

Interviewee: Oriola Koci
Interviewer: Tim Holt, Yasaal Imran
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Abstract: Oriola Koci was born in Tirana, Albania in 1977. Oriola and her family immigrated to Worcester when she was 18 years old on a diversity lottery visa won by her mother. She attended Assumption College for her undergraduate studies and Clark University for her master's degree. Oriola is a very hard worker who overcame the English barrier when she immigrated to the United States. She did this by working hard and integrating herself into the society. Her friends also helped her in this process since some of them attended Clark's ESL program. She and her husband now own two restaurants in Worcester, Livia's Dish and Altea's Eatery, which are named after their children. Oriola has gone from being a dietary aide, to an owner of two successful restaurants. In this interview, Oriola reflects upon the differences between Albanian culture and American culture. She also shares how her family is a really good support system. She then discusses how her work ethic taught her to be disciplined and how to balance work life and personal life. Oriola touches upon how she has seen the Worcester community grow across the years, and how she thinks improvements in the train system will make a difference in the community. Lastly, she mentions her involvement with the Worcester Airport Committee and the Webster Square Association.

TH: Alright, so my name is Tim Holt.

YI: And I am Yasaal Imran.

TH: And we are here with Oriola Koci in Worcester, Massachusetts on March 15th, 2019. As students of Clark University, we are performing an interview for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project. We are focusing on the areas of women's education, work, and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with those factors. Thank you for your help in this important project.

OK: My pleasure.

TH: Is it ok to record your oral history today?

OK: Yes.

YI: So first we will go through some background questions.

OK: Okay.

YI: What is your full name including both your maiden name and married name if applicable?

OK: Oriola Koci.

YI: That's all?

OK: That's it [laughs].

YI: When and where were you born?

OK: I was born in Tirana, Albania, in 1977.

YI: Have you ever married? If yes, what is the name of your husband?

OK: So I am married, I've been married for 20 years, no, avoid that, 15 [laughs]. But, his name is Enton Mehillaj.

YI: Do you have children?

OK: I do, I have two kids.

YI: And, I suppose, do you have any grandchildren?

OK: We would have a problem if I had a grandkid [laughs].

YI: What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with family background?

OK: I'm Albanian, and what culture? I'm European. Ethnicity, I'm Caucasian, what was the other one?

YI: What cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

OK: Yeah, so, I'm European.

TH: Alright, so what is your native language?

OK: Albanian.

TH: OK, so have you had trouble adjusting to English when you first came to the United States?

OK: I would lie if I said no [laughs]. Of course.

TH: And how did you overcome that?

OK: I was gonna say, can we switch? Because I am not gonna be able to – we're gonna have to – I'm gonna have to sit there. Because then I will pay too much attention to the restaurant. [Tim Holt and Oriola Koci switch seats.] Alright, so how did I overcome the language and the barriers? You just do one thing – you take it one day at a time. You do your best, you work really hard, you integrate yourself into the society in the best way possible. And I feel like for a first generation immigrant, America does have a lot of opportunities, a lot of venues to use and resources to integrate yourself. And then, do more. I think it's the way that this country was built by immigrants makes it easier for immigrants and generations to come to be part of this community, this society, and to continue to build this country. So, and one of the resources is definitely Clark University. They have a program that a lot of my friends did attend when they first came here. It's ESL, English as a Second Language, and it goes above and beyond to adjust to the language barrier. I think it also integrates people into this culture, how things work here, you know, from the post office to all these other things. I know my parents and parents of my friends attended and it was very helpful.

TH: That's great. Next question actually, could you possibly tell us about your parents?

OK: Sure. So, we—I immigrated here with my family. My mom won the diversity lottery visa, which is a program that – if you're not familiar with – it's conducted once a year. People enter the visa by applying and then they are randomly selected and they go through a vetting that is – I mean if you can pass through that vetting you can pass through anything [laughs]. It's really in depth, and so my mom won and we moved here. My mom was a nurse practitioner back in my country and then my dad had his own small store. They left everything and they came here. And I think that if I have one thing that works for me, it's my support system and my family and my parents. I think there is something to say about immigrant families, or maybe just different cultures that come here. Our – I'm going to speak for myself, but generally speaking, because you are so far away from what – where you were born and raised, it just – there is so much more connections to the people you have here, to stay with and support one another. And I think that is crucial. But yeah, so my parents are still around. One of the reasons why I'm still in Worcester is because of my parents. They didn't want to move anywhere else, and they love taking care of their grandkids, my two daughters. They are both retired.

