

Tania Alexandra O'Connor

Financial analyst, involved/was involved in several community organizations

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**Sofia**

Okay, could you tell me your full name and your occupation?

**Tania**

Yes, my name is Tanya Alexandra O'Connor and I am a financial analyst for biotech.

**Sofia**

Mhm. And okay, so I want to talk to you about the issue- because you've worked a lot in the community in Mountain View, yes, and so I interviewed this woman, Elsy, that sells pupusas in her home. So she has a small business. And I want to ask you kind of about that, that kind of realm. So, have you seen any, like, what are the- have you seen any benefits of these small businesses as- how they have done events or like impacted the community in some way?

**Tania**

Yes, so in different ways... I know that a lot of families benefit from having the opportunity to be small entrepreneurs. Usually what I've seen is that all the family is involved at some point during the process. So it's not just a source of income, which is very important for the families, but it is also a way of teaching children entrepreneurship. And also from a social point of view, it integrates the family a lot more. So, children very often help parents translate things. Parents teach children how to be entrepreneurs, and together they grow strong as a family and they continue to carry on their traditions and their original roots. So, that is from the point of view of the family and how the family benefits. And from the point of view as an outsider, it gives us, the rest of the population in the city, ways to support local entrepreneurs without having to go to chains and things like that.

**Tania**

So, for the people - and Mountain View is very lucky that we have a lot of people that are very local minded and we prefer- we would always choose to buy local than to go and buy from a big corporation or a chain. So it gives us options to do that, and when- for the people that want to use their money, you know, to fulfill their own needs and at the same time to strengthen society, this is a great opportunity to support local entrepreneurs. It also gives us a lot of different options and it opens our options to try different things and different- if you're talking about food specifically, so it also helps us try different cuisines. I know that you're talking about Elsy, who I know, and I've ordered tamales from her and sometimes she sells outside the school.

**Tania**

But I know that there are also, like Indian people that cook meals. There are a few websites that- where you can go and hire somebody to cook you Indian meal or a Chinese meal. So, yeah, talking about food, I think it's a great way for all of us to support local, local economies and also try different things.

**Sofia**

So you also mentioned that she sells outside the school, right? She also mentioned to me that she usually adjusts her food for the children's taste because those are like, the mothers and the children, those are her main customers. So have you seen any impacts on, like, small businesses like hers on, like the school or the school community as well?

**Tania**

I, I don't know. Well,... it's funny because the school that she serves, is very... Latin American, so I don't know- I don't know what the impact is because we've always had it, right, we have the Don Gavino across the street which is another small entrepreneur. And it is, you know, I mean, it makes all that neighborhood feel different from the rest of the neighborhoods in the city because it has very strong roots and it's very colorful.

**Tania**

But, if anything, it just gives mothers the opportunity to find a piece of food that resembles-that looks like what they used to have in that home country. And if Elsy's modifying the recipes so the kids can eat it too, then that's a huge benefit because kids get immersed in those flavors as well.

**Sofia**

Do you have could you share maybe a little bit of you seem to know a lot about the neighborhood. I would like to know a little bit more about, like maybe its history or like like maybe you could mention, like, some or other businesses or organizations.

**Tania**

I mean, I don't know the *history* of the neighborhood. And I've been around a little bit and might see different things. So yeah, very, very culturally rich neighborhood. There are mainly, I would say, Mexican and Salvadorian businesses around. So, for example, from where Elsy puts her truck or her little car, which she sells tamales, one block west from there, there is a tax service just caters to Spanish speaking immigrants, and they are very good at helping people get their Item? (ID?) numbers, which is a huge step in establishing oneself-when you are an immigrant, because then you get to participate in the tax system and that just opens the door to so many things, so...

**Tania**

and this person, that's her main target audience, is Spanish speaker immigrants. There is a health club, which is amazing, they do zumba classes and they also sell... health shakes and target audience is moms that go drop off the kids and then cross the street, do the zumba class and have their natural shakes, so-

**Tania**

Exactly! So that is about things that you wouldn't see in any other neighborhood, right? And only if you know the people, if you can understand the language that is being spoken, you know what's going on. And there's- so those are very interesting ones, and then they're just the typical ones are a lot of like gift stores that cater to that specific a population that has like baptism clothing and first communion clothing that look very similar to what people would wear in Latin America. So, very targeted as well. There is a tequería which is both Mexican and Salvadorian- those things you would expect. Right. But but the other two, that accounting firm and the health club, those are... little nuggets of amazingsness.

