

Ida Ma Musu
Africanne on Main Street – Richmond, Virginia

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Sara Wood: So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. And it's March 5, 2013 and I'm here with Chef Ida Ma Masu and we're at Africanne on Main Street. And we're in Richmond, Virginia and I just want to go ahead and have you introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where we are right now.

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Ida Ma Masu: I'm Ida Ma Masu and I'm the owner of Africanne on Main in Richmond, Virginia.

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SW: And for the record could you tell me your birth date?

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IM: June 29, 1954.

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SW: And you were just talking about how you decided on the spelling of the restaurant. Could you talk about that again for the record?

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IM: Yes; well, being an African woman in business for – of my own I wanted to make African real special and I decided to add another N and another E on the word African and make it Africanne, which is a female African woman in business.

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SW: Can we – can we start by – can you talk a little bit about where you grew up and how you got to Richmond?

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IM: I grew up in Monrovia, Liberia in West Africa and under the – I would say under the – what word do I want to – under the guidance of my grandmother and – and she was a chef and an entrepreneur herself and I learned everything that I know today from her. And that’s how I started. I came to the United States in 1980 by way of a civil war in Liberia and I have been here since 1980. And I moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1986 and I’ve been here since.

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SW: What is your grandmother’s name?

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IM: Ida after me – Ida Williams is her – is her name – was her name. Her name was Ethtres??. She was – she was part of the free slaves that left in the 1900s and she was half Cherokee and half African. And she came – her family actually originated from Reston, Virginia.

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SW: Chef Ma Masu I’m wondering if you could for people who are – there’s an inextricable link between Virginia and Liberia and I’m wondering could you explain that for people who aren’t familiar with that tie?

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IM: Uh-hm; well Liberia was founded in the 1800s by free slaves that came mostly out of North and South Carolina, Virginia, New York, and I think Mississippi. And most of the slaves left from the Virginia area and in the 1800s. According to history about 60,000 or so left during that – during that era of the 1800s all the way into the 1900s. And largely they founded this place that was originally called the Green Coast and then it was later on colonized and the capital city was named after America’s President James Monroe. And Liberia was actually formed naming free slaves, liberty, meaning free. And right now Liberia is still colonized by the United States. We use the same United States dollars, form of government and basically way of life in Liberia. So that’s – in Virginia is – is one of the closest states in the United States when it comes to Liberia because the first President of Liberia was born in Petersburg, Virginia and the founder of Liberia, Lott Cary was also born in Charles City, Virginia. So the ties with Virginia and Liberia are very close.

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SW: Can you talk a little bit more about your grandmother’s influence on you? I mean in what ways do you carry her with you?

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IM: When I was a child my mother had only daughters and – six girls and I am the eldest of the six. And my grandmother lived – we lived in a house that like a two-story house and my

grandmother lived upstairs and we lived down. But there was a common stairs that went up to where she lived. And so she supervised everything that we did even though she was upstairs and she had only one daughter which was my mother and she had only two children which was a son and a daughter but he died at an early age. So it was just my mother she had. And then my mother had six daughters.

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So but when I was a kid I was as – according to what they said I was very unusual; I wasn't the type of kid that loved to play on the outside like the rest of the kids. I was always inside with my grandmother wanting to learn something you know and so I was naturally you know creative with a lot of stuff that I did. And my grandmother being a very, very creative lady, she did a lot of – of very domestic – she had a restaurant also. She had a convenience store. She had a laundry. She had a bakery, she had just everything. And so she took me under her wings when I was nine years old between eight and nine years old and started training me, even though we lived downstairs and she was upstairs, but I spent all my time upstairs with her.

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And we all called her “Mommy” you know and – and so Mommy was like the big influence on the family because we were all girls. But I was her baby. So I was named after her. Her name is Ida and my name is Ida. And her middle name is Bernice and my name is Bernice. Her other name is Emma and my name is Emma. *[Laughs]* And so a lot of her friends used to call me her pocketbook ‘cause everywhere she went Little Emma went with her, which was me. And every time they’d see her out they’d be like, “Hey Big Emma and Little Emma!” ‘cause I always carried her pocketbook you know. Little Emma always held the pocketbook. If she wanted to buy anything I would open the pocketbook and she’d take the money out and you

know in the marketplace so everybody used to go, “See – with your little pocketbook,” you know.

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So it was during those days, my years with – with my grandmother was one of the best years of my life because she was very, very – she was very funny. She – everything that she did she put a lot of humor into it. And one of the things that I remember the most was she always gave me these gold stars. And [*Laughs*] – and as a kid, I didn’t know you know – she used to say – the words she used to use always was – what was the term she used to say; let’s see if I can remember. Energy; she used to use the word *energy*, and for her energy was – for me energy – I thought you could see energy and she would say, “Okay, you have five energies today. One energy you’re going to make – clean up your room. One energy you’re going to you know do your chores,” but she named the energies, and so I just thought that energy was something that you could really see. And I would be so excited. Every day, “Grandma I got – I did all my energies today!” and she’d be like, “Really?” Yeah; and I would – she would say “Well, how much energy you got left?” I said, “I got one more energy left but I finished it.” She said “Okay. There’s a gold star for this energy and it was – .” [*Laughs*] And so in my room I had all these stars. I mean I collected walls of gold stars you know. Every time she – I did a project with her she would – she would make sure that I went through the project – the project was done and I passed before she would you know give me something else to do and of course I got a little certificate that she wrote and it would be a gold star on it.

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So on my wall is all these awards that I won from grandma. And it meant so much to me because it was an accomplishment. For example, let’s say we were cooking sauce and she – and I learned how to make that sauce and I perfected it and everything and she felt that it was the way

it's supposed to be then I'd get an award and a gold star for that particular sauce. And then we went onto the next thing and the next thing and so that's how I – I was – she was able to train me. She made me love it and she made me care about it and she – and she made food a part of me and as an art, not really to cook it. She used to have these terms like – she used to go like, “You have to get to know your pot. You have to get to – you have to fall in love with it – with your pot.” [Laughs] And so because I was very – I was like her – I would be in the kitchen just dancing. “You gets to know your pot.” You know I'll be teasing her, you know kids. And sometimes I would get mad, you know and I would be – not really teasing her but just mad. And you'd get the know in your pot. [Makes a mocking tone.] And you know she would be saying that and I would be stirring and just fussing you know. And she would be – and she – and she trained me with not even going near the kitchen.

