

# Fernwood Road Café

Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Photos

## The Blue Raven

It's July 2020. Customers have started to learn that the café has re-opened. They wear shorts and t-shirts. Some already wear masks.

It's been two weeks since Shaun purchased the café. He is a software developer with limited experience managing a café or a business. The reality of the pandemic is clarifying. How can we adapt?



It's still the early days. To bring colour to the glum, we use the left-over paint from our new recycling system. We decide to paint the existing, black raven in aquamarine blue. Customers like it. One suggests "the myth of the blue raven." At the time, Salt Spring is experiencing not only COVID-19 but also the effects of US forest fires. From this emerges the myth.

*The raven, hearing the laments of the people, flew north for miles and miles, past the smoke of the 2020 fires. When the raven reached clear skies, it steeped itself in the blue. Filled with joy, the raven returned to the Fernwood Road Café, to remind the people of clear skies ahead.*

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It's still early days. Shaun and Jennifer decide to focus on outdoor seating and recycling. We believe that both will benefit us immediately and in the long-term.

## Recycling Centre

A customer asks, "Can we use our own cups?" Jennifer responds that own cups are now against law. The garbage can is overflowing with materials: paper cups, paper plates, napkins, bio-degradable cutlery...

Shaun is an environmentalist. He moved to Salt Spring in part because it's an experiment in sustainable governance. His home was in the rainwater catchment tour. He drives an electric car. You get the idea. The overflow of compostable materials is an unexpected challenge worth solving.

At this point the café has two employees. Jennifer focusses on adapting the interior of the café and managing operations. Shaun works on special projects. The first is a recycling system to manage pandemic-related increases in take-out waste.

We start to research. While traveling we talk to BC Ferries and Whole Foods. Both report that their recycling centers have dismal customer adherence. Online we find several award-winning systems and settle on the Cornell University recycling center.

After three weeks of working in public, we realize just how much carpentry knowledge exists in the community – lots of people chime in about the design. Shaun's neighbour Kevin helps out with the carpentry. The final product looks wonderful. Our customers step up to the plate! We have about 95% adherence to sorting the categories!



If we are going to have a recycling center, then we need a place to put the compost. We contact the BC Compost Education Center. Wow they are helpful! They use a JORA tumbling composter. Since it's what the experts use, we order two (from Kamloops) and install them behind the café.



We will eventually install a total of five composters. Two are tumblers and three are black bins. More composting options are coming in 2021. Currently, we can compost only some of our food and paper waste on site – the rest is accumulating until we have our new, three-chamber pallet composter!



In a project that completed this November, when we would build floors of our tents, we utilized integration composting - before laying down our bark-mulch floors. Customers literally sit on and eat with the same paper products!

## Flowers

The Fernwood Road Café sits on about a quarter acre of semi-waterfront land. The red government dock extends into Trincomali. It's the mid-summer season for osprey, eagles, king fishers, herons, otters, seals, purple martins, and orcas.

We love this view. Most days of the week, Shaun and Chris walk or cycle to the café from their nearby homes on Maliview and Walkers Hook. Turning the corner before the cafe regularly reveals an eagle in the tree or a heron, waiting.

The next pandemic-related challenge is to seat people in this beautiful outdoor space. How can we make it safe? comfortable? respectful of neighbours?



To make the outdoor seating more attractive, and to protect the neighbouring massage therapy clinic from noise, we decide to build raised beds as a physical barrier. This is Shaun's second carpentry project ever. Customers with knowledge of the field teach the importance of using a square and a level. After a few weeks, Shaun buys his first square, level, and tape measure! A few weeks later, he learns that wet dirt is really heavy. After a collapse of one of our raised beds, and a lesson on "X's everywhere" from the café's neighbor Ken, we add trusses to the legs. This is our first (of many) lessons in sheer support. The flowers look lovely!



## Heaters

The raised beds now contain the cosmos. They also contain dahlias, rudbeckia, and some volunteers from the scattered bird-feeder seeds. The weather is mild these days.

