

Owner of The Hot Yoga Spot: 'I'll never be the same person I was before this happened'

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Donna Abbott-Vlahos | Albany Business Review

Jessica Fuller, owner and co-owner of The Hot Yoga Spot, CrossFit for The People and Bare Blends.

In the last year, one of Jessica Fuller's businesses was shut down for seven months, while another doubled sales and was able to open a second location with a third on the way.

Her experience as the owner/co-owner of three businesses — The Hot Yoga Spot, CrossFit for The People and Bare Blends — shows how drastically the Covid-19 pandemic impacted different industries.

"Bare is a quick-serve, fast casual concept. Even before the pandemic, it was really a lot of people ordering online, grabbing it to go or stopping in for five minutes and eating there," Fuller said. "It was an easy transition when the pandemic happened, as opposed to the studios and the gym. So it's been a very different experience."

Bare Blends, a smoothie and healthy foods restaurant with two locations in Albany and Clifton Park with a third opening in Latham this month, saw business grow during the pandemic.

"A lot of what it came to with this pandemic was the luck of the draw, which type of industry, what type of service you're already doing and how easily it can mold and kind of lend itself to this new way of doing things," Fuller said.

The restaurant was already suited for grab and go. When the pandemic started, Bare Blends added a delivery person and then expanded to using third-party delivery services. They also started offering at-home packages called Bare Unblended, which allowed customers to order up to 10 smoothie combinations in cups to freeze and use at home throughout the week.

"A lot of our business, previously, was people who were leaving the gym and grabbing a protein smoothie, or on their way to work and needed a quick smoothie on the way in and they want their breakfast," Fuller said. "Because people weren't going to gyms and weren't going to work, they weren't really leaving their house ever. So this ended up being a great way to bring in some additional revenue and to be able to keep people healthy and eating our products from home."

At the same time that Bare was growing, The Hot Yoga Spot — the business with five locations that Fuller has owned for 11 years — was forced to close for seven months.

"We are a business that is always open every day of the year. So all of a sudden in March, we're told you're closing and we don't know when you're reopening," Fuller said. "It was brutal. It's still brutal. It sounds dramatic, but I'll never be the same person I was before this happened."

Fuller said when studios were forced to close, The Hot Yoga Spot lost 90% of its revenue overnight because it relied on a per class pricing model rather than a membership model. CrossFit for The People struggled as well, but was insulated in some ways because it used a membership model.

Fuller said she had to pay The Hot Yoga Spot's monthly rent of \$40,000 out of her savings. And plans to expand and relocate the Latham studio were put on hold.

"To be a business owner in this state will always be different for me because I know now, you can do everything right — make good decisions and pay your taxes and vote and do all the things you're supposed to do," Fuller said. "And ultimately somebody can close you and keep you closed."

Once studios and CrossFit for The People were permitted to reopen in August, Fuller said some customers were nervous to come back. Capacity in studios and gyms continues to be limited to 33%, making it even tougher for businesses like Fuller's to make up for seven months of lost revenue.

"When you have a class waitlisted at 20, that used to have 70, there's no way you're making money. You're barely getting by, or maybe not even getting by," Fuller said. "So financially, it's tough. Hopefully with the vaccines and restrictions changing, we'll be able to start letting in more people at class."

Fuller said it feels sometimes like she's building the business from scratch.

"I had spent 10 years getting customers in the door. Once they're in the door, once they tried a few times and they know how good they feel, they start to notice differences in the way they look, or they're getting a better quality sleep at night or happier or feeling stronger, then it's easy for them to keep coming back. But it's getting people in the door and getting your business to be part of their habit and their routine," Fuller said. "And now fitness business owners, we're starting that again from scratch. So that's an extra barrier to our industry that a lot of other industries won't have."



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