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We had – our house was set up with like a little patio and can you set it down and that way you can relax your arm? You good?

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SW: I'm good; yeah. I'm used to this.

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IM: Oh okay; and we had like a little patio where she sat outside. In the old days they used to call it the piazza or some name they called it in the olden day but now they call it like a patio or porch – or porch or whatever. But she sat on there and propped her feet up 'cause she was a little bit of a heavy lady and she would instruct me how to cook from that. She never even went to the pot. She would – I would bring the pot to her and she would look at it – look at it and she would

tell me what stage it's in and I would carry it and put it back on the stove and she would make me stand there and tell her what the actual pot is doing. And I would be like, "Grandma it's – blah, blah, blah," and she'd be like, "Okay. It's in the middle stage." Stairs – and I'm yelling from the kitchen and upstairs and she would be like, "What stage is it?" And I would say, "Grandma I think – blah, blah, blah." [Makes chaotic sounds of the kitchen.] **[Laughs]** Now that I think about it – and I would go through all of these changes but it was different stages of the sauce. And what stage it was in and then she would say smell it and I would **[Sniffs]** and she said "What do you smell?" And I would be like "Uh." "Identify your smell," and she would be all the way like over there **[Gestures]** yelling, "Identify the smell!" and I was like **[Sniffs]** "I smell pepper, I smell this," you know and I would start identifying the smell from – I mean the – the different spices from just smelling it without even tasting it.

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And that's the kind of training I got from her. It – I learned the art of cooking from her and not necessarily cooking but just the art of it. And today I apply that a lot in my cooking as well as teaching the kids. People ask me all the time; "You have a cooking school for girls?" And I tell them yes, but I teach them the art of cooking because once you learn the foundation and the art then you can cook anything. Not necessarily I'm teaching them how to cook rice or pasta but I'm teaching you the – the entire art of it, so – because one of the things that I learned also, the different temperatures of your pot, the different temperatures of your stove has a lot to do with how the food is going to turn out. And I learned all of that from 50-feet away with my grandmother. And – and when it's burning – the food is burning she would know; you know she would say, "What is it?" I said, "I smell something like it's burning," and she'd say, "You have it in the wrong temperature and you have it in the wrong pot cooking." She would tell me all of that; she said, "Now you need to turn it down." And during those days we didn't have the type of

stove that you had 120-degrees and stuff. You'd have to almost like guess it; you know you had – and she used to tell me to put my hand over the – over the pot from – from there and feel the heat and from the heat I would tell what temperature and how high it was as the food was cooking. And that was very unusual. When we'd start and I'd touch it she would say, "Okay now it's at maybe 250-degrees." And then about five or ten minutes later she would say, "Put your hand on it." And I would put it over it and she would say, "Now it's about maybe 300," and that's how we were able to determine how many degrees of – the food, the hotter it got. **[Laughs]**

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SW: That's insane.

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IM: **[Laughs]** Yeah.

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SW: Wow.

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IM: That's how you know I was able – and I still – I still apply that today. I mean though we have – we have the modern stoves and all that but I still can just look at it and tell. I don't even have to taste the food. I can look at it and tell if it's okay. That's how much I am related – I'm related to my food that I can look at it and tell if something is wrong if it's not – if it doesn't have everything in there. I can just take a look and say – 'cause my sister works a lot in the kitchen with me now and she'll come and she will be looking at me and I will look at a pot. And she'll

say wow; Biz, now what did I miss? And I will be like, “Sophie I don’t see enough pepper in there.” And she would stir it around and she said, “Well taste it.” I said, “No. I don’t have to taste it. I know.”

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And so she’s my younger sister and now I’m training her exactly like the way my Mom trained me because eventually she’s going to probably take over the business. So that’s how – that was one of my greatest years of my life with my grandmother. It was – it wasn’t hard for her to train me because I loved it. And she had like herb gardens and so she used to make me smell. One of her biggest thing was smelling. She said the art of cooking is smelling. It’s like the key; you have to be – you have to be able to identify all of these different spices by the smell, what they smell like. And then from there you can go to what it tastes like, but if you can identify peppermint or identify oregano or parsley in the food you can almost separate those smells even when you put – when the food sits in front of you and you can say, “Mm, this has too much oregano in it,” because you – it – it’s stronger than all of the other spices that’s in there. And that’s what I learned – one of the things I learned with my grandmother.

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And – and as I got older, she was – my grandmother of course was very spiritual. She used to actually envision you know so many things, you know the old people always ‘cause we used to say the old people could see the future you know. And she was one of those because she was half Cherokee and she had a lot of that – that spirituality in her from the Indians. And so she always was meditating. She was always – her eyes was always closed and I couldn’t understand a lot of that and now I do that a lot. But I couldn’t understand why she always talked to you and her eyes wasn’t opened. Sometimes she would talk to you and she would – the whole conversation her eyes are not even open. And I’m thinking, “Mommy are you sleep?” And she’d

be like, “No; I can see you.” And her eyes are closed. She’s not even looking at me. Her eyes are closed. She talked in the whole conversation and I’m like, “Your eyes not open.” And she’d say, “Yeah; my eyes are open. I can see you.” And she was one of those women that was very calm but very funny and very realistic about life. She didn’t – even though she talked a lot about the future but she was very realistic about what was in front of her and what the future would be. And she never saw me in Liberia. She used to tell me that.

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She’d say, “Your destiny is not here.” And I never understood that because I didn’t know that I was even going to come to the United States under the condition that I came. And when I was leaving to come to the United States I went by her bedside to say good-night, to say bye – good-bye to her and I remember her laying on the bed and she had her eyes closed, the usual thing, and she held my hand and I said, “Mommy I’m leaving. My plane leaves you know in a couple hours and I’m leaving.” And then she turned to me and she said, “I will never see you again. This is the end for us – for me and you; we have reached our destination this day.” And I said, “Oh Mommy you’re going to live. I’ll be back to visit,” and so she said, “No. I’ve done everything I was supposed to do for you and this is the end for us.” So I started to cry and then she said, “Don’t cry.” She said, “I want you to promise me one thing. Everything that I have taught you does not belong to you. You cannot keep it.”

