



July 9, 2020 Transcript

*Fabre Sanders of It Is What It Is is interviewed by
PA Wilds Ambassador Ellen Matis from Hello Social Co.*

Ellen: Hey there, and welcome to the next episode in the Wilds Are Working series. My name is Ellen Matis. I'm the owner of Hello Social Co., and I'm a PA Wild's ambassador. Today on behalf of the PA Wilds Center, I'm interviewing Fabre Sanders of It Is What It Is in downtown Lock Haven. Fabre is going to share how their organization has pivoted in the last couple of months in what is an uncharted time for businesses and what's planned for the future. Hey, good morning.

Fabre: Good morning, Ellen. How are you?

Ellen: I'm great. Thank you for being here.

Fabre: Well, thank you for having me.

Ellen: So just to kick us off here, tell us about your business and a little bit about its history.

Fabre: So it's an interesting little business. My father has owned Sanders Window Fashions in downtown Lock Haven for 50 years. And a couple of years ago, he decided that he wanted to open a little gift shop in downtown Lock Haven and bring sort of a seashore type gift shop to Lock Haven. So he and my mom were working on it, and, unfortunately, she got sick and passed away. I was living in Boston at the time and he asked me if I would like to help him get started. And that little path led my husband and I to move back to Lock Haven, join him in both businesses, and here we are. So It Is What It Is opened in July of 2018. So we just hit our second year anniversary.

Ellen: Awesome. Well, congratulations. What are some of the products that you offer in the shop there?

Fabre: So our store's about 50 percent specialty food items. I was actually a chef in Boston, so I love helping people bring good meals to their home. So we have everything from sauces to hot sauce to coffee to jams and

jellies and specialty candy. We also have bath and body products, all natural, all cruelty free. We have pet items, baby gift items, accessories, a little bit of everything.

Ellen: Very cool. And so what do you think it is that drew your father to Lock Haven or to the PA Wilds region, and ultimately you, too?

Fabre: We're both born and raised here in Lock Haven. I grew up here and went to college in Boston and stayed up there. So I think my dad was drawn to the region. He just loves it here. He's a true townie. And now that I'm back, I realize there's a lot of great things in this area for people to enjoy and do. No matter what you like to do, if you're outdoorsy, there's definitely a lot to do. If you're not as outdoorsy like me, there's still lots of things to enjoy in the Pennsylvania Wilds.

Ellen: Yeah. Absolutely. And we've heard that so many times in this area so far, that people have moved elsewhere and ended up ultimately coming back to the PA Wilds region, so I think that's really neat. So let's backtrack, go back in time, maybe three or four months, whatever we're at now. How did you have to change your business model when the COVID--19 crisis started?

Fabre: Well, we were pretty much a brick-and-mortar store. We did have kind of a skeleton website set up; but we didn't have a lot of our products on it. It was more like, you know, here's our address, here are our hours, here's a few things we sell. If you want to order, you can. But we never really went anywhere with it. We were truly brick and mortar. We love serving people in the store and helping them find the perfect gift or gifts for themselves. So whenever everything happened, we definitely had to pivot very quickly. So our first thought was that we were going to get the e-commerce website completely, fully set up. So that was the first thing that we did. And it took us about a week to really go through our inventory and list and photograph and describe and transition to a e-commerce website. Once that was done, we started seeing orders rolling in, which was really exciting. We started by only doing shipping because of the shutdown, but because we were e-commerce, we could continue doing that. And then when Governor Wolf opened us up to be able to do curbside pickup, we very quickly transition to that, as well as delivery. And we've decided that we're going to continue with all three of those items going forward, no matter, you know, what happens when we're through this, hopefully sooner rather than later. We're going to continue doing delivery, offering the curbside pickup for people maybe who are in a hurry, and obviously shipping so that you could ship something anywhere in the U.S.

Ellen: Awesome.

Fabre: So that was the first step.

Ellen: And did you find that as a result of that, that maybe your reach was expanded a little bit outside of the immediate Lock Haven area?

Fabre: Absolutely. It was surprising because we started getting orders from Alabama and Texas. Social media has really helped us with that. You know, we promote a lot of our items on social media. People would share them; friends would find them and find our little shop and think it might be the perfect place to get a little

something to send to somebody. We did a lot of, you know, quarantine type gifts like, I'm thinking of you, sorry we can't be together. Mother's Day fell in the middle of all of it. So we did a really nice business at Mother's Day, people sending gifts to their moms or daughters. So it was a really neat transition for us. And it was exciting to be able to kind of put it together and then see some great results. From there, about a month or so later, we decided to start doing live broadcasts on Facebook, which we do every Thursday night. We basically use it as a forty-five minute, QVC-style show. And it's really great because we get to describe some of the products in more detail than we would really even be able to in person. Nobody wants somebody following them around going that would be great on chicken, that would be great on fish, you can use this and that; and it gives us an opportunity to do that. And people have responded really well to it. It's a very simple process to use, and it's something I recommend for anybody who has a product to sell. It really has worked very well for us. A friend of mine here in town has been doing it for several years with her clothing boutique and she recommended it to me. And I've always been like, 'yeah, yeah, yeah.' And then, you know, when we quickly realized we had to do things like this in order to survive, we learned and we took care of it.

