group events, but I will say there's a group that's anxious to get going again and anxious to get back out in there at those group events and I think the ones that have a large national presence, like the Missoula Marathon or the Rut, the event I'm talking about over Labor Day, those events are going to continue to kind of try to navigate that. I think the in-state events that have a population that's mainly from your neighbors and people around you, I think there's going to be opportunity for those events to get creative and maybe again, learn from this and provide a little different experience. But I think those are going to be the first events that are going to come back are those smaller events that are, you know, from your local communities.

ML: Excellent. Okay. Mr. Brooker, do you need a break or anything? We're almost at an hour. We only have a few questions left.

AB: We can keep it rolling.

ML: Hanging in there. Awesome. That brings us to a close with our running and community related questions. These next few questions are more about the local city and state government how that's played a role with closures and businesses. But before we get there, there's another question. Okay, and this question is, of course, open ended. What do you think are important issues that the media is or is not covering at the moment, which is COVID or non-COVID related?

AB: Yeah, I mean, it's a weird time in our world right now, in our country, in our state, and our local communities. Obviously, the conversation from maybe February and March into April was COVID and now our country is struggling with other things and I think there's, you know, the subjects of, you know, and not knowing to be honest in how to state it, but the, you know,

Black Lives Matter, racism in our country, equality in our country. I think those are the things that are in the headlines now and they probably should be over COVID. It's just been really interesting, you know, those of us that have, you know, still turn on the news in the morning or read the local newspaper. I shouldn't say newspaper, read the paper online. Not the paper version, but, you know, it went from the opening was and everything felt like it was about COVID to now COVID is almost the kind of the end of the reports or what you read in the fifth page or something like that and today it's about the other struggles of our country and the inequalities that a lot of people have felt for a long time in this country.

And so, you know, being from western Montana, I think we all have to be, I don't know if anybody knows what to say right now and to say it the right way and I struggle with that sometimes, but I would just say that, you know, I think that it's similar COVID in that I think sometimes we get so ingrained in our local community we fail to kind of see the big picture. I'm speaking for myself. I fail, maybe to see the big picture sometimes and tend to worry about western Montana in Missoula and there's a lot of people that in western Montana and Missoula that feel the emotions and maybe the racism and the other things that we're talking about and they've been feeling for a long time, but, you know, I guess I tended to not see it as much as maybe other people see it around the country and it's not because it's not here just probably that it's my own fault and, you know, and I'm not aware of what's going on around me. But it's been an interesting shift in conversation from the COVID pandemic to, you know, the conversation of racism and the conversation of inequality and the conversation, you know, the Black Lives Matter and those kinds of things.

ML: Excellent, thank you for that. Okay, now we can move more into the municipal side of the questions. How have been municipal leaders and government officials in Missoula and Montana responded to the outbreak, especially in relation to your business?

AB: You know, I don't envy, any of those entities that you brought up, whether it's state or local and I think it's new for all of them. I guess as a as a business person I wish there was more answers and it might be the people don't have those answers. And so, I think lately I would say over the last month, I think the community, or maybe longer than that last month to two months, the communication from our governor has been good from Governor Bullock. I think that he's probably done a really good job of managing. There's a lot of different feelings and how states should manage this pandemic and do you just pretend it's not there and go forward and people will deal with it at an individual level or do you keep the state on lockdown forever? And obviously, Montana is heavily rooted in tourism and that means a lot to a lot of people in this state and so, the governor has to weigh the health of his state plus the financial impact of those decisions. And so, I mean, I guess from a personal standpoint, I think he's probably walked that line about as good as he could have.