TH: That's great. So, have you lived anywhere else besides Worcester and Albania in your lifetime?

OK: No, I actually moved from Albania. I was 18 and a half, and I moved here [says bye to customers passing by]. So, I moved here from Albania to the United States – I mean I've experimented a little bit around here. I lived in Boston for a little bit, but nothing – I think I've called Worcester home for a long time.

TH: And what was the neighborhood like generally in Albania while you were growing up?

OK: You know, we're talking 22 years ago. More than that, because I left Albania 22 years ago. So, today, maybe a little different. I'd have to say, what it was like when I was there may not be

relevant to what it is like now. But, we went through – since you are a history major – a Communist regime for a long time. I was very young when this regime was in order. And, it was difficult I think more for my parents than me, since when you're a kid you don't really know. It's whatever they tell you and that's what you – but I'm sure it was very difficult for my parents – not to provide what you want for your family and to be told what to think, what to do. It then transitioned into a socialist society that was worse than a communist one. But then in the '90s [1990s], the whole Eastern Europe went through a tremendous change and Albania could not – was part of it – it could not be by itself. So, in the '90s the regime that was in order was then taken over by what we would consider the democratic parties that arise at the time. And I was, so seventh grade – eighth grade – what a time of change. But, I'm happy I – I'm kind of like – overwhelmed for how much it changed in such a short period of time. People live their whole lives and they don't see that kind of change, and I was able to see it within the matter of several years. So, at the time the Albanian neighborhoods – in our culture – were very tight. Because in our culture, you don't move as much as you do here. Like you were born in this neighborhood, and the chances are that you will most likely marry someone close by and then you are probably gonna raise your family at your parents' house or something. So, culturally, we are very family oriented. So it's all about that you have to – you know all your neighbors, you know their grandparents. So I was raised in a neighborhood where they knew my great-grandfather. And the generations got – moved along – people had this connection that comes from time. Nothing else can build it. So then I moved here, and when my parents bought a house, I talked to my next door neighbor and they're like, "Yeah, we bought this house but we're planning to stay here for like five years." And I'm like, "You just bought a house and you...?" because it's a different culture – it's a different mentality, it's a different – people look for that next opportunity, for that – there's a lot of movement here. So, going back to Albania, I came from very tight communities. If you did something bad, let's say in school or around the neighborhood that everybody would know, and your parents would come after you and tell you you can never do that again. There was a lot of peer pressure in the sense to be the best you can be. Because you were being – not necessarily watched – but everybody around you knows you. You can't get away with anything. So, it was that kind of environment that I may have not liked it when I was there, but I look back now and I think it made – it was a good part of what built me to who I am today.

TH: That's awesome.

YI: So where do you live in the city now? Do you live near your businesses?

OK: I do, I do. So I commuted to Jamaica Plain for a long time [Boston, Massachusetts]. I worked for UMass Medical School, they have an entity in Jamaica Plain. And when I decided that the traffic was too much and the commute was too long, I said to myself, "I'm not – applying – or getting a job that is more than five miles from my house." I had promised this to myself because I killed myself for years to drive back and forth. I loved my job, but the traffic and the commute got to me. My restaurants today – literally both of them – because I have two – [Altea's Eatery and Livia's Dish] are literally both two and a half miles to three miles from my

house. So I put my foot down and I said no more. So I live on the west side of the city. My parents live on that end too, the Tatnuck Square area. So yes, I am very close to my businesses.

YI: So your other family members also live with you?

OK: Yeah – no – so they don't live with me, but they live close by.

YI: Oh, so your parents live close by?

OK: Yes.

YI: What challenges to you think this city still faces, or what would you change about the city? Because you have been in Worcester for a long period of time so you know what is going on over here for the past two decades, I believe?

OK: Yup, yup.

YI: So what do you think are the challenges that this city still faces, and what would you like to change?

