

Tina Leone:

Cheers everyone, and welcome to Ballston connect. We're here to connect you to all things about Ballston. I'm your host, Tina Leone, the CEO of the Ballston Business Improvement District. We hope all of you and your families remain safe and healthy.

Tina Leone:

As we record this show, we're entering phase three of Virginia's reopening plan. While things are starting to approach normal, whatever that is, we will continue to record our interviews remotely. So please forgive what might be a lower sound quality. And the background noise is probably my dog. We look forward to returning to our recording space at Industrious in Ballston Exchange, just as soon as it is safe to do so. Well, we all know that our industries, our retailers, our restaurants, et cetera, were greatly impacted by the closures prompted by COVID-19. Our businesses, our restaurants, our salons have finally been able to reopen to a greater degree, certainly this week, but there are going to be some major changes to what we have known as business as usual. There will now be a new normal, and we are trying to figure out what that is and where we are going.

Tina Leone:

But today we want to learn about how the pandemic impacted these businesses. We know that financially is definitely was impacted, but how else, what else happened to them? How did they manage to stay connected to the community and customers during that stay at home order? During our last show, we talked about how life at the office will change. So now we want to talk how COVID changes the future of retail and personal services businesses like our salons and our spas. What's the future going to be like for them? We'll discuss these questions and find out how we can continue to support our local businesses as we chat with Jane Abraham, co-owner of Scout & Molly's boutique here in Ballston Quarter and Eric Renfro, the owner operator of Bearded Goat in Ballston Exchange. Jane and Eric, cheers and welcome. Thank you for joining us today. We know how busy you are, for sure.

Jane Abraham:

Glad to be with you.

Eric Renfro:

Appreciate being here.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. Well, we're glad you're open. We're glad things are starting to move back to whatever our normal is going to be. We want you to be successful and we want to definitely want to hear about what you've experienced over the last few months, but first let's talk about your individual storefronts. Jane, let's start with you about Scout & Molly's. You've become one of my favorite boutiques, for sure, since you've come to Ballston and we're just so happy to have you, so tell us more about how you started up the group.

Jane Abraham:

My daughter, Betsy, and I are co-owners, and we are excited that our second store is in Ballston Quarter. We opened a first store in Reston Town Center. And when we learned that new Ballston Quarter complex was going to be built, we thought it was the perfect place for our second store. It's

such a vibrant section of Arlington and we're really excited to be part of it. We're located on the second level of Ballston Quarter in the outside, courtyard area.

Tina Leone:

Yes, I know. I have to remind people that our great retail shops, for real shopping is up upstairs. So I keep saying, we need to put signs up there to put the big arrows that go, "Go up, go up."

Jane Abraham:

Definitely is one of our biggest challenges and that is getting the word out to the community that we've got some really great retail stores in the center of Ballston Quarter. You need to go up that escalator and come find us.

Tina Leone:

Yeah. We were so lucky to have you, because before even Ballston Quarter was starting the construction, people were crying out for great boutiques, so we have them, we just got to make sure that they know that you're there and now that you're back opened, for sure. So tell us what's different about Scout & Molly's because it seems like you have a great, eclectic mix.

Jane Abraham:

We really strive to be everyone's favorite boutique, that's my goal. I'd like our customers to feel that they're shopping in their best friend's closet. We hope that you'll find stuff in our boutique that you won't find other places. I work really hard to be sure that we have something special for a pretty broad age range and body type. We carry sizes that range from 0 to 18, we can do quite a bit of special ordering with our vendors. So, I think we are unique because we really can cater to our customer. And once we work with somebody, we can then bring in additional styles that that person would be interested in.

Tina Leone:

I think that's terrific. And I do appreciate that because a woman over 40 can still shop in there. Over 50 can shop easily in your shop, which is great. And I really appreciate the different sizes.