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She said, “You will not be blessed until you pass it on.” She said, “If you want me to live forever the essence of me has to live in others. And then I will never die.” **[Laughs]** And so as I got older – can you handle this story? **[Laughs]** As I got older it started becoming a burden to me and she started – it seemed like my grandmother started becoming alive you know in my spirit and in my life. I used to see her in a lot of things I did. Even my family started saying to me that,

“Oh, you look just like Mommy. You’re acting just like Mommy.” And the funny thing about it, my mother was very afraid of me. My mother died last year. My mother was very afraid of me because she saw the strength of her mother in me a lot. And so she did not – not that she didn’t like that but there was – she just used to see so much of her mom in me until she started almost rejecting me a little bit being afraid. So she never used to like to be around me a lot because my grandmother was just too much in me.

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And she used to see that a lot; she used to say, “Ah, you’re just like Momma.” She used to call her Momma but we called her Mommy. “You’re just like Momma; you act so much like Momma.” You know and – and it was true. As I got older my sisters and family just started telling me that they thought that my grandmother had come back because everything I started doing it seemed like it started just – just like her – her mannerism, her lifestyle, you know and then I started talking to her. I would – you know when I want to do something real new or – or start a new project I will say to myself, “Mommy if you were here how would you do this?” Or you know or I’m – “I’m at a – you know I’m at a point where I can’t think anymore, so I need some guidance you know from you. Tell me what I need to do with this. I have this project but I don’t know what – where to go with it.” And I will just say that to myself and then little by little it started to reveal to me what I needed to do.

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And – and so that’s how her spirit had been living. But as I started getting older, when I turned 40 it seemed like I had this burden that I was carrying that didn’t belong to me. And I started wondering what to do. I’m like okay; she told me what she had taught me does not belong – is not – does not belong to me. I need to pass it on. Okay; I have a daughter that I already saturated everything with. She’s – I mean she’s really good and she ran away from me and

moved to California because I was just [*Gestures*]. I just wanted to give her everything that Mommy had given me but she wasn't like me. And it took me a long time to realize that – that she wasn't me. But – and I wanted to make her a replica of me and she wasn't and so it was hard for her. She never felt that she could do anything right around me because I always wanted her to be perfect like me or like Mommy. And so she decided to just live her own life way far, far away from me.

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So now she's a nurse. She is doing very well. She's a vegetarian. She's eating rice. She's doing other things she needs to do but she's just doing it away from me and I like that. So and so I decided that I had to start teaching it; I had to pass it on. But I didn't know how to even do it. So I started asking customers; "Do you have a daughter? I can teach her. You have a daughter? I can teach her how to cook." And so they started giving me their daughters and I just started teaching them and that's how the school started just like that. And – and I never really – and people were like "You need to charge for this; you need to charge for this." And I always tell people that you cannot put a price on your blessings. I say if money is supposed to come out of this it will come. But my goal is not to charge because this was a gift that was given to me and it was told to me to pass it on and she didn't say sell it. She said pass it on and you will be blessed.

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And so I just started teaching and people started forcing me to charge. And I'm like no, I'm not. So then after they realized I wasn't charging they started giving me donations to help me out. "Hey," they would bring their kids and say, "Hey you know donations for transportation, donations for this; if you need help you know to take them you know or whatever you know we'll help you financially." So they started volunteering to give me money to help me with these expenses, which I never asked for that.

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Then they got to – the school started becoming popular and people got to know it and then this huge organization in Richmond called Bon Secours is Richmond’s community hospital and Bon Secours saw what I was doing in the community and decided to sponsor the whole program.

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SW: What year was that?

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IM: Nineteen – it’s two years ago – 19 – 2011. They came to me with a project and wanted to see what it was all about. And so we did one class and they loved it and decided, “Whatever you need financially we’re going to pay you and pay for everything. All we want you to do is to find girls that are underprivileged and work on obesity because that’s the goal you know in young women. And the rest is history. And we will finance this for you.” Yeah.

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And – and that’s exactly what – how I felt that once I did it for the right reasons I knew that sooner or later somebody would see it and just take it instead of trying to charge people a whole lot of money and make it such a profitable thing that it just became stagnant. And now I don’t have to worry about anything because not only do they pay all the expenses, they actually pay me also. You know which I never really asked for but that’s how it ended up. And sometimes in life that’s what you have to do. If you have a calling and you have something that you need to do you need to just put it out there and let the spirit work and let God work His way through it especially if it’s something from your heart, because when my grandmother gave me that

knowledge she didn't give it to me to sell. She gave it to me to share. And she said that to me, "This is not yours; the only way you're going to be blessed, you have to pass it on. And if you want me to live forever the essence of what I've taught you will live in other young women. And I personally will never die because my essence will live on." And that's how our ancestors lived on because they lived – their essence lived in us. And that's how you know – and that's how I've been doing it and it's been working. And I haven't pushed it – I always say that I need a building and I always put it out there and I know sooner or later somebody will have a building and they will say, "I'm doing nothing with this building. Use it for the kids you know." This is how – this is how things happen. And so that's the way the school is now.

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SW: Now I want to go back to the school but – but I want to talk about how you started the restaurant. So you came to the states in 1980 and can you talk about what led you – you know where you came? Did you come by yourself?

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IM: Yes; I came – the war broke in 1980 in my country and I was fortunate to get out before the – get out which – unfortunately – I was fortunate to get out before the rest of my family. And I was the only one at that time in my family that was able to get out. My children was still stuck in the war, my parents, my sisters. I mean, everybody was still there and I was the only one that was able to get out. And I believe that God had really pulled me out because I had the strength to help get the others out so I was able to get my children out. You know, some of my other family members including my parents out of the war. And I just started – I started – I didn't start

actually working for myself. I started – I was working in hotels you know just trying to make ends meet in the Marriott Hotels and other places.

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SW: Was that here in Richmond?

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IM: Yeah; no, it started in New York in the French hotel because I speak French so I was working at the hotel in New York City and then I got – I had a friend that lived in Richmond and she – I came to visit her one – one weekend and just loved it. And one of the reasons why I decided to stay in Richmond, it reminded me of Liberia a lot because there are a lot of places in Richmond that looks just like Liberia, like – example, we have Broad Street in Liberia; we have Broad Street here. And Cary Street and it was just so much – you know things that were so familiar to me from the South because Liberia is kind of built like the South, so and the people were very friendly just like home. It just felt so – it just felt so real for me.