OK: So, I think the infrastructure. I think that if we can get these trains to be more often to commute to Boston – I think – like I said for me I like the city, I like living here, I think it's truly a melting pot. You probably have heard this a lot but it is true. You can find anything you want. I mean there are stores from any culture and there are restaurants – I mean with the movement recently – there are a lot of nice restaurants – places that you can go and do things that you probably couldn't do before. So I think it's going towards the right direction. But I feel like if we could make the commute to Boston shorter it would absolutely expand this city even more. Because I think – if I knew I could get the train and be – even if it was like an hour – but at least you're on the train and the train goes for every half an hour. Not necessarily like a subway, but definitely more frequent on the busy hours – frequent trains to go back and forth – I think that would be tremendous. I think this city having all these colleges around here, which is enormous. It's impeccable – you know – to have all these kids who go to school – there's something to say about the new blood. Not necessarily the new blood, but the younger generation that will come in and really lift this city up to the next level. And I don't even know how that was never utilized. But I feel like now it is coming together. I think the challenge is to maybe be – and I wouldn't know how – but maybe possibly bring these college kids out more – where you make it more welcoming for them to go out and do things versus just staying in the campus and doing all the things in the campus. That's another challenge that this city faces I would think. I mean, other things that I would want to change – there's a lot of good stuff – I think that if we can get a lot more companies to come this way which a lot of – like I know a lot of city officials are trying and working at it, and tax rates Worcester has may not be the best to help businesses come and build here. But I think we can if we can get that more up to speed it would be helpful. I know we are trying to make this city walkable. And they are succeeding somewhat to that. But at the end of the day, this is New England, no one's gonna walk in the middle of a storm and unfortunately

from November to March – I mean we just had a storm on Sunday – so I think the balance between being a walkable city and then once the reality hits – it’s a little challenging. Yeah, I think – I just read that they hiked – the prices of the tickets went up. That’s going to be a burden on everybody and you can see, I mean you haven’t lived here but for me – that I’ve lived here for 20 something years, I think you can definitely see a change. You can definitely see a lot of – there used to be more empty buildings and now all the mill buildings are turned into apartments. Like it’s getting that city feel – that city vibe – that we absolutely needed. But I think we need to get more people to come this way and one of the best ways to do it is by having a better commuter service. Because I think – I don’t know – for me – I made a promise to myself to – you know, five miles and that’s it – but for the average person I think a 45 minute ride on a train is not horrible. I think people are adjusting to – okay, we’re gonna live in the west side, but we’re going to commute – because that’s what it is. You can’t find the school systems or the good house closer to the city. So people are okay with that, but when it gets to two hours – then no, I would rather pay more to stay close. I think the train would make a big difference.

TH: Cool. So what do you think women’s experiences in Worcester have been generally?

OK: I don’t know, I think I can only speak for myself. When I went to open this business – when my husband and I went to open this business – the way that we run our business is that I’m the front of the house, I do all the front of the house things. Taking care of this, this, and this. And I think I’m more of a face of the restaurant because I’m also out here a lot more than my husband. So he’s in the back. I think at the beginning when we first opened up I did notice that when people would ask, “Oh well I need to talk to the owner,” and they expected him, they expected the male. But I think that in my seven years running these businesses, things have moved along. I also – personally I’m not someone that would really pay too much attention to that. Like I never accepted a no for an answer, so if somebody would say that to me I would find ways to make it – to turn it into a yes without spending too much time on why did that happen to me. But I do want to say that prior to all of this restaurant movement that Worcester has seen recently, I think there were a lot of restaurants around here that were run by a husband and wife team. And I think that works really well if you can make it work. But, you never knew about the wife, you always knew about the husband. But I think women generally always have taken the – maybe not necessarily by choice sometimes – but I don’t know, we always were assumed to take the backstage and be the person behind all of it and never take credit. I think with the new generation that’s coming aboard – and including mine – we’re not doing that any more. So, I think women are stepping up and building some amazing businesses. Fortunately enough, I don’t have an example to say that I’ve had a bad experience. I’ve just looked for – in any situation I looked for the next way to make it happen. So that’s my story [laughs].

YI: So moving on to education. Where did you attend your school and what – what did you study in Worcester?