**Sofia**

Yeah! This is the plaza right next to the school and Castro, right? Yes.

**Tania**

Right. Yes, yes. So you have three corners: one is the dry cleaners, and then the other one where the tax lady is, all the way at the end is where they used to have the zumba classes- I don't know if they still have this one after the pandemic, it would be hard to believe that they were able to keep paying rent and all that during the pandemic.

**Sofia**

I see. Also, I was reading in an article by the Mountain View Voice about a lot of home businesses. Not only in Mountain View, but like in this general area, like the Bay Area, like businesses that sell food, like, you know, that use their, their apartment or their house to sell food. And I also read that people in these businesses often struggle to get the permits or they struggle to grow, you know, as a business, ave you have you seen some of these problems or do you know some other issues?

**Tania**

Yeah, yeah. So, what I understand is... the city of Mountain View is- it's really easy to get a business climate, except when it comes to food. Because of health regulations, you need to have an industrial kitchen, and that industrial kitchen needs to be like, I don't know, all stainless steel, it has to have like fire-controlling things...and none of that can be built in a house or in an apartment. So I think- I think the main struggle for these small entrepreneurs is that they cannot have a business license. That doesn't stop the rest of us

from buying from them. Obviously, you know, they have enough demand that there are many of them and they all are selling. But, it's- I guess it's a tricky situation for the city because they cannot-... I guess up until now, they have been turning a blind eye, which is very smart. But they cannot be like, "here's your permit to sell food out of your kitchen."

**Sofia**

Right.

**Tania**

They would-yeah, it would be trouble, probably, but that's what I know. That's what I know, that they cannot have a permit, and without that it's difficult to expand because like, even if they wanted to, I mean, it would be really hard to... to rent a place, just because of the cost of the rent, but even if they could afford it, if they don't have a business permit, then you can't, you know, that's very hard to do all those transactions, they could ask for a loan in a bank, but banks are not going to lend any money to a person without a business permit. So it is, it is definitely something that is stopping them from potential growth, yes.

**Sofia**

And could they potentially face any consequences or are they facing any consequences for this like kind of barrier?

**Tania**

I don't think so, I mean, could they? Sure. Have they? I don't know. I don't think so. Not that I know. I think it would be very... it would be very controversial if any law was enforced. Yeah... So I don't know anybody has faced any consequences...

**Sofia**

I see. Um, so overall, like this kind of, this issue kind of reminds me of like, I think in L.A., there was like a legal food truck war where there were they started putting a lot of regulations of where food trucks could sell and like which types of food trucks and things like that. It was like a whole issue, because many, well, most of the people who were selling these-they were immigrants, right? And they were not like big companies, like big brands. And do you think also-maybe other ways in which the environment in Mountain View discourages or maybe encourages, like small businesses to to be there, like maybe any factors when an immigrant is trying to create a business, a food related business, like any things they might run into?

**Tania**

Not-I don't-um, let me... let me see how I can phrase this... These businesses are so small, so they are limited by the size of the kitchen and the size of their clientele. And it seems to

me that the kitchen and the clientele usually matches each other. We have so many of them and there's business for everybody. But, I don't know if one of them wants to get out of the kitchen and buy a food truck and then if, if that would mean that they are taking business for people or maybe they are expanding to other, to other, uh, to a broader audience, which probably is what would happen.

**Tania**

Because what I do know is that these little businesses are not advertised to the general public. These businesses are advertising just to their own community, and if they get to branch out a little bit, it's like by word of mouth. But they do not-they do not reach out outside of that Spanish speaking community.

**Sofia**

I see.

**Tania**

So yes, the limitation is, yeah, the size of the kitchen and the size of the clientele, but I think it matches each other. Yeah.

**Sofia**

And, so I also know that you are part of Listos, which is a community organization that supported undocumented immigrants here in Mountain View. Could you maybe explain what kind of things you, you did or saw people do that helped people stick together or like form a strong bond as a community?