Outdoor seating has met success. When the weather chills, though, how are customer going to stay warm? We start to brainstorm and evaluate the pros and cons. Blankets are out because of germs. Propane heaters conflict with our environmental focus. Electrical heaters... hmm...

After looking at the market, we choose Dimplex Pro. They pump out 2,000 watts of heat, are weather proof against rain and ice, and use an energy efficient 220-volt power.





Encouraged by our success in the recycling center, we trench the 220-volt lines, assemble the heaters, and build a planter box to house one. Ryan Toovey at Gulf Island Electric Ltd is new on the Island and available on short notice. Excitement starts to build. Customers show enthusiasm. We pass building inspection. Woot! Warm outdoor spaces!

## Tents – The First Iteration

The answering machine picks up the phone. Chris leaves a message: “Shaun, nobody is hurt. One of the tents, one of the tents is completely crushed, the other tent is severely broken. You should probably come down to the café soon.”

Shaun is at home in the middle of a software development Zoom meeting. Hearing the answering machine in the distance, he has a vague sense that something has gone wrong with the tents, but he is not sure exactly what happened. Chris, our new barista, sounded calmed but serious.

Simultaneously with the installation of the heaters, we had also started the tent experiment. Customers with experience at the markets had warned us against the winds and rains. After purchasing some used and new tents, we weigh them down heavily and bolt some directly into the concrete – thank you again Ken and Kurt for the help!



The first version of the tents looks fantastic. We’re confident that they can withstand the wind and rain. Customers are using them. We’re winning.



Unfortunately, we are overconfident. After a particularly rainy night, a bathtub of water greets us one morning. That is the first sign that our tents are not ready. It turns out to be bad that the ceiling support is spring loaded. Once a little bit of water sits in the roof, the spring compresses, making room for more water, and then more, and even more... That tent survives, but not without stretching, draining, and learning on our part.



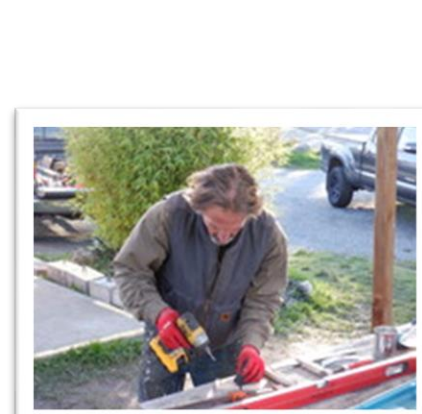
In the above picture something is missing - the smaller tents are gone! They had crumpled in the first big wind storm. That's what Chris had phoned about during Shaun's Zoom meeting. We had had the tents weighted down sufficiently, but had yet to master sheer support. Though the wind couldn't lift them, it had snapped their metal posts. After the zoom call, when Shaun finally arrives at the café, Chris and Ken are already cleaning up the collapsed tents.

The lumber bill is about to increase.

## Tents - The Second Iteration

Compared with how the café grounds looked yesterday, today the grass area looks empty. The two tents are gone. It's like meeting a friend after having shaved a mustache. Something is missing.

What had gone right is that the customers liked the tents. What had gone wrong is that we had underestimated the force of nature. We were about to learn the extent of our community support.