OK: Yes. So I finished high school in Albania. Then I moved here because like I said on the diversity lottery visa, you needed to have a host so my mom had a friend that lived here who hosted us. And then we moved here and I realized that there are a lot of colleges around here

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that are really really good that I could study and without having to go anywhere else. So I went to Assumption [College]. I started off at a clean slate for about a year and a half of integrating myself going into – I had studied English as a Second Language in Albania but it's nothing when you come and you are like what are they speaking? You know it's completely different so then I went there and transferred to Assumption. Got my undergrad [degree] from Assumption, went on to work and then went to Clark and got my master's [degree]. So I think – Worcester, if there is one thing that the people have in Worcester besides having cultures from all around the world – is the good schools.

YI: What programs did you study when you were in college?

OK: Yeah, So at Assumption I was a business major with minor in human resources and then at Clark, I have a master's in professional communication.

YI: What were your challenges in the education while you studying?

OK: OK – my challenges – well the first of all is English wasn't my first language and I didn't pick engineering or math. I picked some majors that you needed to be able to explain yourself. So I have always even in my native tongue I forced myself – this is how I've always been, I forced myself through this challenge to make me better. So that is the one of the challenges that I – I mean you know that it's a different culture – I went into Assumption for a business degree and I felt like the math that I was doing there that I had already done in high school. So I mean in some sense it was easier but on the other end I had to do so much work because I could go into a classroom and not know half of the things that were being said. I had to go back and reread and rewrite and, you know, all that work to be compatible with everyone in the classroom. But when it came to science and maths, I mean I don't know, my score is better. [laughs]

YI: Upon finishing your formal education in both Assumption and Clark, what did you see as your options? First when you graduated from Assumption and then later when you graduated from Clark?

OK: Alright. So I'm Albanian, in Albania any Albanian was tested this – it is very important that you follow some steps. It's the cycle of life, you go to school, you get a good education, you get a job – like no one really thinks of entrepreneurship. So you have to follow the steps in order to get a good job and do well in life. So when I moved here, that was the first day, I have to make sure I go to good school and make my parents proud. And that would be the only option and so there wasn't any other option around. You really have to go to good school, get a good education, work for corporate America – get a good job and then you know get hired from there. Those were the options then and I kind of followed them because I wanted my parents to be proud, I wanted to show that I could do this, but then you know 10 years in 15 years in I said no, I want to do something else and I moved to – yeah. So my husband is a graduate of Johnson and Wales [University], so knowing him I've been around food obviously and I've been together for a long time but I've been around food for as long as I've known him. I don't like to cook – maybe I shouldn't say this but cooking is not my forte but for him it is and he and I really work

together because we really are like – we really love to do what we chose to do in running this business. He absolutely loves the cooking side of it. He would come up with the menus, doing all the work and making the dishes look exceptional every time, making sure that you – because people eat with their eyes. And then I love doing this end, promoting the business, selling what we have – you can make the best meal in your lifetime and if there are no people that are there to value it and appreciate it then there is no point. So I think that the both ends have to work really well together and we do and that's because I knew how talented he was and how good he is at what he does. So then I switched gears and left my job and did this, but just like his education helped him to become this great chef, education helped me grow and promote this business in such a way that has an organic growth without being just like ads being promoted because of who we are. But I couldn't do that unless I went to – I did all this – got this education and worked at where I did and had the connections that I have so I think it was important even though like when I left my job people were like, “What do you mean, like how, are you sure if – if it works?”

YI: So what have your support networks and mentoring been?

OK: Yeah! So my number one support system is my family. I tell this and I have said this in many other chances that I've had or interview, I think if it wasn't for my parents – I mean I shouldn't say I wouldn't have been able to do it as well as I do because we also have two young kids, I mean six years and seven years ago my youngest was one and my oldest was four, so you know it was a crazy few years. So if it wasn't for my unconditional love that my parents gave me and the hard work and the full support – or just being – you can do this – I don't think I would have the courage to take it on. And sometimes its – in my experience, taking that step of doing something is half of the battle and then once you do then you have no choice, you are going to make it work but taking that first step it would be difficult for most people and I think with the support of my parents it wasn't. I definitely think they're part of my very good support system, my friends for sure, and then mentoring – I think that there are some restauranteurs around here that are older, ran businesses for a long time, some of them are Albanians. Yes, I can't say one person but generally speaking that kind of gave us both, Enton and I, fair advice and their references on what they have learned from running their businesses. I think how businesses were run 20 years ago is completely different from how they run today. The challenges that we face today are completely different than the challenges they were facing then, but at least kind of like understanding the volume and the work of this industry, because I think nothing prepares you for what's about to come when you decide to open a restaurant. So I think some of these people, I could definitely say they are my mentors.