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And so I decided to stay in – to live in Richmond. And I started off working at a Marriott and then I – 1996 I opened my first business which was braiding, hair braiding and during that time braids were not popular in Richmond especially amongst the blacks. It was very difficult for me ‘cause it was a new thing during that time. People were not – women were not braiding their hair because it was too ethnic. And so a lot of jobs would not allow them to – to work with braids in their hair. They felt that it was too ethnic, it was too black, and all of that so they couldn’t get their hair braided you know and get a job.

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And then during – during the ‘80s and so braiding, I was the first in Richmond to open a hair – a professional hair-braiding salon. And I had to create a style which was called an interlock braid that the – the owners or the managers or supervisors of a business could not tell that these women had braids in their hair because the braids were actually underneath and their hair was just kind of on top. So they really couldn’t tell that their hair was actually braided. And so a lot of jobs I had to – I visited a lot of jobs explaining the blackness of braids because they didn’t understand you know the whites mostly didn’t understand it and they didn’t think that – they thought it was radical for women to wear braids at work. It was just too ethnic and so it – it was wrong.

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So it was hard for me to actually make a living from it in the beginning but I kept at it. It got better. It got better. It got better. I was a braider for 10 years. And by the time I – I left that and did something else it had evolved to the point where it was just I couldn’t even control it anymore because then I started training all the African young ladies to actually take it over because I wanted to do something else.

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Now going into the – the cooking part was kind of strange because if – people started eating my food before I even started the restaurant. I mean they would come to get their hair braided and they would be sitting with me for like six-seven hours and I would offer them something to eat. And they would eat and they would be like, “Oh what is this?” And I would explain it to them. “This is spinach and rice and this and that.” And so they got used to it; some of them started calling me and saying, “Can you make that spinach for me for my – for my family?” And then all of the sudden I found myself cooking at home for my customers you know and their families so all of the sudden it started becoming a business. I was doing sometimes 25 -

30 dinners off the bat, you know because they started telling other people oh, “She cooked this stuff. I don’t know what it was but it was so nice. Can you cook us some more and stuff like that?”

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And so – can somebody get the phone please? [To her employees.] And so it just started growing from there. So my braiding shop – right next to my braiding shop was a carry – a little carryout sandwich shop.

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SW: Can I stop you? Where – where – what was the name of your braiding shop and where was it?

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IM: It was – it was called Braids out of Africa and it was on Broad Street. Okay; and I started – and in the braiding shop I – I also am a seamstress, so I used to make clothes and I used to make choir robes and – and vests and African jewelry. I will show you some of my pictures that I’ve done work. I used to make wreathes and all – and all crafts actually – crafts. My grandmother was a very good artist in terms of crafts, so I learned a lot of crafting and molding and stuff.

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So I had this little craft shop right next to the braids with all these different African arts and fabrics and stuff like that ‘cause also I’m a fabric artist. I can take a piece of fabric and turn it into art. And so I did a lot with fabrics in terms of artwork. And so I had that going plus the braiding and that’s how I was supporting my family at home and here. I was sending money back home to help them through the war to get transportation to come to the United States and that

went on for like almost 12 years just I was working. I mean it was hard for me because I was the only one here and my family was dying. I mean they were in a civil war, just I mean just misplaced and dead and can't find this. I couldn't – when I left my son he was six years old and when I finally found him he was 16 years old. That's him over there standing there, my son.

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He was 16 years old. My daughter was raped and just you know really sodomized and all kinds of stuff happened to her during the process. When I left her she was two years old and when I found her she was 13 years old. And so it was very difficult when I got them to the United States especially with her to kind of get her straight because she was so – was so wounded by the war and that – that included a lot of young – young women during – during that time during the war. But I was able to get her, she and my son out safely. I was to get my parents out safely. My parents lived with me until my mother died last year, January.

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So it was hard for me; it was very, very difficult for me being the only one out and everybody else dying. And so all I did was just worked and worked and just sent money home and just tried to get them out and tried to – and people used to ask me all the time, “How do you deal with this,” people that knew me? “Your family is dying and how do you deal with it?” My – my only reason was the ones that are dead there wasn't anything I can do for the ones that were already dead. I have to stay strong for the ones that are alive because they need me. If I break down now I can't help the – the ones that are alive. So I can't afford to break down. I can't afford to cry. I can't afford to fall apart. And I have to stay strong because I have to bring the ones that are alive out. I said there was a reason, it was a reason why God pulled me out first because He – I guess – I mean He knew that He has given me the strength to do this.

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And you know people – and friends would say, “Well if it were me I probably would be a mental home by now. I would have broken down and I would be popping pills.” I said it’s – it’s – you have to be realistic about life because that’s what life is. It’s about – you know you have to always set – and that was one of the strengths that I pulled from my grandmother into – as I told you earlier that she was very realistic about life. She always saw things as they were. And I saw that. I knew that I couldn’t fall apart. I knew that I couldn’t break down because of the fact that people – my family needed me to stay strong. They trusted me. I was their – their stand up bearer to bring everybody out so I had to stay strong.

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And I was able to bring a lot out of the war during that time you know with – through the Red Cross and the Immigration and working and sending money for tickets and all of that. So when I started the braiding shop I ran through that to a point where I started preparing food. But my ultimate goal was not to braid hair. I was just doing it to survive. It was the quickest thing to do and the fastest way to make some money. So I just did it. But my ultimate goal was cooking and I knew that at some point it was going to evolve into that but I just didn’t know how. And I didn’t pursue it; I didn’t go after this goal that I wanted. I just let things happen. And – and this is how I’m generally is, I – I’m not the type of person that pursues and pursues. I just set standards and I just throw it out there in the universe and just let it catch and let it happen. And a lot of times it takes longer but the reason why I know it takes longer because I know it’s not time for it to happen. And so I always believe that nothing happens before its time, you know.

