

Melanie Gulbas

Staff Writer

mgulbas1@binghamton.edu

Local businesses, BU students face financial repercussions of COVID-19



Zach Canaperi/Photography Intern

Tom & Marty's was one of the first local businesses to shut its doors amid the recent COVID-19 outbreak.

Fears surrounding the virus cause local businesses to restructure

By DAVID JULIEN AND MELANIE GULBAS - MARCH 19, 2020

As concerns surrounding the coronavirus (COVID-19) spread, Binghamton businesses and Binghamton University students are facing financial repercussions.

Local restaurants, bars and other gathering places in the area are changing their usual routines or shutting down completely after Gov. Andrew Cuomo mandated on Monday that bars, restaurants, casinos, gyms and movie theaters close to encourage social distancing practices. While restaurants can still provide delivery and grab-and-go meals, they were forced to halt all dine-in services, leaving some student staffers from BU unsure of their future and financial security.

One of the affected businesses, Tom & Marty's in Downtown Binghamton, temporarily closed its doors before the state-mandated shutdown came into effect. Owner Larry Shea, 49, of Binghamton, said he did not want to contribute to the spread of COVID-19 and put his customers' wellness above business.

"The health of myself and staff and the whole community is the most important and it would be irresponsible to keep it open," Shea said.

He said the economic impact of the pandemic will be hard on all local businesses, especially

ones that have full-time staff members.

“From my perspective, I wanted to not only close, but I wanted to be positive and vocal about why we have to do it so I can play a positive role in that regard, without preaching to other businesses,” Shea said.

With the closing of his establishment, many of his student staff members are now jobless, prompting them to leave the Binghamton area and return home.

“They are working for the money and need that money,” Shea said. “The quicker we get past this, the quicker we can go back to work and I want a chance to be open for graduation. The sooner we all get on board and do our part, we can all move this past — but it is ultimately up to the experts.”

One of his employees, Anna Shaheen, a junior majoring in environmental studies, has been working at Tom & Marty’s for over a year. Although the break from working will not be a financial detriment to her, she said it will be for others.

“My heart aches for students who live paycheck to paycheck and need to pay rent,” Shaheen said. “In the meantime, I plan to stay home or go out in nature where there is no one else.” Shaheen said she is sad she will not be able to serve her peers and the Binghamton community for now, but knows it is for the safety of everyone.

“I will definitely miss working at [Tom & Marty’s] and I love the entire staff and every customer I serve, but in order to preserve the great business we have and the health of everyone, we have to play it safe,” Shaheen said. “I can’t wait until the day I can step back behind the bar and serve again. Hopefully, that’s soon.”

Another local business, Alexander’s Cafe, will remain open but will be changing the way orders are handled. They will be offering delivery services, takeout orders and curbside pickup, in accordance with the new mandate.

Owner Alexander Nichols, 27, of Binghamton, said he believes his business may be affected by a large portion of BU’s population leaving the area, but to avoid health concerns and make getting food easy for customers, he opted to implement curbside pickup.

“[Customers] don’t have to get out of their car,” Nichols said. “They just let us know they’re here and we bring it to them. It is Downtown, and parking is usually an issue, but we have two spots for them and that’s unique.”

Nichols said his staff will be working hard to serve customers as COVID-19 continues to interrupt daily life.

“None of my students are going home so they are still working for me,” Nichols said. “They are working through it and we’re working with them.”

Students who work for local businesses have not been the only ones impacted by the global pandemic. BU student employees have also been forced to keep up with changes and have dealt with recent uncertainty concerning the future of their jobs. Andrew Kennedy, a junior majoring in biochemistry and a referee for Campus Recreation's intramural sports, said as events have been canceled, he no longer has a job on campus. He also referees while away from BU, but is unsure if he will be employed going forward.

"The season is just starting, but I was planning on going to West Virginia and New Jersey for tournaments over spring break," Kennedy said. "While those haven't been canceled yet, I've been told not to make travel plans yet either. As for the summer season, leagues are delayed and I don't know if I will have games to ref this summer."

Nevertheless, he said he remains grateful for the University's response and believes administrators have been a guiding force throughout the panic.

"I think the response from the University has been good," Kennedy said. "I understand and appreciate the school not forcing students off campus because I work in a lab on campus, and for some students, it might be safer to stay on campus than go home. Overall, I think they have done their best to roll with the punches and I appreciate their flexibility as the news changes literally every hour."

With the U.S. stock market continuing to plunge, the Binghamton workforce is not alone in seeing lost jobs and financial instability. According to a recent Marist poll, around 18 percent of adults have reported being laid off or having their hours cut during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emily Cirulnick, a first-year graduate student studying biomedical engineering and a student caterer at Sodexo dining services, said she is not sure if she lost her job yet, but her hours have been drastically cut.

"I was originally scheduled for 20 hours of work this week and after the announcement that classes were going online, I dropped down to zero hours as many events were canceled," Cirulnick said. "I rely on these shifts to pay for groceries and other living necessities."

Although Cirulnick said she is struggling to comprehend the situation around her, she is finding comfort in knowing she isn't the only one dealing with uncertainty.

"I'm extremely stressed because I've always been concerned with budgeting myself and losing all of my shifts makes it even harder," Cirulnick said. "Knowing that a lot of other students are going through it as well slightly calms me because I know I'm not alone and everyone is probably just as stressed as I am."

While times are tough, Cirulnick said she is trying to stay optimistic.

"It just feels so surreal to me right now, and I'm trying not to worry because it will get better at some point," she said.