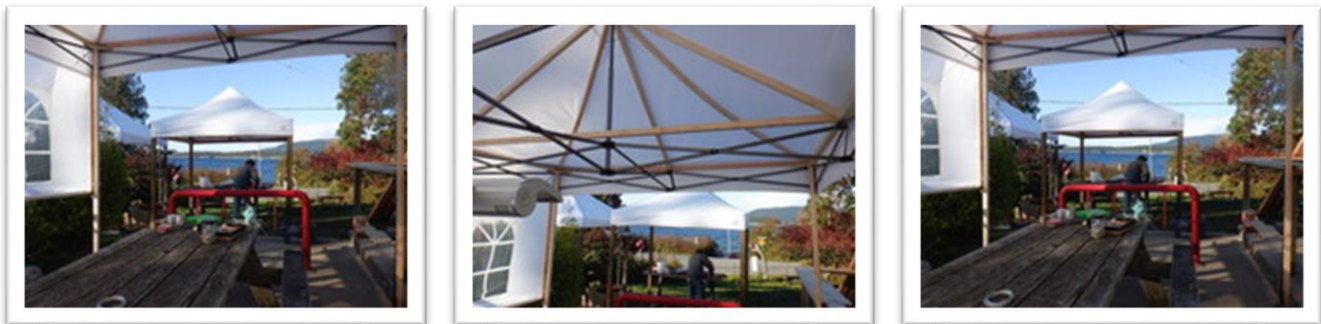
A very close friend (Heather) suggests contacting a retired civil engineer (Kurt). Since then, Kurt regularly surprises me week after week with generosity in time and knowledge. He shows up on day one with tools. Through hands on teaching, Kurt shows Shaun the difference between plumb and level, how to use a sliding bevel tee, the importance of sheer support, and, among other things, how to build a gusset for the corners.

### The Larger Tent Upgrades

The large tent (the one with the water bubble) had remained standing in the wind storm. Even so, Kurt advises that we reinforce the ceiling and posts. We keep the existing metal skeleton and add both wood and cable.



In the left image is support against rain collecting in the ceiling. The center photo shows the gusset attached to the airline cable with a turnbuckle. That's sheer support. The right-most photo shows the ceiling structure with wood that Kurt had shaped to fit the ceiling curve. The photos below show the finished product.



### The Smaller Tents

After the vertical supports had crumpled entirely, we realize that the two smaller tents need more significant rebuilds. We use 4x4 pressure treated wood in 20-inch gravel filled pole holes. During the construction, a cafe neighbour, Ken, joins the construction and impresses on Shaun the importance of obsessive measuring. After a few weeks and an impromptu massage therapy session with Uma, the posts are installed.



We start to experiment with how to affix the existing tent ceilings to the wooden frames. Shaun devises an approach to placement, and Kurt machines the custom compound angles. Cool! Who knew there was such a thing as a compound angle?



### Tents – Passing Health Inspection

Each new day that the café opens, the weather becomes colder, and customers use the tents more. Individuals and bubbles of people sit under the heaters with warm drinks, soups, scones...

We consider adding more walls to the tents. One challenge is to secure them against the wind, another is to make them go up and down easily, a third is to build them in line with COVID-19 safety protocols.

For the latter reason, we pro-actively contact Chris from the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA). Over the one-week wait for the inspection, we worry that more sides might not be allowed, or that we would have to remove existing sides (and warmth). Thankfully, the inspection approves our tents. We learn that the tents can have more sides than what we had expected VIHA to allow.



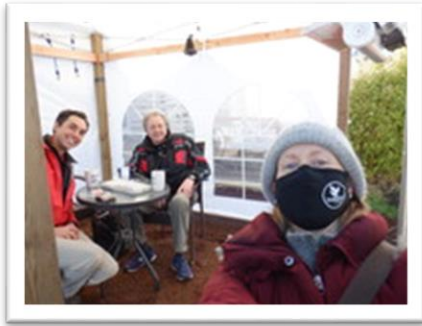
In each of the smaller tents, VIHA permits three wall panels and one “bubble” of up to six people.



In the larger tent, VIHA permits five wall panels and one “bubble” per table.



## Customers in the New Outdoor Space!



## Halloween

The cosmos overflow in the raised beds. Looking left, the tents glow orange with the heaters in the afternoon sunset. People line up outside. Most of them wear warm clothes and masks. In the back, the composts are growing mushrooms and sprouts to replace the paper cups, plates, napkins, coffee grounds, orange and banana peels.

