

Interview with Mike Cosco

By Phoebe MacIntosh, Jan. 31, 2023

Between the countless flyers for local happenings posted outside and the warm bustling atmosphere, the Putney General Store feels like the heart of a community to anyone stopping there. On a recent Saturday in January I met the current owner, Mike Cosco. We sat down for coffee and an interview above the store, at a table in front of three windows which look out over the town. Mike leaned back in his chair as he spoke and sipped his coffee from an enamel General Store mug in between questions. He spoke eloquently and thoughtfully, in a strong voice that made everything he said, even when complicated, seem remarkably clear.

“My wife said we probably took the pandemic in stride because we were already in chaos, our life was already thrown up in the air. We didn’t have close friends and family here, that sudden break of everything shutting down was so much upheaval but we were living in upheaval. Our lives had changed enormously.”



Mike Cosco, owner of the Putney General Store, Jan. 28, 2023

Naturally we started at the beginning: March 2020. Mike and his wife Kim were new to Putney, having only just arrived and taken over the historic business in September of 2019.

“I had been running a comparatively very small general store north of Boston for eight and a half years. We came here understanding what a general store is to a community and how to run a complex business. For those first few months we were getting our feet on the ground— they were a whirlwind of change. In January the first word of the virus starts to come, in February it gets more serious and by March fifteenth they close the economy. People weren’t allowed indoors, everybody was starting to wear masks. Running a general store is a

commitment to the community; we felt that it was important to show a place of calm and confidence.”

Calm and confidence reflects what I felt in Mike’s presence. He seemed at ease, scanning the main street with a pleasant look as he answered my questions in an even-keeled voice. Mike wanted to offer reassurance to the community, of both Putney and Vermont. He made a simple chalkboard sign which read “We Can Do This! we are VT Strong” and put it out on the road in front of the store. He also posted a photo of the sign to Facebook which garnered around ten thousand likes.

“That was an idea that was important at the time. There was so much questioning and fear of what was going on and where Covid was going. There were all these new rules that society had never experienced before. I wanted to say: whatever this is, we can do this. The community, the employees, the store owners, Putney, Vermont: we can do this. Whatever it takes, we’ll survive, we’ll get through this. That’s how we approached the whole pandemic, we never closed.”



Aforementioned post from the Putney General Store Facebook, Apr. 4, 2020

I asked if the confidence was a front, because that’s what people needed at the time, or if Mike really did feel like everything was going to be okay.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t very fearful. Employees who felt they needed to leave the General Store because they were more at risk went home and we supported them as best we could. There was paperwork to do with the government to get them unemployment benefits and Covid funds. But I wasn’t terrified, I thought if we just listened to the science as it came, although there wasn’t much clarity early on, it would be okay. We did what the government asked us to do: we took out all our

seating, we all wore masks, we sanitized everything regularly, but we let people flex as they saw fit depending on how nervous they were. You still see that now: some employees wear masks and some don't. When the vaccines became available we encouraged people to get them but we couldn't tell anyone what to do so we tried to be a level head."

Mike brought up the idea of being flexible to meet people where they are a few times throughout our conversation. It was refreshing, compared to some of the more black and white thinking that I'm used to, to imagine a world with more understanding. I wondered how he kept so much faith in others, especially as someone working in the service industry, which has been notoriously nightmarish these past few years. His approach was impressive:

"I try to tell my team: everybody is dealing with this in their own way, you have no idea what their lives are like, what other concerns they have, what their day has been like. If somebody comes in and barks, understand that everybody is doing the best they can."

It is not easy to be compassionate, and it stood out to me in stark contrast to what I had been experiencing at the same time in Brooklyn. My Covid years were filled with people fighting across counters but Mike offered up an alternative.

"We had a couple customers who wanted to make the point that masks were unnecessary and that the government made up Covid, but I talked to them, we didn't fight with anybody. We flexed with where everybody was at. The business operated like this: if you want to come into the store, we're open; if you want to stay in your car, we do curbside; if you're stuck at home or you're afraid, I'll deliver your groceries: tell me what you need and I'll bring it to you."

Of course the upheaval caused by the disease itself was only part of the social upheaval amidst Covid. In another one of Mike's Facebook posts, employees stand six feet apart, outdoors and masked, holding a BLM flag under a banner which reads "Stronger Together." I asked if politics played into the General Store these past few years but Mike said they hadn't.

"Here it's just the personal interaction: we're gonna get you the food you asked for, we're gonna serve you coffee and have a conversation. I heard other service businesses had issues with people being nasty but we don't really see that. I think it's because of the energy we put out: we get calm and pleasantness in return. People appreciate who we are and how we do business. Even the people who are angry, when they stick around, they see that we aren't really doing that. We're not going to argue with people and they learn to leave or to leave their anger at the door."

I liked Mike's idea of "the personal interaction" as a way to combat polarization, and found it similarly refreshing to his compassionate outlook. Too often instead of treating people as individuals we treat them as embodiments of ideas preventing any kind of constructive discourse. Because the General Store is so integral to the town, Mike didn't want to bar anyone from it and tried to create a space where people can interact just as human beings.



Aforementioned post from the Putney General Store Facebook, Jan. 5, 2021

Although his attitude felt positive to me, Mike said there were no silver-linings to the pandemic. He did however acknowledge that Covid solidified his and Kim's relationship with Putney.

"We showed how much we care and what lengths we're willing to go to to keep the business open, to support the community, and support people wherever they are and however they want to connect with us. We were strangers to the town: people were wondering who we were and how we were going to run this business. We showed them."

Crises connect people quickly, and in ways that may have never happened otherwise. Now, as the world starts stepping out of the pandemic, Mike and Putney are looking forward.

"There are some community forums, we're talking about the future of Putney: there are task forces to revive downtown, to work on creating affordable housing. We're thinking about the next five, ten years. We're wondering: what does Putney need and what do we need to do as a community to make that happen?"

Last year hundreds of people came together and gave their ideas of what's important. Then task forces were created and assigned three or four priorities each. Mike is the chair of all those task forces.

"We're early in the process of connecting to resources, experts, and funding. I'm going to help as best I can on all those fronts. There's some vision of what Putney used to be and I'm not sure if that's what the Putney of the future will be. I see pictures of retail shops up and down main street with families milling around. The pizza shop used to be a thriving place with flowers out front and now that building might need to get knocked down."

At the end of our interview we circled back to the beginning and I asked Mike what drew him and Kim to Putney.

“I had a corporate job for twelve years, I traveled a lot and made good money but we’d talk and say when the kids are grown and we retire, where will we go? We like the north, we wanted the mountains and the outdoors, we had these vague ideas. When my corporate job went away I took a little time and got into farmer’s market management. Then we opened a general store from scratch and ran it for eight years. I got very connected to serving people face to face which was so different from my old job. We grew that business to be successful, it became a beloved center to that community. It was on a crossroads with a white church across the street, it was a very New England scene. It was a nice area, but when this came and it was a bigger business, in Vermont, it was our chance to move. Everything felt like it was coming together and we thought: we have to go.”

“Like I said, we were made to take the business over. Now we’re here, and we’re staying.”



The Putney General Store, Jan. 28, 2023