Jane Abraham:

We can guaranteed that you're always going to find really interesting, fun things in our store. And we try to have dressy clothes, casual clothes. The one thing that really is different right now is that so many people have been working from home. And so they're not yet ready to shop for dresses and fancy things. Everybody's still in this transition phase. And you'll find a lot of really great things, so if you want to be cozy still at home, or if you're an hour transition into your office and need a few things to spruce up your wardrobe, or if like me, you've gained a couple of extra pounds, we've got you covered.

Tina Leone:

I appreciate that. So I'll be in soon, for sure. Eric, let's talk about the Bearded Goat. I love seeing that there is more retail being just for men or geared towards men. Talk to us about how you came up with the concept for this. And of course, we're glad you chose Ballston, for sure. So tell us about your shop.

Eric Renfro:

Oh, absolutely. Jon Dodson and myself, both the owner operators of the Bearded Goat, met a while back and had a dream of opening a barbershop. And we started cutting Scott's hair during that timeframe. And it started with an idea, just a casual conversation, which led to several meetings, to which the partnership was born between the three of us. And we were excited to find this area in Ballston. Because I, myself had worked in that mall for most of my career since 2002, until 2016. So we were actually considering Boston Quarter, but when we found the location which we are at, which is a 4201 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 145, we're actually on the Ninth Street side, we were enamored just with the location and the windows and the space. And it was the perfect location. We're a block away from the Metro and a block away from the new Boston Quarter. So we found our home and we're happy to be there serving the community.

Tina Leone:

Yeah, it is a great location. Is there something to the name Bearded Goat or that's a whimsy?

Eric Renfro:

No. Yeah. So yeah, we wanted something that just was very memorable. But my partner, Jon, he makes our beard oils and beard balms. And the main ingredient in both of those products is handmade olive oil from Greece. His wife's family have a Grove out there in Greece, and that's where we get our olive oil from and on those groves, bearded goats roam. So when Jon and [Eleni 00:07:52] were out there harvesting some of the oils, he was enamored with the bearded goats and it just stuck with him.

Jane Abraham:

It's perfect. The story is absolutely charming. That's terrific. So tell us a little bit about this whole trend to, and I don't want to digress too far, but Arlington was recently named America's most handsome city by Grooming Lounge in December. So tell us about this interest about grooming for men. I mean, is this a metrosexual thing? Is the beard thing going to keep continuing? Tell us about what the trends are.

Eric Renfro:

So we're actually a full service barber shop. We do take our beards very seriously from anyone that's coming in there, but we do all things catering towards men and the services that they require. And I just think men in general now are taking their appearance to a higher standard. I think communicating the type of services they require is a big portion of this. And so, it's an appointment based service that we're giving. So, there's no time wasted. You come in for your appointment time, we take our time during the service, you're getting a quality service instead of just a walk in and get a quick hair cut in and out. And you're not sure what you, what you got until you get home and pick through it yourself. So it's something that we're taking our time and making sure we're educating our client on how to maintain the style that we're giving them as they walk out that door until their next service.

Tina Leone:

Well, we as women appreciate that. Thank you very much because the men do look pretty good in Ballston.

Eric Renfro:

Oh, thank you.

Tina Leone:

So let's turn to the big topic about COVID. And so, things obviously changed very drastically for you and your stores back in March. And it seemed like a switch went off and all of a sudden everything was shut down. And then, within a couple of days, I had just returned from Spain, actually. And two days later, they were shutting us all down. So tell us what it was like for you the last few months. What happened to you and what things maybe occurred that you had not thought about or maybe you didn't know that you would have had to plan for? So, Jane, let's start with you.

Jane Abraham:

Sure. Well, I appreciate that question because I think it did take all of us by surprise and especially those of us that are in small businesses to go from having a vibrant business one day to being completely shut down. And as it turned out for a good three months, if not a little bit more, it's a hard thing to take as a small business. Because of course your fields don't necessarily staff, but I will say two things. One, the community has been terrific. The chamber, your operation. So many community groups have really tried to work with us to find ways that they can be helpful, whether it is through grants or through helping us advertise online services during this tough time. I do want to give a shout out to Ballston in particular, in Arlington as a whole, because the community really has been helpful and supportive, even though that's the case, it's been pretty tough.