I have nothing but respect for a local government. I will say that the thing that that as a business that we missed and that we needed was more direction from our local health department and they just maybe didn't have the answers because it's such a new – the

pandemic is something they haven't dealt with. What we felt like was when we were told we could open back up, we weren't given a whole lot of resources. You know, what we were basically given is, you can open up to 50 percent capacity and as a retailer that's hard to know, you know, as a restaurant and I again I don't envy restaurants, because they have their own set of logistics, but 50 percent of capacities is 50 percent of the seats, you know, and then you can't sit at the bar, maybe in a bar, those kinds of things, but we weren't given much beyond that of tangible kind of opening procedures. And so, we as a retailer had to put our own procedures in place and those in some scenarios, those procedures were either very popular or very unpopular. You know, we made the decision to - based on what we kind of knew or guessed or guessing, I shouldn't say we know what we were guessing is going to happen, is when we opened up we went appointment only so you had to make an appointment to come in the store, and we were limiting to originally two customers per every half hour and then it was three customers per every half hour moved forward, but you had to put hand sanitizer on when you came in, the door was locked, excuse me, so you didn't get unless you had an appointment and we required facemasks for both yourself and our team members and those are decisions on either side of it that we wish we had help with from the local health department because you would go up the street or down the street and it was a wide range of what retailers were doing because nobody told them what they should be doing.

And so, that was the hardest thing because customers didn't know what to expect at each business. You know, you might go into one business and they were handling it one way or another business was handling it the other way and I think we went on more of a strict policy because we didn't want to, you know, in the end, we said we don't want to be part of the problem and we don't want to put our team at risk and we don't want our customers at risk so we're going to do those things and we had some customers who left the store. They refused to put a face mask on and we had to be okay with that. If our goal was to protect the health of our team and them, but they could go up the street to another business and that business was making a different choice and again, because we're all making our own decisions. So, I think to answer your question, we wish there was a little bit more guidance on what our retailers should have done when they opened up their doors. And to give the Health Department and the city credit, they might not have known what we should have done. And so, I think it was hard on everybody, but we wish there was more guidance in that way.

ML: Great. I think that brings us then to our final question because, as I've told you this is a dual project for the University of Montana History Department, as well as the Missoula Downtown Partnership, and the question from them is how can organizations such as the Missoula Downtown Partnership help you and your business? What resources or information could they provide you... now and in the future, sorry. Go ahead.

AB: Yeah. I think that, you know, and again with the pandemic it's, you know, nobody seems to have the answers and that's what we all struggle with is the unknown and the unknown going forward and what to expect tomorrow and next month, next year. I think that maybe almost like the health department, I think some continued education and recommendations to local

businesses on maybe what they're seeing around the country and what they're seeing from other organizations, on how we move forward and how we move forward in a way that that allows us to move forward, because we all want to progress forward, but allows us to move forward in a way that's healthy for our community. So, I think, you know, just more resources and more communication is really important. You know, and on top of that, I think kind of better business practices for all businesses. [Computer Sound] You know, some of us have the opportunity, based on our industry, to have trade shows and to have organizations that support us and people that help us kind of see the larger picture. Although, we can always do a better job of that, but I think from a local level, you know, kind of better business practices at a local level and what you know maybe examples of what businesses around the community are doing and how they executed it. You know, similar interviews like this, I could see the partnership playing a role and saying, you know, interviewing businesses. Maybe it's the Good Food Store or some other business around town, how are they handling it and not just how are they handling, but an honest and open conversation about the kind of struggles that those businesses have had and on both sides of it: the good, the bad, the ugly. I think that the more stories and the more we can learn from each other, the better as business owners and I think that the partnership is the organization to do that.

ML: Excellent. Well, Mr. Brooker, I've come to the end of my questions. Is there anything you would like to share about your experience with the pandemic or recent events that you think are worthwhile for future generations to know that we haven't discussed yet.

AB: You know, I don't. Not much. I would say that I think the thing I've learned is that it's so easy being in western Montana and being in Missoula to kind of, for me, and this is maybe just me, maybe not everybody else to kind of feel isolated and, you know, to not be sharing the same experiences that some of the other people around this country are feeling. And so, I think what's been helpful for me is kind of being compassionate and looking and listening and putting myself in their shoes and knowing that even in western Montana, things like this can happen and it's been an eye-opening experience. I think we've lived, I mean I shouldn't say we, I've lived a privileged life, you know, supportive parents, supportive wife, supportive friends and to see the struggles that our country is going through, whether it's the pandemic or, you know, the racial struggles that we're going through the inequity struggles, we're going through, the equality struggles I should say, I think it's been eye-opening and something that we can all learn from and know that these things can happen to the best communities and the best countries and the best people and just forcing us all to be better, I guess.

ML: Okay, I'm going to pause the recording then.

[End of Interview]