Halloween! How are we going to pull this off? Once again, Heather (a close friend and member of the community) comes up with a great idea. She has bought a tyrannosaurus costume! For Halloween we carve pumpkins, create a candy

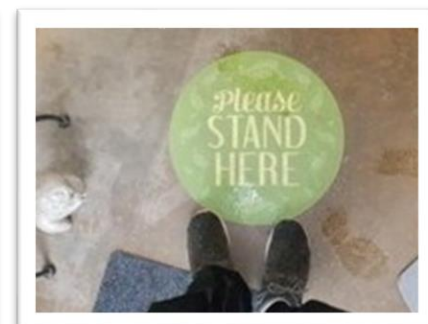
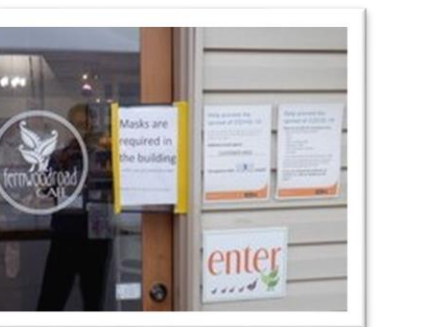
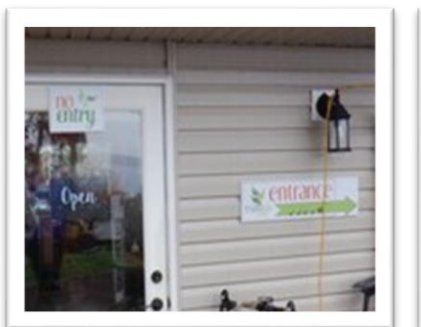
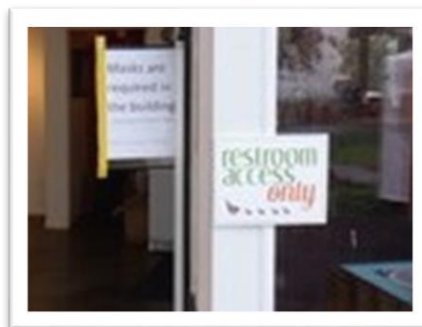


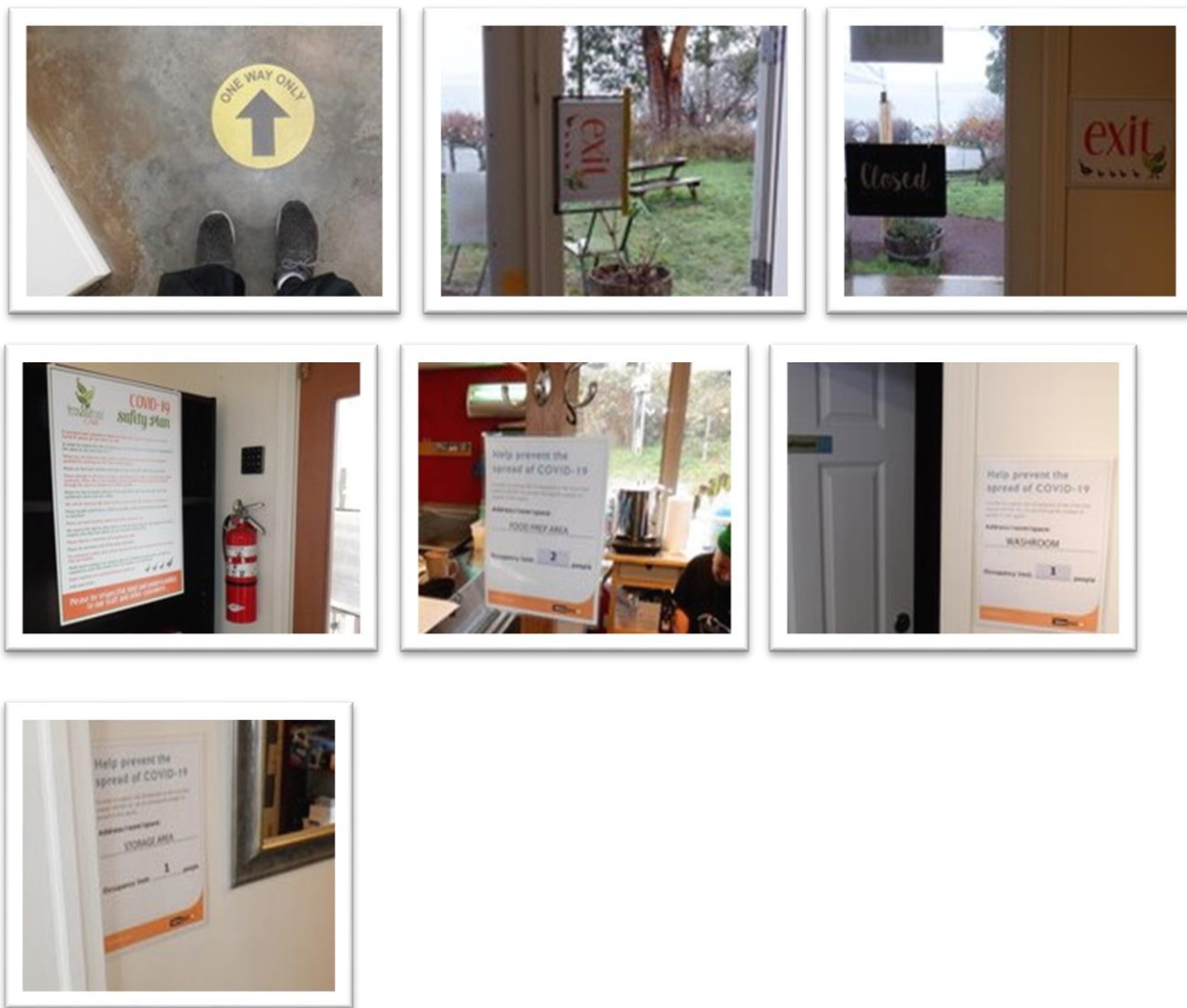
chute of stove piping, and have T-Na (the tyrannosaurus) for COVID-safe entertainment. Kids and parents show relief at this minor return to normal.



