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Josh Grimes and Jared Conti of Avenue 209 Coffee House are interviewed by PA Wilds Ambassador Ellen Matis of Hello Social Co.

Ellen: Hey, and welcome to the next episode in the Wilds Are Working series. My name is Ellen Matis and I'm the owner of Hello Social Co., And I'm a PA Wilds ambassador. Today on behalf of the PA Wilds Center, I am interviewing Jared Conti and Josh Grimes of Avenue 209 Coffee. So Jared and Josh are going to share how their organization has pivoted a little bit in the last few months during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what is an uncharted time for businesses. So, hi, welcome.

Jared: Hello!

Josh: Hey!

Jared: Thanks for having us!

Ellen: Yeah, absolutely. Just to get started, tell us a little bit about Avenue 209.

Jared: We're at 11 years?

Josh: Yeah, 11 years.

Jared: We were at 11 years in February. And we opened up in this little college town of Lock Haven.

Ellen: Awesome!

Josh: We do coffee roasting. And we are host for live music and the arts and our community. We employ, usually I would say, around seven to eight employees.

Jared: Yes, seven-eight employees, depending on COVID or not.

Josh: Yes.... our coffee shop is owned by the church that I pastor. And so there's some fun.... On Sundays, we have church in our coffee shop. So it's a for-profit business that loves our community.

Ellen: Very cool! And what is it about your community? So obviously your business and Lock Haven are in the PA Wilds. Why did you choose Lock Haven?

Jared: I'm from here, and I've always wanted to do a coffee shop. I've moved away a bunch of times. When I moved back in 2004, I met Josh through his wife, Sarah, and started going to church with them. And he had this wicked cool idea of doing something different with church. And it kind of went crazy from there.

Josh: Yeah. Jared and I went to coffee school together in 2008, I think, Coffee Academy, where we learned all about coffee and business and then we launched. But the question was, what do we love about Lock Haven? Why here? And I think it was because.... There's some things about Lock Haven that I love. It's kind of this gateway entry point to the wilderness. And so it's host to a lot of fun outdoor activities. You know, the river has a lot of life in our community. And I love that. It's also a quiet town. It has a university. So there's lots of young life that comes into our area as well. And it's a beautiful place to live.

Jared: Yeah. It's overly friendly here. Again, my family's here. My friends are here. I went to school here. I just wanted to stick around. And I know that there's you know, sometimes we knock this small town life, but there's so much potential here as well. There's a lot of things to come out of it. And it's nice to be in a business where you can see the community coming together for events and meetings and that kind of thing. It's a great spot to be.

Ellen: Yeah!

Jared: It's a nice hub. It's a nice nexus to kind of branch out from and go different spots.

Josh: Good word!

Jared: Nexus? Yeah!

Ellen: That is a good word. So obviously, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses all across the PA Wilds had to kind of change the way that they were doing business. So what were some of the things that you guys had to do when this all started? And what are you continuing to do?

Jared: Real early on.... we hire mostly college students, and we lost two of those two of our workers right away.

Josh: There was no school. School cancelled and they moved home, so that's why.

Jared: Yeah. No sickness, but very, very hard to deal with that right away because everything was all up in the air. We scaled back our hours. So we're open about two hours less a day than what we were. And production is kind of ... It feels like a normal summer in Lock Haven ... but there are just not as many people coming through.

Josh: Yeah. In the early days, I remember conversations Jared and I were having back and forth was, 'do we shut down or do we keep going?' And it was a tough call to make because, since we're food service, we were allowed to be open for takeout. And so our decision to stay open was two part, like we wanted to continue to pay or have our employees have jobs and get paychecks. And also, it's felt like maybe getting your coffee is the one thing that could feel a little normal everyday for people whose entire lives were disrupted. At least they

could go get their coffee. They couldn't stay and couldn't linger. But that seemed to bring some sort of, at least in my mind, that maybe that would just be a little bit of normal. That would help anchor people in a really unsettling time. So in terms of pivoting, I mean, it was tough. We lost money the whole time.

Jared: Yeah.

Josh: And so we've had to pivot with it... We also roast. So we roast both for [use] in shop as well as for other commercial clients. And in the very beginning, like everybody was almost like hoarding coffee. When it first broke, like we had incredible sales. Everybody was like, 'I got to stock up on coffee for the foreseeable future.' It was like toilet paper and coffee. Those were the two things people wanted.

Ellen: The essentials!

Jared: That's right. But that waned. That urgency went down and then the reality of what we were going to be in for a kind of to begin to settle.