TH: Alright, so switching gears now to focus on your work. What was your first job and what did it teach you?

OK: Ok, so, my first job was when I first moved here was a dietary aide at a nursing home. What that meant was you – I worked at night – I just moved here, I worked at night. I would go in at four o'clock and yes I think it was like four to eight and it was serving food to nursing home patients. I think anyone that is European or anywhere else would understand this because I

moved here without ever working in my life and I was 18 and a half. When I first moved here and I said I never worked, people thought there was something wrong with me because people start working here when they are very young. But that's not the culture where I was coming from. And you don't work until you actually graduate college so not a lot of people do the side work while they go to school. So when I took this on, it was kind of challenging for my parents, but it wasn't for me. For me it was more like, "Oh this is great, I can have some money for myself and I can do whatever I want with it." That freedom that working gives you when you are that age and don't have to pay bills. So I saw it as an opportunity to better myself on whatever I wanted to do. My parents saw it as a failure because we came from a culture that didn't necessarily have kids work. It was almost like child abuse, but we had to do what we had to do. And what I learned from that job – and then moved on to do various other things after that – but what I learned was the importance of working together because it was – I think one of the hardest things about a kitchen is that it's very intense, it's a lot of labor – it's labor intensive – a lot of work. And you can't necessarily split it in such a way that you're gonna do this and your're gonna do this – we all have to work together in order for the environment to work. So that's where I not necessarily had a challenge but it taught me the ways to work together as a team.

TH: So besides this job and your first job, what other jobs did you have in between?

OK: Yeah, so I've worked as a server through college in a few restaurants in the city and other surrounding towns. And once I finished I was a recruiter – I worked as a recruiter right after college for this nursing agency. And then I worked in human resources for Bose Corporation, and then I worked at UMass Medical School as an HR [human resources] consultant. And then I left that and came here and did this.

TH: Awesome, so what has this work meant to you?

OK: Oh my God, this is like my baby. This is my world. I love the fact that we built something from nothing. I wasn't sure if I was going to like the fact that we named them after our kids, but I love that more than anything because it brings the whole family together. I take everything about this place personally – this is who I am, this is what we do. And the mentality building these restaurants was that we are going to build something that's going to be what we want to see if we went somewhere. And that's from the food, to the atmosphere, to the service, to the way that people are treated, everything else. So this is my world, this is my world. [laughs]

TH: [laughs] What are the biggest challenges to owning your own business?

OK: Oh Jesus, do you have two hours? [laughs] I think the number one is the hard work – the discipline. I think sometimes people—and this is probably true for all kinds of industries, but for sure restaurants – people think that you kind of develop this idea when you see how the restaurants – that it would take a few months to build and then it would run itself. It never does. Never, ever. I think the discipline that you must have, it's not a choice. You must have it. It's

enormous. I think that's where it falls apart, when people forget that it's forever. The minute that you let it go, it's going to go downhill.

YI: It's going to fall down.

OK: Yeah, so I think that is – to me – work to improve it, to make it better. I see it as something that keeps me on my toes, and definitely something that I like to do. But I think it would be a challenge for any new businesses.

TH: And what drew you to the hospitality industry?

OK: So one of the main reasons was I've always wanted to do something for nothing. I don't know, I feel like for the most part people are born with this – like the go getter, the take that big step. It takes a special – not that it takes a special person but it takes a lot of courage, and I think that I don't lack [laughs]. But the reason why it drew me to this is because in this business you have to have someone in the kitchen that you absolutely trust and want to work with. Because at the end of the day, this business, what you're selling is food. So you want to make sure it's done appropriately, accordingly – the way that it should. So teaming up with my husband is what really made me want to do this.

TH: And how have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles, and interests in your life?