## Protocols, Signs, and Enforcement

Stickers are on the floor of the café saying “Please Stand Here” and “One Way Only.” Before masks were required by law, the front-entrance said, “Most people wear masks in this café. We appreciate it.” Now it says masks are required. The side entrances, from left to right, say, “Restroom Access Only” and “Exit Only”, and “Please Enter This Way.” There are at least eighteen COVID-19 signs:





Shaun sits and watches sometimes to notice how well the signage is working. He has read, “Thinking in Systems” by Donella Meadows and knows that behavior emerges from systems. When people enter through the exit, he reminds himself that our signage system needs more work. Shaun also gives the café credit, because the rules are changing so often – it’s hard to keep up the signage.

It’s early November. Bonnie Henry announces that masks are mandatory in all indoor spaces. The café management immediately starts posting signs. We meet with members of the community to craft a policy. We decide that we must have firm rules from day one: no exceptions. Day one has a few hitches – of course people are upset, we expect this – some people express anger, but later these same folks find courage to return to the café, with masks, despite difference in opinion – no hard feelings.

It’s a challenge for customers, a challenge for staff, and a challenge to remember everyone is doing the best they can.

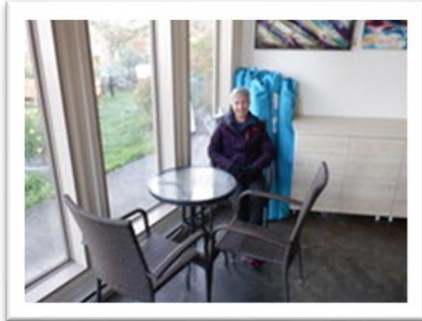
On day two, Shaun is sitting in the café, at our new indoor seating. A friend comes to door and asks, “May I use the washroom.” Shaun replies, “Only if you have a mask.” This friend, without a mask, walks past Shaun to the washroom - without a mask, and without further word. The staff and Shaun look at each other. This is a person we all like and respect, a person who respects the community. We appreciate the situation. This person is not used to seeing Shaun as an enforcement authority. The rule for mandatory masks is only one day old. We have had few cases of COVID-19 on Salt Spring Island. What’s the big deal? On the one hand, breaking the rules in this way is understandable. Today, Shaun still worries about his response and how it might have affected his relationship. He waits outside until his friend finishes. With his head down Shaun says, “Hi. What was that about?” The reply startles him, “It was an emergency. I have diarrhea. It was either there or in my pants.” After a brief goodbye Shaun’s friend returns to a neighbourhood walk.