00:34:28

You know sometimes we jump the gun and do things and then they fall apart. But when we let things mature and when it does happen it – it has a very strong foundation. And so I

started cooking food out of my house for just customers. They would come and sit there eight – nine hours getting their hair braided and I would make dinner for them for the weekend, for the night, and then it just started growing you know 25 dinners, 50 dinners. But then what made it – what made me get out of the house was somebody reported me to the board of health because I was cooking at home and selling it and I didn't have the right paperwork and all of that. So the health department you know contacted me and said, "Okay if you want to do this you need to get a license for this and all of that."

00:35:15

And so okay that was great. So when I had the hair-braiding salon, right next to the braiding salon was – was a sandwich shop and this guy opened the sandwich shop, set it up, and never worked in it. Set up the shop, put all he could in it, and then decided he didn't want it; he was going back to New York. And then the landlord said to me, he said, "Oh," one day he said to me; he said, "Ida guess what?" I said "What?" He said, "You see the sandwich shop next door?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "The guy left." I said, "What do you mean – left? He just fixed it up." He said, "You like to cook, you want it?" And I was like "Really?" **[Laughs]** So I went and looked at it and it was just a little carry out and it had a little kind of space, kitchen was set up and everything, set up – he said "You can pay \$500 a month." "Really?" And then I said "Well, I'm just a cook. I don't know anything about restaurant business. All I know how to do is cook." He said – then he said – he was this older guy; he said, "Two things I would say to you – cook well and pay your taxes and hire other people to do the rest and you will be successful – just like that."

00:36:31

I was – I said, “Okay.” It was an old white Jewish guy. And I still see him every now and then and every time he sees me he do like this. [*gestures fist in the air*] So I said, “Okay.” I said, “Well I don’t have any money to even get all what I need – pots and pans.” He said, “How much do you have in the bank?” Just like that. I said, “Maybe about \$500.” He said, “Take the \$500 and buy what you need and get started.” I said, “Okay.” I went and bought a few pots, a few little things I needed. I did hand – I got all my customers to help me do hand-printed flyers and stuff like that and they started passing it on in their jobs for lunch and all of the sudden Chef Ma Masu West African Cuisine took off. It was the first West African restaurant in the entire state of Virginia. Virginia never had one.

00:37:23

And then it was so strange because it was foreign to them. So everybody was excited about this new African restaurant. But I had a challenge then. I couldn’t really cook traditional African dishes because I first had to educate them with it. So I decided to find a middle ground. I said, “Okay I’m going to take Southern dishes and use African spices and change the whole concept of what Southern food is about.” Because really Southern food started in – from the Mother Land. And came here and went back came here, went back. So I took collard greens – instead of using pork because a lot of people don’t eat pork, I just used spices, so I started taking out all of the things in the Southern food that were unhealthy and making it a healthy Southern food.

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And that started catching on because people were like, “Wow; you sure you don’t have no meat in these greens?” I’m like, “No”. “It’s not possible to cook collard greens with no meat. It’s not possible to cook this without meat. You sure you don’t have no fatback in here somewhere? You sure?” I’m like, “No.” And – and so it became curious to them that I could

actually prepare the stuff that grand – their grandmother made but made it healthier for them.

And – and it just took off like wildfire. I mean boom, it went up. And it's been up since.

00:38:58

SW: And what year was that?

00:38:59

IM: Nineteen ninety-eight; 1998 was the first of the carry out. So I had the carry out for like about a year and then I got – then I needed more space. I mean I was like out of space. People was standing outside of the door to get in because it was just a little – I had – I could seat only about maybe 15 – 20 people. And you would have like 30 people outside trying to get in. And so I said, “Okay; it’s time for me to let the braiding go.” So I turned the braiding – at that time I had trained my daughter very well so I turned the braiding – I took the braiding out of that particular building and I re-established it somewhere else and gave it to my daughter because she was good at it and transferred all the customers to her. And then opened up the wall between the two buildings and turned that part into a dining area and it became a big restaurant. So the dining area was seating about 120 people, plus the little carry out. So I went from 25 seats to 125 seats in a year. And the restaurant took off to the point where it was so overwhelming for me because I couldn’t handle it. Even though I was cooking and everything I didn’t have the business sense to really push forward so I started hiring accountants and publicists and this and that because I didn’t know what to do – even with the computer I wasn’t really good at it. So I listened to that little voice in the back that said, “Cook, pay your taxes, and hire people to do the rest.” And that’s what I did.

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I had a very good office manager. I had a good accountant. I had people around me that you know were showing me business. I started aligning myself with old business people you know people who had been in business for 50 years. I started befriending them to get that knowledge. “How do I take this to the next level? What do I need? How can you help me get to where I need to get?” And those people just started pouring in knowledge, free knowledge, free knowledge; “You might want to do this.” And to the point where they started giving me stuff before me asking and they would come in the restaurant, “Chef how you doing?” I said, “I’m doing fine.” And they would look around and say, “Hmm; maybe you want to get an air – a bigger air-conditioner.” You know and I’d be like, “What’s wrong with my air-conditioner?” “Maybe you want a 1500 BTU. It’s – what’s you got over there?” I’m like, “250 or whatever.” [Laughs] “No; you want a 1500.” That would kind of cool the whole place. So I started getting this great knowledge from people who knew the business – restaurateurs, just regular folks just started coming and the older women and older folks, church folks just started giving me their knowledge and just helping me because they saw now that this was changing the way. They saw now that this is something that Richmond really needed and so I started getting all of that grandma knowledge coming right back at me.

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And I listened to a lot of the good ones. Some were just boogers but some I listened to and this is what I am today. And the reason why I decided to downsize, I will use the word downsize in terms of space to come back to the original space ‘cause when I first started it was maybe a little bit smaller than this because I really do not want to go into restaurant, you know like owning restaurants all over the place. I wanted to brand my name; that’s my goal. I want to be able to – for people to go in a grocery store and see Chef Ma Masu’s greens in the frozen section or my bread or my drinks or my spices and stuff. That is really my goal, but my ultimate

goal is to have my own cooking show on television. That's my ultimate goal to own my own television show. And the way I want – I have a vision of it is it's going to be – 'cause I know it's going to happen. It's going to be a traveling show where I will travel and actually visit places. You know it's not new because it happens a lot but mine would be a little bit different because I'm going to do it through Africa where I will visit the villages and actually talk about the land, the food, and do it more of a spiritual cooking as opposed to just cooking the dish. And so it – it will be probably on like the *History Channel* or the *Travel Channel* more or less than on the *Food Channel*. So it would be talking about history of the foods and stuff. And so that's my goal.