Jane Abraham:

As a retailer that's inside really a mall-like facility, we really couldn't have anybody come in for a long time. We first started trying to do personal appointments. And while that was a safe thing for us to do, the community wasn't ready for that. I think the fear level was so high that we really did not get much traction with our personal appointments. We then expanded our online presence and people were appreciative of that, it was a way for us to stay connected. But as people were unsure about what their own futures would bring them, it wasn't a time where people wanted to spend an awful lot of money. And so I decided working with my daughter, Betsy, that we would do a couple of things during that initial time span.

Jane Abraham:

One, we wanted to do something that would help those that were working on the front lines and we had a very large inventory. We had just accepted pretty much all of our spring inventory when we had to close our doors. So we developed a plan to reach out to people in the community that were interested in supporting us. And that also wanted to support people who were working on the front lines. And we offered really a free dress promotion. If a client purchased a dress from us, we then donated a dress to somebody of their choice that was working on the front lines. And while we had a lot of people participating in this, and I have to say Ballston was extraordinarily supportive of this effort. More than anything, it helped us get the word out that as a retailer, we were trying to do some things to help the community.

Jane Abraham:

And we were featured on Great Day Washington. We were featured in several of the local newsletters online and in print. And that was helpful to us because while we weren't able to see a lot of customers, we were able to stay connected. And then as it became clear that when we were going to open, face masks we're going to be a new reality, we began, I think, on the early end of most retailers reaching out to customers in the community and letting them know that we were going to be a place that they could

purchase those items. And those two things had been helpful to us in terms of staying connected to the community.

Tina Leone:

That's terrific. We definitely were happy to see the exposure that you got for the work you were doing and really pivoting amazingly, during this whole thing. Eric, it's a little different for you, right? Because this is a personal service where you have to touch people. So how was it for you? What was your experience?

Eric Renfro:

So, initially we were really just hitting our stride right when we had to shut down, we were approaching our one year anniversary.

Tina Leone:

I was just going to say that. You weren't open for very long really.

Eric Renfro:

Yeah. We opened up March 21st of 2019 and we closed March 17th, 2020. We were just hitting our stride. So yeah, it was tough having to shut down and being uncertain. No one had answers, no one's gone through this. So, some of the big questions were, how are we going to pay rent and utilities? And obviously all of our employees are commission, they make a portion of the services. So we were worried about their livelihood as well, but I have to echo what the young lady was saying before, in terms of the community, we were able to open up our online store as well.

Eric Renfro:

And initially it was just gift cards, but then we started offering products and merchandise and we donated the profits of those transactions to our employees. And once we opened up the gift cards, we sold over \$20,000 in gift cards within the first several weeks. So it was amazing, just the support that our community was giving us and wanting our business to thrive during that period of time. We were all amazed.

Tina Leone:

That's fantastic. Oh, we love hearing that. So, revenue wise, both of you, obviously those gift cards may or may not be redeemed, who knows. But as far as your revenue, how severe was it hit? And did you go for any of the government paycheck protection program, the SBA loans, the economic injury disaster loan, and then of course, Arlington and the bids contributed as well to this grant program that was just announced at the Awardies last month. Tell us about your, you don't have to get into detail, but your financial situation.

Eric Renfro:

Sure. So for us initially, like I said, we did the online stores and the profits sharing with our employees. Luckily all of us were able to get unemployment and that really helped out personal finances. Bearded Goat barber was able to get the PPP loan on the second wave. So that's helping us now, but yeah, during the shutdown, as a business, other than our online sales, it was really no income coming in because just being a service based industry.

Eric Renfro:

We were also able to implement things to stay connected with our clients, FaceTime Fridays. My partner, Jon, was a big part of that. Where we would coach people through at home haircuts with their spouse or roommate.

Tina Leone:

Oh boy, that sounds a little dangerous.

Eric Renfro:

Absolutely. But we were there coaching them through the process and making sure they didn't get too awry during the at home haircut. But most of them turned out very well.

Tina Leone:

That's awesome. Oh my gosh. I would not trust anybody else. No way.