Friendships are awkward during this pandemic.

## Interior Changes

We need to significantly re-arrange the interior of the café. In the early days, we move furniture into the corners to make space for social distancing. Four months later, our order of base cabinetry arrives – yes, it took four months for the shipping. With the arrival of the cabinets, we can finally open up a single indoor table for three.

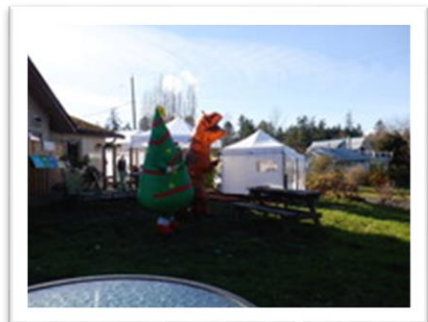
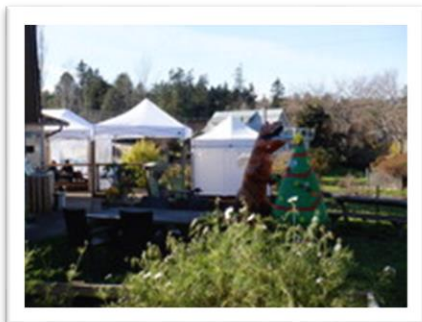


## COVID Friendly Entertainment

It's late November, before the more stringent public health order on December 2<sup>nd</sup> arrive, and we decide to lighten up the mood with some live, COVID-friendly entertainment. T-NA (the tyrannosaurus) performs lip-sync Christmas music while Balle-tree-na interprets them in dance. People are delighted!



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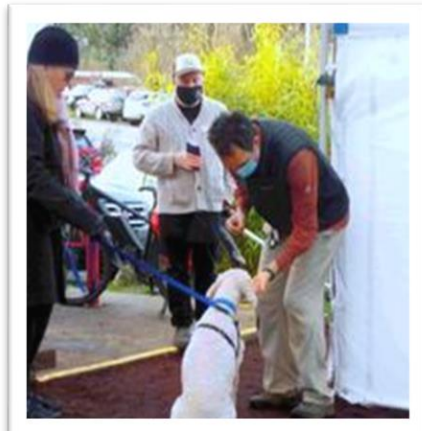


Unfortunately, after the public health order on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, T-Na and Balle-tree-na are forced to put their singing and dancing on hold. It's for the better good, but it sure is a drag.

## Ruff Cut Dog Treats

It's about six months into the pandemic now. As part of our plan to increase business, we survey the regular customers. Annie suggests dog treats because both Walkers Hook Road and North Beach Road are destinations for dog (and people) walkers. Great idea!





Since we have lots of canine visitors, we start to cater to canines! We plan to launch on December 12<sup>th</sup> the first in our product line: Rosie's Ruff Treats. These are the first locally made Ruff Cut Treats.

## Buying a Café during a Pandemic

December has come. Sitting in one of the tents, a customer asks, "Has it been a good investment?" Shaun laughs and says, "No." The customer laughs too. After a moment of reflection, Shaun says, "It hasn't been a good financial investment – at least not yet - but that wasn't the purpose. The purpose was to keep the café running as a COVID safe outpost." It's important to provide a safe place for belonging.



We are a staff of three. All of us (Jennifer, Shaun, and Chris) live within a ten-minute walk of the café. Many immediate café neighbours help regularly. Kurt lives a five-minute drive down the street and machines compound angles! Ken lives right next door and teaches "X's everywhere." Heather lives two minutes away and provides funny posters, tyrannosaurus sightings, and pumpkin carving. Rosie lives a three-minute walk down the street and bakes homemade dog treats. What could be a better investment?

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As if rewarding us with a pat on the back for rising to the challenge, nature grants us a rainbow for our resilient response to its wind, its rain, and its virus.