Ellen: Great.

Fabre: So it's pretty exciting and we're gonna continue that as well. The response has been great. So it's a little out of my comfort zone, but it's something that I'm learning and I'm enjoying it.

Ellen: Yeah, practice makes perfect. Right?

Fabre: Exactly.

Ellen: So one of the things that recently happened was that the city of Lock Haven added the downtown pedestrian mall to the downtown area. And that's a place where people can, you know, support small businesses and spread out and eat outside, and there's live music. So can you talk about that a little bit from the business owner's perspective and how that's changed business a little bit since reopening?

Fabre: I certainly can. I think it was such a wonderful idea by our city and they worked very, very hard. We're very lucky to be blessed with a great city planner, city manager, city council, all the other people who put this together, director of Community Life. They all got their heads together and said, 'how can we help our downtown?' And we have seen such a positive impact from closing Main Street. It's closed from 3 p.m. on Friday until 9 p.m. on Saturday. And the restaurants have all purchased tables and they're allowed to set up on the sidewalk. We actually have purchased some outdoor displays. We also pulled part of the store out onto the sidewalk to allow people to browse some of our products. We're selling mostly impulse, desert type items out there. We just brought in a line of gourmet sodas that people can pick up. There's also a Summer Concert Series going on at the same time, so if they want to sweet or soda to take to the concert, they can purchase it at our store. And it's just nice to see people out and about enjoying themselves, having a good time smiling and being able to spend time outside of the home while still practicing social distancing.

Ellen: Yeah. Absolutely. And so obviously, that's one of the ways that you're able to, you know, help customers out a little bit, help customers find you and shop with you. What other approaches would you say you're taking to protect employees of your shop and your customers from kind of the spread of COVID-19?

Fabre: Well, we haven't actually fully opened the store yet. We just started with a very soft appointment-only shopping. We're going to for the for the near future, just allow one person or group together at a time in the store. It's not an enormous store. You know, it's not like an Ollie's or WalMart, that size, so, you know, it's a small boutique downtown. So we're going to keep our customers safe by keeping everybody distanced, by just allowing small groups or individuals into the store the current time. And people have been responding to that really, really well. We certainly have done all the things that the CDC has recommended; we do require masks to enter the store, We have hand sanitizer throughout the store. We have a screen shield at the register area. All those things that all the other businesses are doing. And we're just trying to take it very slowly with reopening and cautiously to protect everybody and to protect our own family as well.

Ellen: Great. So to wrap up here, what would you say has maybe been an inspiration to you during this time or something that you might tell another business owner that's been struggling through this?

Fabre: Well, I think that what I could tell another business owner is to take risks. Think outside of the box. I think this opened our eyes in a way that I never expected. I just moved back to town in August. We just renovated an old house. There's been a lot of changes in my life. And then this kind of happened out of the blue. And I think you just have to throw yourself out there and try new things. I think that's the most important thing is don't convince yourself it's not going to work until you try it, because everything about retail or business has changed in the past four months. And I have been pleasantly surprised by the reaction of our customers. Go within your comfort zone to think outside of the box. So don't be afraid to try online. Don't be afraid to try some Facebook marketing or sales. And don't panic. I think we're all going to get through this. I find that the support for small businesses is stronger than ever. I really feel like, at least here in Lock Haven, that people have been going out of their way to support us and keep us around. Unfortunately, we've lost a lot of small businesses here in Lock Haven over the past couple of months. So I think people are waking up and realizing, well, if we don't support the ones that are left, we're not going to have any at the end of this. So, you know, think creatively and try new things. And you never know what's going to pleasantly surprised you.

Ellen: Yeah, I think that's great advice. So if you're watching this and you'd like more information on how to support the small businesses and the PA Wilds make sure to visit WildsCoPA.org. There, you're going to find every interview that we've conducted in this area so far. Also, applications are still being accepted through July 15th. So if you're a business owner or a nonprofit or other organization in the Wilds region that wants to share your story about pivoting amongst COVID-19, now's the time to apply. Fabre, thank you so much for your time and for coming on the series.

Fabre: Thank you, Ellen.

Ellen: All right. We'll see you guys next time.