**Tania**

Right. So what we did was events, more of a- with- always with a legal point of view. So we would bring immigration lawyers to talk to the population and in that way, that I think the first thing that we tried to do was lower the anxiety because this was during the 2016, 2017... you know, political climate was, was a little rough against immigrants.

**Tania**

So that was the main reason we did it, was to help-help us and help everybody around us calm down and understand first that what was being said on the news was not very easy to actually put into action, and two that we were not alone. And so I saw something, I don't know, something very positive that came out of that horrible climate is that before, the news were so grim and and aggressive,

**Tania**

Everybody assumed that there was no undocumented immigrants. It was a little bit of a "don't ask, don't tell" situation. And the assumption by the people outside of the core community, all the allies and all the people that were trying to help, nobody would ask and everybody would assume that financial situations were just financial situations.

**Tania**

But they didn't know that there was this horrible roadblock of being undocumented to make anything else-so that was a positive thing that came out of the horribleness of the news and the rhetoric , it was just like that everybody was like: "no, you know what? I am an undocumented immigrant, and this is what I'm facing, and my kids go to school with your kids and you know my family and we're good people.

**Tania**

So, that was great. And, and, we were very lucky that we were able to provide a place where we all could come together and understand each other and help each other without being afraid of saying it out loud. So that was back then, things got much better. And we are able to focus on the kind of things. And I love that you're doing this because I have been talking to a person at the Los Altos Mountain View Community Foundation about this great idea of having a community kitchen, so being able to find a sponsor that could let us use an industrial kitchen, where we can have rotating people doing whatever they want

**Tania**

to do so they can actually sell to everybody. So I love that you're doing it, so that's what, that is something that and that's the most meaningful conversation I've been involved in post immigration stuff that we were doing a few years ago.

**Sofia**

Right, Right.

**Sofia**

So this kind of- I feel like this kind of invisibility among immigrants is very common. So have you also seen this kind of- in like maybe like invisibility in- throughout like the ways that people and kind of interact through food, if that makes sense. Like when like, for example, when someone goes to a restaurants or picks a specific area of restaurants or things like that, you know, as a as a community member, is there a kind of like disconnect in between these different areas, specifically maybe in Mountain View and like making certain areas more invisible than others?

**Tania**

Yes, for sure. Yeah. Yes and I think that has a lot to do with that target audience and the comfort level... or... the feel that... I don't know. I don't know. But yes for sure. I mean, you know that Castro street is very popular, and people come from all around to eat and to party on Satur- on Friday and Saturday night. It's always a lot of people, most people are from out of town. Right. And that's, you know, and the rest of the city is for the locals, right?

**Tania**

Like there's no visibility outside of the city for establishments that are outside that general area. And within the city too, I'm-when something was foreign to you, when something like you're driving- it's not that the restaurants are closed to anybody else, but when you're driving down the street and the neighborhood looks like it's some neighborhood from another country, sometimes it's not that you don't feel as comfortable, getting out of your car and going into a restaurant. I don't think that's- I mean, that's human nature, and I don't think that that neighborhood needs to change to make everybody feel comfortable either, right. Definitely I don't know if it's invisibility, but for sure, there is a level of comfort- And I think it but it goes both ways because, you know, there are there are places where people only speak one language, and it's not English, and when you walk in and if you don't speak the language, it's really hard to order... And for the people, it's really hard to serve you, right? So I think it goes both ways. Should it be fixed? I don't know, that's a good question. I kind of like having these little nuggets of authenticity around.

**Sofia**

Right right, yeah. So what about foreign food as an overall topic? Do you have a story where you connected with someone through trying a different food?

**Tania**

Yes: my husband!

**Sofia**

Really?

**Tania**

We love sushi, right? Yeah, I. I don't think he grew up in the suburbs of Boston, but not the wealthy suburbs, he didn't have access to, like a whole bunch of foreign food. So he had Italian and Chinese and American food. So, when we met, we were, you know, more in the city of Boston, and we both love sushi, so, that's how we connected, going to sushi, once a week. So that, yeah, I think, I think it's easier for me to connect with people that enjoy food because I enjoy food so much and I enjoy food from all over the world. Because we live in a place where we connect socially through going to restaurants. We don't go out to bars. We are not super outdoorsy, so we don't connect with people by going on hikes, either, So we

connect with other friends when we go to restaurants. So it's easier to connect when people enjoy the same type of food that we do.

