Restarting the New Orleans economy, one meal at a time

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As a student at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, Emily Shaya (BSM ’06, MBA ’13) learned the importance of having a business plan and preparing for the future. She also learned about how crucial it is to be nimble and have a set of values to guide you through any eventuality. For Shaya, who owns restaurant group Pomegranate Hospitality with her well-known chef husband Alon, that education is serving her well as COVID-19 has impacted the hospitality industry.

“You can make any type of plan you want, but life’s going to throw you curve balls, and the way you deal with those is the way that people will be able to recover from this,” she says.

The Shayas run two restaurants — Saba in New Orleans and Safta in Denver. After closing during the stay-at-home orders, both restaurants reopened for takeout on

May 8.

“With the rapidly changing situation, we didn’t feel comfortable with our team interfacing with that many people per day. We made the decision to pause for a little while.”

But she’s been as busy as ever. She and Alon have personally cooked and prepared meals for COVID frontline providers.

“He’s been working in the kitchen, and I’ve been preparing all the boxes and the packaging and the dishes. It’s been a two-person team,” Shaya said, speaking one recent afternoon after the meals had been completed. She hoped the food offered “a little bit of comfort and positivity during this really hard time.”

Emily Shaya came to Tulane from a small town in Georgia and fell in love with New Orleans. Upon graduation, she worked in real estate development for a few years and then returned to the A. B. Freeman School of Business to get her MBA.

She studied entrepreneurship and learned that “You always need to be thinking about the next steps and the next challenge that’s going to be thrown in your way.”

Ruminating on the current situation, she adds, “I didn’t see the challenge as coming in quite this way, but just having those frameworks and that knowledge helps you deal with things that are coming at you pretty quickly.”

While restaurants nationwide have been affected by COVID-19, Emily Shaya said New Orleanians have rallied around their local establishments. During the early days after the shelter-in-place order, she was heartened to see the response from the community and the neighborhood. For example, on the first day of take-out and delivery, they expected 30 orders but did 120. She has seen a spike in the sale of gift cards and Saba merchandise.

She graduated from Tulane in 2006, less than a year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Having experienced New Orleans after Katrina, she knows how resilient the community is, and that makes her optimistic for the future.

“The average person in New Orleans has dealt with more adversity on a disaster recovery front than most other places. But we are known for overcoming, for bouncing back after a tragedy. So, I hope that we're able to come back a little bit more quickly just because we’ve been through it before.

“It’s a special place, and everybody here really takes care of one another.”

— *Mary Sparacello*