Ellen: Yeah. And I think I saw that you were doing a gift card program of some sort for teachers and nurses. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Jared: Yeah, we've had we've had a huge uptick in gift card sales, I think not only because of the COVID. But it's not something I think I normally would have noticed at the end of a year, like the end of the year, people are still coming in and you just don't register what's happening. So a lot of schools have bought, I know one of the local schools bought --

Josh: By end of year, do you mean end of the school year?

Jared: I'm sorry. End of school year. So the end of school year normally comes around and you just don't notice the things that are happening. But a local school bought a whole bunch of gift cards for their graduating class. We have a bunch of PTO's that have been coming in and buying gift cards for all the teachers. So things like that I think wouldn't normally register with me, but are more substantial now that there's lack of business, and now that there's just a very big uncertainty in all that's happening right now.

Ellen: Sure!

Jared: Also... we're working on our to go ordering platforms. So our coffee business is not to drive through. And so it's very much, you come in and sit down. That was kind of how our model was built. But that's not possible now. We've had to try to make [changes] -- you can call in your order and soon you'll be able to just order coffee off of your Avenue app and we can have it ready for you. So those are some ways that we're trying to be creative.

Ellen: Yeah. And so speaking of that, are you finding that there are things that you're wanting to implement long term now as a result of this, like that coffee ordering app?

Jared: Yeah, I think so. The app is kind of two fold. Not only is there an app where you can order ahead, but it also doubles as a rewards program. So we used to have punch cards and that was kind of nice. But now this rewards program has like a little key fob for your keychain where you can just come in and scan it and there's prizes you can get. There's like one of these neat -- if you've ever played the role playing games -- there's like this neat little numbers bar that goes up every time you're about ready to, like, get this big reward. So that's kind of cool. And people can see the things that are happening.... It's not just like, 'oh, I have another star on my punch card,' it's like, 'oh, hey, not only do I get a free coffee, but here's a five dollar gift certificate for my next purchase.'

Ellen: Sure. And so obviously there's been a lot of changes to your business. What are some of the ways that you're getting this information out to your customers and communicating with them despite not seeing them in person?

Jared: It's mostly Facebook. There's a lot of Facebook. We've got a Twitter, but nobody really follows that. Oh, and Instagram is pretty nice as well. It's nice to do different things for different platforms. Our local chamber has been very helpful in sending us all the information that we need to know about reopenings and that kind of thing. They're also doing like these 25-30 second spots, little commercials for the business. And you guys are doing a wonderful job with blasting different businesses all throughout the Pennsylvania Wilds.

Ellen: Yeah, for sure. Shout out to the PA Wilds! So to wrap up here. Is there anything that's really inspired you this time or a moment of humanity that's kind of kept you going that you want to share with other businesses?

Jared: I'll say and I don't know, David's probably not watching, but we have a longtime customer who has been in pretty much since the start. And he's in for a couple hours a day. And he is one of the customers that we had, we used to have this big table in the corner that he and all his friends sat at for a couple of years, and we moved the table over to the front windows. And everybody was pretty livid about moving that table. Because they're regulars, and they have a say in things. But what's great about it is every once in a while they poke fun at it and give us a hard time about it. But I saw him. He's had some problems with his health, so he's not been able to come in and get his coffee and not able to stay two or three hours a day. But I saw him for the first time in about five or six weeks the other day, and I just [had] tears in my eyes, and it went back to normal real quick with our friendship. Just seeing him in person, even from six feet away, was just such a gut wrenching thing. It was really great.

Ellen: Yeah.

Josh: I think that there is a sense of customers, like you -- if it's an inspiration -- you don't realize how much you like your customers until you can't see them anymore. And then when they come back, in those moments, you are just so grateful for them. And I think that, like [a point of] inspiration would just be a reminder of the idea that there's a relationship connected to customers. That's been encouraging.

Ellen: Yeah, that's great.

Josh: We've got some folks who will sit in the parking lot and have coffee together since they can't come inside.

Ellen: Well, thank you so much for your time. If you're watching this right now and you'd like more information on how to support the small businesses and the PA Wilds make sure to visit WildsCoPA.org. And also applications to appear on the series are still being accepted. So if you'd like to share your story like Jared and Josh did today, just make sure to hop on the website that's listed on the screen here and apply. So thank you guys again so much.

Jared: Thanks so much.

Josh: Thanks for having us.

Ellen: All right, see you, everybody.

Jared: Thanks, everybody!