**Sofia**

That's true. That is true. Um, have you also learned through- well, yeah, I assume that you've learned as well about a lot of different cultures just living in Mountain View.

**Tania**

Oh my gosh, yes. I mean, I grew up in Guadalajara, so, we have one Japanese restaurant, and that's it. And Italian, of course. Well, had a Chinese place that we didn't like. So to me, having food the way I do, discovering Arabic, Israeli food was huge, I didn't- I had never- I had had Arabic food before, but I was never able to sit down with people from Israel and actually try their food the way they do it. And so that was amazing, and to this day- So that was my first job here in the Bay Area: I worked for Startup, the owners were Israeli. I just fell in love with their culture because of their delicious food they served me every time they brought food to the office. It's delicious. So yeah, I think that was the first thing, and ever since, I have never having Indian food and I was missing out, that is absolutely delicious. So yes, I always felt so lucky to be here because I know that every chef is interpreting, doing their best to interpret their food.

**Tania**

For us. It's not like in Guadalajara you would have a Mexican chef reading a book, trying to do a recipe from another country that they have never visited, because this is in Mexico, right?

**Sofia**

Right, right. Yeah.

**Tania**

Here, you know that you will try-things are very close to the authentic things. One, because the chefs probably were born or raised in that country. And second because they are catering to people from that country, too, it's not that they have to mellow things down. Trying to be as authentic as possible. So, yeah, I feel super lucky to be here, be able to try so many delicious things.

**Sofia**

And what what do you think is- to you, What does authenticity of authenticity mean exactly? Like where what is the definition.

**Tania**



When it doesn't have to be... When a recipe doesn't have to be adapted to the taste of a different culture. To the extent that it loses its spirit, like mole, right. I can, I don't think you can ever change mole to meet the taste of an American person. I just don't know a lot of American people that would enjoy mole, so mole is always going to be authentic. And I hope that it is, right? If I'm any point in changes so that my kids and my husband love it, then it's not going to be mole for sure. The way I think about it, it is probably same with curry: if I go to an Indian place or a Thai place, the level of spiciness hasn't changed, right? It's really still very spicy, the flavors are very pungent... So, I think it hasn't been changed to an extent that, you know, it became bland.

**Sofia**

Yeah, I'm kind of like comparing your definition with like Elsy's because she said something authentic was something that came from herself that was like, more like, unique. That was like authenticity and uniqueness.

**Tania**

Right, right, right. That is true. Yeah. But if you think about it, something that came from Elsy is because she learned it in a kitchen far, far away, so whatever comes from her is because she's learned from centuries and centuries of, you know, passing the recipes and techniques and, you know, ideas of spices... So, yeah for sure, I agree with her.

**Sofia**

So one one last question. So do you see people opening up in the future to different communities and like maybe you described in a lot of like a kind of you, you made a picture of kind of like in some ways a segregated city, like segregated by different foods and cultures like the, the street with the, with the Latino community, the street with the Indian community, -Do you see in the future some kind of bridging between these communities?

**Tania**

I hope so. I, I think that that's just a matter of... To me, it's a matter of getting to know each other and feeling comfortable in each other's presence. And in my experience, that happens through schools because, you know, you cannot control which kids your kids go to school with, and then through that, you learn that kids are kids and they are wonderful and then, they must have wonderful parents and then, you get to be friends with them and then, you get to be invited to their celebrations and then you feel comfortable and then you don't feel like you're an outsider, you know that you're accepted. So I think that's- I don't think it's easy, but I think the more we talk about it, the easier it becomes, because then everybody understands that we all feel the same and that we all kind of have the same kind of hesitations and when we know that we're not alone things are easier. I do hope that- I really don't want places to lose their identity, because I feel like that's beautiful, and I do want

people to feel comfortable coming and going out of those different environments. That would be a dream, yes, that would be a dream.

**End of Interview**