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Thomas Bosco, who runs a cafe in Upper Manhattan, told MSNBC he had voted for President Trump in 2016 and might do so again.

A Cafe Owner's Vote Could Dry Up a Liberal Oasis

By AZI PAYBARAH

At Indian Road Cafe in Upper Manhattan, a Black Lives Matters sign hangs in a front window. Local writers, artists, musicians and political activists are regulars. And for years, two drag queens have hosted a monthly charity bingo tournament there.

Many in the surrounding Inwood neighborhood considered it a community hub and a progressive oasis.

But then the cafe's owner, Thomas Bosco, said in an MSNBC interview in late spring that he voted for President Trump in 2016 and was likely to do so again.

The backlash was swift, as you might expect.

Neighbors railed in the comments on various neighborhood Facebook groups, posting hundreds of angry messages aimed at the cafe — and one another. Some people called for a boycott.

"How could I be against Trump and all that he stands for and go somewhere and patronize someone who supports this demon?" Douglas Henderson, 62, a lawyer and nearby resident, said in an interview.

Glenn Aquino-Gil, 37, a resident of Riverdale, in the Bronx, vowed she would never go to Indian Road again.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, who lives nearby, wrote on Facebook: "It's hard to ever go back."

The two drag queens have said they will move their show to a different venue.

The controversy, coming in the middle of a pandemic and the Black Lives Matters protests, shows how in a highly polarized social media era, a few comments

in an interview can reverberate: Mr. Bosco said the fallout from his TV appearance, in a segment about small business owners and workers, might put him out of business.

Soon after the TV appearance circulated online, Mr. Bosco posted an open letter to the community — "the community I live in, a community I love, respect, and serve" — defending his answer to the question about Mr. Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

In the appearance, Mr. Bosco said that the president had made missteps, "but at the end of the day, I support him. I support my governor and I support my mayor." Mr. Bosco then said he voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 and planned to do so again.

In his open letter, Mr. Bosco wrote that he had "answered honestly and from the heart," but his response had been presented without context. He said that what was in the video did not include that he had supported the last four presidents and that he had "found many things troubling about our administration."

"I'm a liberal guy who supports almost every liberal cause I can think of," Mr. Bosco said recently while sitting inside his cafe, empty because of the current ban on indoor dining.

When a worker did not have child care, Mr. Bosco provided it on site, Mr. Bosco and another employee said. They also said that when a different worker feared being stopped by the police and questioned about his immigration status, Mr. Bosco drove that person to and from the cafe.

And on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, Mr. Bosco organized a brunch to raise

money for an immigrant's advocacy organization.

He struggled to explain how he voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 after having supported Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a progressive Democrat, earlier that year. Eventually, he settled on the phrase "small government, big community."

Now, Mr. Bosco says, he is not sure whom he will support in November.

"My staff feels like I let them down to a certain extent," Mr. Bosco said.

"They feel like when I answered that question, that I didn't think about them" as employees of the cafe he was representing, he added. "And that hurts. I wish I had it back."

Similar backlashes have erupted in liberal New York City, usually after a business is revealed to have financial links to Mr. Trump or socially conservative causes.

Last year, the management at the high-end fitness chains Equinox and SoulCycle faced blowback from members after it was reported that the outlets were financially linked to Stephen Ross, a real estate developer who planned to host a fund-raiser in the Hamptons for Mr. Trump.

But Mr. Bosco is no Mr. Ross.

Mr. Bosco has not made donations to any political campaign, according to city, state and federal records online. And Indian Road is not a chain.

"Does he know where his restaurant is?" asked Caroline Montero, 29, from nearby Washington Heights. The cafe, which will change its name to Inwood Farm this month, is in a gentrifying area with many immigrants.

"Where's your loyalty?" she

added, as she sat in a park across the street from the cafe with Ms. Aquino-Gil and another friend. Sipping drinks purchased from a park vendor, all three vowed to no longer patronize the cafe.

Vivian Llodrá, 49, of Inwood, was one of the first to post Mr. Bosco's interview in a neighborhood Facebook group. She said that what he had done locally paled in comparison to how he had voted. "He broke the trust with the community," she said.

"I appreciate that he's given money to immigrants rights groups and donated to food pantries" Ms. Llodrá said in an interview. "That's great. But it doesn't take away the fact that he voted for someone in 2016 and planned to vote for someone in 2020 who will take away my rights."

Hawk Newsome, chairman of an independent Black Lives Matter group in Manhattan, said, "I wouldn't say there is no coming back from supporting Donald Trump, but it is a very long road to redemption."

On a recent sunny afternoon, customers sat at small tables under the cafe's awning. "There's no controversy with me," said Jason Claiborne, 43, a creative director for a publishing company and a longtime Inwood resident.

"If he is a racist, right-wing supremacist, he's hiding it so god-damn good," Mr. Claiborne said.

He was later joined by a friend, Andre Wallace, a former mayor of Mount Vernon, which lies just north of the city. Patronizing the cafe, Mr. Wallace said, had nothing to do with the cafe owner's vote in the presidential race.

"I don't see why I would mix the two," said Mr. Wallace, 52, a Democrat.

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