Eric Renfro:

Oh, a lot of the guys that are coming in now, yeah. Most of them let the hair grow out. Some of them are embracing a longer look now, but I would say more than 50% are going back to what they were getting beforehand.

Tina Leone:

That's good. Yeah. A lot of people were walking around pretty shaggy.

Eric Renfro:

Oh, yeah. Lots of hair hitting the floor, for sure.

Tina Leone:

Jane, tell us about your experience and did you go for any of the government loans?

Jane Abraham:

Well, like Eric, we had several employees that we had to let go and they were able to get unemployment. I am now happy to say we've been able to offer everyone that we had to let go an opportunity to come back at both stores. And those area have appreciated that and are beginning to come back to work for us. We did apply for the PPP loan and that was approved and so that was very important to us, being able to begin to bring back those employees. And to be honest with you, the expansion of that, some of the changes that Congress made that allowed there to be a lengthier period of time to qualify for forgiveness has been really crucial to a small business like mine because within eight weeks of receiving that loan Ballston Quarter wasn't even open.

Jane Abraham:

So I couldn't really bring anybody back to do real work. And so now that that has been expanded, that is very helpful to us. And we are a recipient of one of the grants from the Arlington community. And we very, very much appreciate that. We anticipate that being very helpful as we begin now to look at how we'll bring in new inventory, because like I mentioned earlier, we had all this spring inventory that had

just arrived. And so we now are in the process of figuring out how we might liquidate that and offer incentives to people to come in and shop. In fact, I'll give a little plug right now that if you come in and make an appointment with us, we are giving 30% off anything that you purchase at this time.

Jane Abraham:

And then we're also looking at, because let's just face it, people aren't yet flocking to stores. And I don't know, Eric, if you're back up to the level of business you were before, but we certainly are not. And we have the added challenge of being inside that courtyard. And it's a challenge for people to know that we're there. And so we're offering some gift bundles and summer love boxes that we're beginning to promote that people can buy to send their high schooler that might've graduated this year, a friend who needs a pick me up, maybe it's the person herself that needs a little pick me up. So we're starting to be innovative in putting items together in a variety of bundles and in boxes so that people can order something that's reasonably priced and that can be a gift to someone or to themselves.

Jane Abraham:

And we also have developed a program called Boutique in a Box, so for those people who really are not yet ready to come out and shop, but would like to have that experience, we can do that for them in their home. We do just a little interview with them and based on that, we pull together about 20 pieces of clothing that they might be interested in. We bundle it up in a box and then we hand deliver that to them. And then they have two or three days where they, in their home, can try those things on, decide what they want to keep, what they want to return, and then we pick up what their not going to keep. So, we're trying to find innovative ways to reach people at their comfort level.

Tina Leone:

That's a great idea. Love that. So, talk to us about the reopening now. The first is phase three, and that means, basically you're almost completely back open, but with restrictions. So, and especially with businesses like yours, Eric, it's very close. So what does the reopening look like for you, eric?

Eric Renfro:

We've been reopened since May 29th and we've actually been operating under the phase one protocols up until tomorrow. What that meant for us was we were at 50% capacity and we had to reorganize all of our barbers schedules into two six hour shifts daily, seven days a week, where we had every other chair empty and everyone wearing face masks while in the shop and then extra measures that we were doing, like single use cape, checking all of our staff's temperatures before each shift or wiping down surfaces and the chairs, et cetera, after each service and cleaning tools and such so that we were ready to go with with each and every client.

Eric Renfro:

Starting July 1st, we're going to be at full capacity, but we're still limiting our waiting and we're encouraging people to wait outside if the weather's decent so that we're limiting to just the staff and the clientele that's in the shop.

Tina Leone:

That's terrific, you're back open. Jane, go ahead, please.