00:43:46

And it's going to happen one of these days. You'll be, "Wow. She told me and that is her on TV." [**Laughs**] Oh yeah; so that's how it started. Everything that I'm doing I am really loving it because I'm not doing it – I mean it's a joy to love what you do and actually make money from it. It's like a – I don't even know how to explain it. You know it's like you enjoy what you're doing but you ain't making a whole lot of money so why do you do it, you know? It's not you're not sweating; you know you're not waking up and saying, "Oh, I got to go to work today." And the more I cook the more I enjoy it. I mean I'm singing. One of the things that I do a lot when I cook, I pray. And I learned that from my grandmother. I ask God that whatever he's put in my hands that people will heal from it; that the spices that I'm using will heal somebody, somebody will come and have a stomach ache and will eat some of the greens and feel better or a headache or – or upset stomach or whatever. So I ask God to use my hands as healing you know and even when I'm putting the spices in it I'm talking. "Is this what you want me to put in Lord? Is this correct? You know I know there is someone out there that's going to eat today that will feel better. Heal them for me." And so that's what I do a lot; I pray as I cook and I sing. I just enjoy this. This is like it's like really who I am. If – I believe that if I had to die today and came back I

would come back the same way. I wouldn't want to be anything else in this world but what I'm doing – nothing, nothing. I am so fulfilled with what I'm doing. There isn't anything else I want to be. I can't even envision myself doing anything else, because I love this art so much.

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And – and the reason – and because of the love of the art, I – it's like the art is evolving. I decided because my grandmother also was an herbalist and so I decided I was going to go to school and study some you know the natural herbs and now I'm supposed to be graduating in the next couple of years as – you know as an herbalist. And I haven't even graduated yet and I'm starting to – people will walk in – inside and say, “Chef, I got a real bad stomach ache today. What do you have for me? What can I take?” They're starting already to trust me, not only with the food, but with their bodies because – and one of the things that I do also I have a scale over there. I have scale over there that people weigh their food and I talk – not all the customers but the ones that will listen they'll put their food on there and I will look at it and I will say, “You need two vegetables on there. You got three starch and no vegetables. Go back and put another vegetable on it.” “Well I don't. . . “ – “Okay; you don't have to pay for it. Go and add another vegetable on there.”

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And they will be like – and I'm like, “Yeah.” And sometimes I will say, “Now you've just – you have two pounds of food that's going in your stomach right now. And it's lunchtime. Don't go home and eat another three pounds of food. It's too much food in your system for the day.” So I will kind of talk to them that way especially if I see that they need it, you know. I don't just you know impose on people. I know the ones that I can talk to and that I can help. And I will say to them, “I think you need more water in your system. I can look at your skin and it's dry a little bit so you need to add a little bit more water. You need to drink a little bit more water.” And once I

started slowly talking to them with the health issues they started relying on me even more. And to the point now where I have a weight loss program which is called Balance and the program is a combination of nutrition and exercise and my son is the personal trainer, certified, so he does the training and I do the food. And most people that we train – that we work with are people that are diabetics, high blood pressure, you know that kind of stuff, so we kind of are redirecting their eating habits, sleeping habits, and actually balancing their life. And so when I meet people now I talk to them and tell them about their lifestyle that this body that was given to us by God, He entrusted us with this – with this body but this body is of the earth. We're supposed to eat everything off the earth. We're not supposed to put chemicals and stuff that – and the body does reject it when we do it, but we just don't pay attention to it.

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And so I talk to them about it and slowly people are really coming in here for that. So the restaurant is now going into a whole new – new idea that I don't even know what's happening right now. It's – it's going to its own direction and I'm not even controlling it anymore. I'm just laying back and enjoying it. So I – I do – I detox; I make my own detox where I cleanse the system. People come and just buy it by the gallons. **[Laughs]** You know but it's all natural herbs and spices that I use and they're trusting me because they seen the results. And it's stuff that I'm giving it, it's not new. It's not stuff that is not here. It's right here; it's just that people have not paid attention to the earth for so many years and what it has to offer. You know and so now a lot of people are trying to eat right because they see that they are getting sicker earlier in age. I mean back then our parents used to live up to 80 – 90 years, you know 100 years because they grew their own vegetables in the backyard. Everything they grew and they ate from it.

00:50:01

Now we are dying at 50, 60; the most we might go would be 75. By the time especially women by the time we hit 45 we got everything – high blood pressure, diabetes, da-da-da, heart disease and 99-percent of the time we really don't have it. It's just our eating habits. As soon as you redirect your eating habits and you start eating right and doing the right thing those things started dropping off especially high blood pressure. And so I have a lot of people that come to me obese. I deal with the girls that I teach a lot of them are obese – a lot of them don't drink water. They don't even like it. They don't know of vegetables you know and stuff like that so I have that challenge every time I have a class. I have to almost reprogram them. And so I started bringing their mothers in to help to find out – to help because once they learn and they go back home the mom gets mad at me. “Well I ain't got no money to be buying no fresh vegetables. I don't know why Chef is telling you all that; I ain't got the money. You better eat those canned beans.” And then she would say, “Mom, Chef said those beans are dead. I can't eat it.” **[Laughs]** And then the mom would call me and say, “You better buy some fresh vegetables and bring them in my house 'cause I can't afford it. I bought these canned beans three for a \$1.00.” and I'm like, “It's killing you because it has so much chemicals in it and it's dead, so you can't eat it either.”

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And so what I have been working with also are women that are on welfare that get food stamps. I've been working on them and taking them to the grocery store and helping them choose the right vegetables for their money and teaching them how to cook it. So all of that is being like on the down low with me and the girls. You know I would take them and their mom when they get their food stamps and we'll go to like Wal-Mart or somewhere and I will say, “Look; you can afford to get this. If you can spend \$1.00 – here's some vegetables here for \$1.00.” And so I would give them the most inexpensive vegetables like cabbage or collards and those types of vegetables that are not so expensive but still good, you know that they can eat and

you know and try to take away some of the beef, heavy meats and give them more fruits you know and take away the chips and all of that stuff and give them more fruits and stuff like that. So it's been working a little, it's slow but it's been working. Changing has been working. And I just take – you know take it one day at a time. I don't impose myself on people a lot. I try – if they accept it they do it, if they don't – I mean it's no charge to it so if they say, "Nah, I'm happy like the way I am," then we move to the next person who wants you know to live longer or maybe a healthier life and that's what I do.