OK: That is next to that discipline kind of challenge. It is very hard. The way I did it – the way my husband and I did it – was that we said we're going to give 100 percent, but at the same time we want to live. So we decided to go breakfast and lunch. So we work during the day, and then this doesn't end. We have a lot of stuff to do after we close, but at least we are with our family. You know even if we are – so the kids, they're not just a part of the name on the businesses, they're also a part of the businesses in a way because they live and breathe the challenges that we go through. I mean we try, but it's impossible to leave everything here when you go home. You do take some of it home. So they are part of it, but I think in order to do this – and anything in life right – you have to balance. And the way that we found balance is by saying we can't do dinner because we have young kids. We have to be at their events and their practices and everything else in order to be successful. I mean we have people here all the time ask, "Why don't we open for dinner," because we have a liquor license, the restaurants are really nice. I think I can live with what we are making today. But I can't turn back time for my kids, so that's the biggest challenge to be able to say no to one thing and yes to another. And we're faced with that every day, when I pick up my kids and I have to be able to juggle all the things that we have to do. So, you make it work.

TH: And what do you think are the pros and cons of the path you've chosen?

OK: Pros, I mean as much as there is a lot of work that goes into this and balance, we still have been able to do things the way that we wanted to do. Like, the liberty of having control over

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your life and the business you choose to have. That's the pro, and that's the con as well. Because it's a lot of pressure, you know there are about 30 something employees that are here, and our decisions will drive this business one way or another. And to have that on your shoulders is a lot of work as well. So I think other than that I love it [laughs].

YI: So moving toward the community involvement, can you tell us about your involvement with the Worcester Women's Oral History Project? Have you ever worked with them?

OK: No, I don't think so.

YI: So you've never worked with them, or been to their office?

OK: No, so they reached out to me. Yeah.

TH: Oh, ok, we were not aware of that.

YI: Moving on, do you consider yourself active politically?

OK: I do, I do. I am a member of the Worcester Airport Commission here in Worcester – I mean Worcester Airport Committee for the Worcester Airport up the hill. I'm a board member for Webster Square Association. I was elected as one of the 40 under 40 by Worcester Business Journal. We have attended a lot of events that the city puts together to promote certain cultures, certain ideas. So yeah, I'm definitely very involved. I mean not necessarily looking to run for anything, but I – you know if people ask me – because for my husband and I, on top of running two restaurants we also have owned the properties for where these restaurants are. So any laws and regulations that the city councils take on affect us in very different way, so yeah. I know all of them. [laughs]

TH: That's good, that's good. And have you ever been involved in volunteer or community work in Worcester?

Ok: Yeah, I mean, being at the airport committee is totally volunteer work. Working with Webster Square, we have done things with them to promote the Webster Square area. So main programs, I can't really think of one right now in the six and a half years, but you know we've worked with this church on Hamilton Street when they were doing a fundraising and we provided the food for them. There are things when people ask me, I am always the first one to help people out.

TH: So maybe a final question.

OK: Yes.

TH: What kind of impact do you think your two restaurants have on the Worcester community?

OK: Oh my goodness [laughs], we're changing the world. So, when we decided to open restaurants we obviously had to go around to see what was out here. The first thing that we noticed was that Worcester is known for diners, for greasy spoon kind of places that are – but that's what, that's what Worcester was known for. I mean, I'm not saying that's bad, but that was familiar to Worcester. And we wanted to do something different. What we considered different was to actually have a brunch-like restaurant where you brought your date, where you brought your parents, when you really – it was an upscale breakfast place that you could have a drink in the middle of the day. But the prices, I think on the price level, we wanted to stay local to Worcester and what this community – what we think is appropriate for this area. So I do think – I do hear this a lot in both restaurants, I hear people that come in here at Altea's and they, they're like, "Oh my God it feels like we need a passport to come here because it is so European, so different." So, that's what we wanted to bring. We wanted to bring something that wasn't just another restaurant, it was – it had what a restaurant needs to be successful. And the three elements, the atmosphere, the food, and the service. And to do that for breakfast and lunch is kind of unheard for Worcester. They were used to dinner restaurants being all five star, but not necessarily for the breakfast and lunch. And I think that's what we brought and we changed the scene of food industry in Worcester a little bit.

TH: That's awesome, well I think that will be it.

OK: Perfect.

TH: Thank you so much for all your help.

OK: No problem.

YI: Thank you.