Jane Abraham:

For us, because we're on the interior portion of the Ballston Quarter mall, some of what we're able to do really is dependent upon the foot traffic in that mall area. So up to this point, we have been open, modified hours and by appointment. And we are trying to advertise the right phone number for people to contact us, to schedule appointments. And the word seems to be getting out because people are finding us that way. And then, now as we move into this next week, we are following a pretty strict protocol in terms of face masks. We are requiring everybody wear face masks when they are in our store. And we ask that as people enter, that they use hand sanitizer. All of our employees wear face masks all the time, and wear gloves. So people can feel comfortable that we're following those protocols. We always have done a deep cleaning process, but we're continuing to do that. And in between customers, we wipe everything down.

Jane Abraham:

A question a lot of people have had is, can they try clothes on? And yes, we do let people try clothes on in our fitting room. We have a policy, if somebody tries something on and decides not to purchase it, we take it out of our inventory for at least 24 hours so that it can air out, we'll steam it. So we feel pretty confident that that is a good protocol for us to follow in terms of keeping both our employees and our customers safe.

Tina Leone:

That's terrific. Yeah. It sounds like you all have done as much as possible to make sure that any concerns somebody might have could be allayed because you're doing a whole heck of a lot of work to make sure that everything is as safe as possible. So, we really appreciate that and I look forward to shopping. And to that point, so let's end on the note of what expert advice can you give us here? So, Jane, talk to us about what's hot for this season now, and what's exciting maybe to buy? And then what should we have in our closet? Maybe there's some things that we just absolutely should have as a staple in our wardrobe.

Jane Abraham:

Going into spring and summer, there were all sorts of fun trends, lot of pleats, pleated skirts, pleated pants, and a lot of fun colors, some coral and yellows and purple, all the different phases of purple have been popular, sleeves, fun statement sleeves. All of those going into spring and summer were trending. I have to say that this COVID experience probably has impacted that a good bit because people haven't the places to go. They're not going to events and they're not going out like they might have anticipated. So I would say the trends right now, going into the heat of the summer have moved more toward comfort and more for fun and making yourself feel good.

Jane Abraham:

And so, we have a lot of fun T-shirts and workout shirts and shorts and things along those lines that I think now is the time to buy some of that stuff because you need it. You can perk yourself up with a few of those items. And if you happen to have gained a couple of pounds, I've worked with several of my customers and as one told me recently, I don't want to buy anything until I lose the five pounds that I gained. And I would say that I wish you would rethink that because at any stage of our body type, you want to feel good about yourself. You want to feel comfortable.

Jane Abraham:



So I would say find one or two pieces that are comfortable, that make you feel beautiful to put into your wardrobe for this period of time. And if you want to work on getting rid of those couple of pounds, that's good too. But, it's important, especially now, as there still is so much uncertainty, that we do everything we can to feel good about ourselves. And I think having clothes that you feel comfortable in and make you feel beautiful is important.

Tina Leone:

Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. I remember my mother was always saying, "You have to dress the body that you have now, at this moment and you need to feel good about it." So, totally agree with you. Yes. Then it's perfectly good reason to go shopping. Whether you've gained weight or lost it.

Jane Abraham:

Also, face masks are here to stay for a while, especially in our area. And what I'm finding is people now really are beginning to embrace them and want them to look nice with whatever their outfit is. And so, I can tell you had at Scout & Molly's, we have a lot of patterns, we have a lot of fabrics. Everybody is finding something that they feel more comfortable with than not. Whether it's 100% cotton or if it's more of a spandex, thin mask. We've got to covered. So, come check us out. And while you're looking at face masks, we'll see if we can get you into a piece or two of other things that would be fun for you to have.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. Well, I know for sure that I'll be in. Eric, talk to us about how it's getting started back again. You've been teaching these people how to cut their own hair. I'm sure they're more than ready to come back in, or they've already been in at this point, but what are a few things for your clients that you recommend, for the gentleman? What should every guy have in his cabinet to be well-groomed?

Eric Renfro:

Sure. Well, two main things I would say for them to stay well-groomed is, during the consultation, they're expressing how they want their hair to be cut and maybe relying upon the expertise of their barber, especially if they have a good rapport with them, on trusting them to do the detail work that they don't necessarily know the answer to. A lot of the times during the consultation, sometimes they don't know what a number two is or a number three, but just having that trust in your barber or stylist to know the ropes and what's good for them, can go a long way.