00:52:50

SW: Can I ask you a couple follow-up questions? Do you have a little bit more time?

00:52:53

IM: Yes; yeah.

00:52:54

SW: Okay; I'm wondering what year did you move to Main Street from – what year did you open this – ?

00:53:05

IM: On Main Street; 1998 uh-hm.

00:53:07

SW: Okay; and then what year did you start the classes for the girls?

00:53:12

IM: The girls 2005; started the classes for the girls.

00:53:19

SW: And then up to that point, so you were – you were just doing it yourself and then it was 2011 and you said when Bon Secours – ?

00:53:24

IM: Took it – I was doing it by myself but I was – the classes I was teaching all the way from 1998 like one-on-one. People would just drop their daughter off and I would teach her. But I didn't really have a structure of a class until 2005 when I actually put together a little 10-week curriculum and started really structuring it. But I was just teaching it as I went along and then after a while I decided to structure it into an actual program. And I started that 2005.

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SW: And can you talk about what the – what the program has been like, I mean how it started with the curriculum and – and how it's evolved and just some – ?

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IM: Well it started off it's like 10 weeks and the first week I usually when I get the girls, introduce them you know and people drop them off and I will let them introduce themselves and stuff like – because it's a free class and then the second week we start off with etiquette, you know learning plate settings and what is a dinner fork or salad spoon or wine glass, you know – where do you park?

00:54:35

SW: Um –

00:54:36

IM: Okay; good because over here they will give you a ticket.

00:54:38

SW: I saw the signs.

00:54:39

IM: Yeah; yeah, so we started, so at first we do a little etiquette and learning how to sit to the table you know as a – as a woman you know don't slouch and you know don't lean on the table like stuff – yeah, yeah, you know etiquette to learn all of that the first week. The second week – then we learn pots, the different pots and pans. We learn the temperatures of the pots you know and what is a cast iron pot, what is an aluminum pot, how does it cook on the stove, what temperature you can cook in and we learn all of that? And then I get the health department to come in and teach them health safety. They volunteer to help me with that so someone from the health department will come and teach them how to freeze food, where to put frozen food in the refrigerator and cook food and all that so they give them all of these health tips. Then I get the fire department – volunteer comes in and teaches them fire safety, how to use their – their fire extinguishers if – in terms of fire, what to do, and all of that.

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So they send a volunteer to do all of that with me. And then we go into grocery shopping. So what I do, I give everybody \$20 and we go to the grocery store and so what I do, I teach them how to shop in the grocery store. First of all we enter the grocery store and I get them to actually know the grocery store 'cause most grocery stores are set up the same way. You have your fruits on one side and your dairy products, your meats in the back, your – you know so they get the whole diagram of the store so that when they go into the grocery store they won't be lost. You know a lot of times people in the grocery store they turn you around 'cause they don't know where nothing is. So they learn the skill of the grocery store. So when they open the door and so I usually latch them out and open the door and everybody just goes in the direction and they will see it and I will say, "Okay from two people going to meats where are the meats?" And then they will say, "In the back!" and they all run to the back. "Two people go in the vegetables; where are the vegetables? To your right," they all run to the right. So they know where everything is. And then once we got in the grocery store we do a tour of the grocery store and we talk about – and I usually get like the manager of the grocery store to give us a tour and they will talk about vegetables that they don't know, like they don't know what mangos look like, they don't know what avocados look like, things like that. They might just know corn, broccoli, but these are exotic fruits – fruits and stuff they have no idea.

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So we have the director from the meat department comes out and teaches – talks about all the different meats and how it's packed, what is a T-bone steak you know like so they learn that. And then we go down the aisle and we talk about cereal, which is their favorite thing and they will read on the back of all of the cereal what is good in that particular cereal and what is not good, how many grams of sugar and all that and I will tell them, "You see this – Fruit Loops? You can't eat it; it's too much sugar in there. And you see how much sugar you have? You can't

have this; you need whole grain or whatever,” so we do that whole process of the grocery stores. And we get out of that and then we have a butcher, a professional butcher that comes in and teaches them how to cut up chicken and how to cut up meats, you know and they learn – I had one of the kids that said she didn’t know chicken had parts. All she knew was a wing. She’s like, “Chicken got – chicken got different parts!” You know ‘cause he will bring a whole chicken in and we teach them how to actually dissect the whole chicken and explain to them that it is easier to buy a whole chicken and cheaper than buying the parts if you know how to cut it up. So you find it cheaper that way, so – so we try to teach them how to budget.

00:58:03

If you get a whole chicken and you got – you got to get two legs, your wings, your breasts; you got all of the parts of the chicken in one than to just go buy a bag of legs or a bag of wings or whatever. And so we teach them how to do all of that. And the butcher comes in and do that. And then I come in and then we go to – I’ll get one of the restaurants, a fine dining restaurant to accept them and they will do a fine dining. And the way they do it is well I will take – I will break the group in half; one group would be the customers and the other group will be the wait staff. So we had – and then we break the wait staff in two and we have the real nasty wait – waitress and the real proper waitress. And the nasty waitress is the one that has no education. “Well you can order you know,” and so the kids love it because they like to do crazy stuff. “Here your menu,” you know and things like that you know – we call the ghetto waitress. So we have the ghetto waitress and then the other waitress. And so and she will sit there and she’s supposed to ask the tough question. The idea with this exercise is for her to not be afraid to go in any restaurant anywhere and ask the tough questions even if she has to ask them to bring the chef outside. She can do that; she has the right as a customer. And her question is if she cannot eat mushrooms she need to ask the waitress – “I cannot have mushrooms. Is mushrooms

in this?” And the waitress might say “I don’t know.” “Bring me the chef that cooked this.” And the chef comes out and so, “Chef did you put – ? I cannot have onions. Do you have onions in this?” And he has to tell me what’s in his dish. And so I gave them that exercise to take them through it when they get into the restaurant especially fine dining. So we do that exercise like in some of the big restaurants. And they will be – they will be prepared for that and they will come in there and – some – the last restaurant we went to was the Jefferson. And we had six of the sous chefs came out dressed down and these kids were pounding them with questions. I was just yah; I was so excited. [*Makes excited noises.*]