Eric Renfro:

And then just using the right products to maintain the desired hairstyle. For people with fine hair, we sell a texture powder that you put that in dry hair and it automatically thickens it up and gives it volume and texture. So, using the right products can go a long way to maintaining the look, that fresh barbershop look throughout the life of the haircut. And obviously, our beard oils and beard balms for everyone who's got the quarantine beard going or just a beard in general, those good, healthy beard.

Tina Leone:

So I got to ask though, for masks and beards, I've heard all of these different things about. Are there certain types of mask or kinds that are better for gentlemen with beards?

Eric Renfro:

So, yeah, it's rough, especially the bigger beards. The one thing that I could say while wearing a mask, if you have a big beard and if you can use a bandana to wrap the beard up and tuck that into your shirt and then put the mask over that, it works a lot better, but then you have two things going on. But just the regular face masks, it does hinder what's going on with the beard and gets a little sweaty, I guess you could say. The hot air coming into the mask and like the mustache area or whatnot, yeah. It can get moist there. So it's tough working around the mask with that.

Tina Leone:

All the more reason to stay well groomed.

Eric Renfro:

Absolutely. And moisturizing with the beard oil and stuff, making sure that there's no irritation on the skin and whatnot, but it's the new normal, right? That's the coined term for 2020.

Tina Leone:

Absolutely. That's what I do is when I see a guy with a beard, I'm like, "Are you going to the Bearded Goat? Or have you going in there? You need to."

Eric Renfro:

Unfortunately we can't do any beard services right now because the mask has to remain on during this timeframe. So yeah, we're just offering variations of haircut services at the moment. So, that's another factor we're just waiting to see when we'll be able to do that and how going to work out. What are the measures we're going to have to take when doing beard services.

Tina Leone:

Well, at least you can advise your clients while they're there.

Eric Renfro:

Absolutely. Which is what we're doing.

Tina Leone:

That's terrific. Well, finally, both of you, Eric, tell us first, how can we get in touch with you and stay in touch with you?

Eric Renfro:

Oh yeah, sure. You can book your appointments online at [www.beardedgoatbarber.com](http://www.beardedgoatbarber.com) as well as you can also give us a ring at (703) 243-5476. We're appointment based but we do have apprentices as well that take appointments. Their services aren't online so you can always call the shop to get scheduled with one of them.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. And Jane, how can we get in touch with you and what are your hours right now?

Jane Abraham:

Well, we are about to move toward 12 to 6 as our hours. And we'll see how that goes. We're hopeful that we will have enough traffic to be able to sustain that. So everybody knows where we're located. We're on the second level of Ballston Quarter in the outside courtyard section. So the easiest way is to come up the escalator from Wilson directly up to the second level, or if you're coming from inside the mall, to go up to the second level and then go outside where we're located. And our website is [scoutandmollys.com/ballston](http://scoutandmollys.com/ballston). We'd love to have you shop online if that is more convenient for you, both for masks and for clothes. And at this point, we are offering free shipping for all purchases that are done online.

Jane Abraham:

And I'm going to give you a phone number for personal appointments. It is a different phone number than our store number because it goes directly to me. And that way we can be a little bit more available for hours that might be outside of our store hours. And that number is (703) 362-5860. And you are welcome to call that number or text it and we will set up a personal appointment if that's something that you would like.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. Well, thank you both so much for joining us today. We've been chatting with Jane Abraham of Scout & Molly's and Eric Renfro with the Bearded Goat. And we are looking forward to visiting both of your stores very soon in person.

Jane Abraham:

Thank you. Appreciate it.

Eric Renfro:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Tina Leone:

All righty then. It's last call for this show. Remember to stay in touch with us, follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. And of course, sign up for our e-news at our new website at [ballstonva.org](http://ballstonva.org). I'm Tina Leone and I hope you'll join us next time to learn more about Ballston and connect with more of the amazing people in our community. And remember, life is full in Ballston. Bye bye.