01:00:05

They were pounding and were questioning and they were just looking at what – “What school do you go to?” And they were like Chef Ma Masu’s Cultural Cooking School. And they were asking all these questions and they were so impressed because – and I tell them; I said, “When you go to these strange restaurants the only thing you look for is chicken wings or whatever ‘cause you know – ask for something that you’ve never had and make the chef tell you what it is because sometimes chicken wings could be named something else. But it’s just chicken wings.” And so those are the kinds of exercises we have that’s the field trips, you know field trips we go on. And then at the end of the course these girls prepare a six-course meal for their family and their friends for graduation. And so we have a big graduation and we invite guest speakers from the community. They have on their chef jackets and hats and they get a gift from the chef, from me, they get a complete cooking set, which costs like \$120 a piece and I get that for them with their new knife set and their cook – pots and pans and everything to get started. They get that as a gift. They get a chef jacket, a chef apron, and the certificate at the end of the 10 weeks. And they’re on their way.

01:01:19

And they do a – during the program they do a little skit where – they put their – the first set of girls I had put this together themselves. And we've been using it since in all the graduations. What they will do, they will take one set of girls that never went to the cooking school and another set of girls that did. And so one set will decide to prepare dinner for her mother's birthday and the other set will do the same. Now the other set will – the one that didn't would burn their house down; they escaped you know the fire – you know fire trucks going off in the skit and flour all over their face and mom comes from work and screaming, "You burnt my house down! You know you don't know how to cook!" And then she will say, "If you had sent me to Chef Ma Masu's Cooking School I wouldn't burn the house down!" **[Laughs]**

01:02:10

And so everybody just freaks out 'cause it's just so funny 'cause we have all these little – 'cause the girls are so good, they're funny; you know they like to do stuff like that. And then you get the other one that went to the school and she has this fine dining for her grand – her mother's birthday and she did chicken tartar or whatever, whatever. And so they go through that and so they have this little skit they do at every graduation. And it's getting better and better because we're perfecting it every time we have a graduation. **[Laughs]** It gets better and better. So this last graduation we had – we had a fire truck sound, we have the smoke **[Laughs]**; before we didn't have all of that, so that they did a whole production with this one. And so it was even better than you know a couple of years so every year they kind of you know perfect their little skit. And then we graduate them and then I wait another couple of weeks and start the next class.

01:03:00

SW: Do any of the girls go on – I know that when I stopped by in the fall I think you mentioned that you – you’ve hired a few; I mean can you talk about some of the trajectory of some of these girls?

01:03:09

IM: Yes; well right now I have four of them that work with me during catering and festivals. They are almost like permanent. I took – one I took when she was 11; she’s now 16. And she’s been working with me for five years. She’s working all of my – ‘cause I do a lot of weddings and receptions and festivals and stuff. And so she’s like one of my staff.

01:03:31

She’s very polite; she’s good with people and she’s learned a lot and she – and I took her from 11 and she’s now 16. And then I have the other ones that I only use as I need them, you know need them but I have two permanent ones that work with me now. And others have gone to get jobs in like McDonald’s or – and I’ll see them out and they will say, “Chef you know I’m working at Chuck-E-Cheese” and I’m like, “Are you doing good?” “Oh yeah!” The – and they will tell me some – “The other day I saw this guy and he didn’t change his gloves chef and I was like you know you have to change your gloves every time you touch a piece of meat.” **[Laughs]** And I said, “That’s good; that’s good.”

01:04:11

And then something else, I will see the parents out and I will ask about them and she’ll say, “She’s doing well. She’s cooking; you know she’s loving it and stuff like that.” So I have a very good positive review of the girls that have left me. You know and so –

01:04:28

SW: And you said since you've started there's been about maybe over 200 girls that have gone.

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IM: Yeah; that have gone through this program, about 200 girls so far that have gone through this program and some of them just went on and some kind of added you know that to you know their lifestyle you know. They took their knowledge and went with it and some of them are doing well with it.

01:04:48

SW: And can you talk a little bit – when I first sat down with you earlier before I turned the tape on you were talking about how you want – you're trying to get a bigger space and –

01:04:57

IM: Yeah; uh-hm.

01:04:58

SW: – you have – .

01:04:59

IM: Yeah; well it's – it's the original idea of the school that I have – I wanted it to be like an after school program where the girls can come every day you know five days a week after school and just learn something different every day and group them you know and work with them as opposed to cramping everything in 10 weeks, because really what I teach them in 10 weeks I can stretch that whole curriculum to a whole school year but I try to just surface it, you know

because I don't have them with me and I don't have the facility and time and everything to keep them every day after school. But if I did it would be – it would be a very productive program. It is but it would be more effective if I could get them you know every day.

01:05:44

And – and my goal is to find a building where I will be able to do that and you know be able to have this great commercial kitchen where I will be able to teach the girls. And one of the things that I wanted to do once I could get that I will be able to let them prepare the food to share with the homeless, whatever food they prepare like say the food bank would give me food, I would teach the girls how to cook it and then turn it over to the homeless shelter and stuff like that. So that's the kind of training I wanted the girls to be able to do to learn how to cook, get the food, cook it, and then turn it over to the shelters that need it. So I haven't – this is just a thought, I haven't been working with anyone concerning that but I know that you know when the time comes and these things will happen. And I pray to live long enough to see it.

01:06:33

But that's the goal, teach them not necessarily to go out – go out and you know and make money but also to help because the shelters are out there that need food. And the food banks sometimes have food so I could go to the food bank and say, "Give me vegetables and this and that," and the girls, I will teach them how to cook this and we would turn the cooked food over to you or to whatever shelter, Salvation Army whatever that needs the food. But these would be – these girls would be there to do that without – without pay you know 'cause that would be part of their training.

01:07:07

But what I need is a kitchen, a facility to do that. And so that's just a dream right now.

01:07:14

SW: And the precursor to the culinary school – ?

01:07:17

IM: Huh? Yes; yes and also to prepare them for the culinary school. Like I said they have a couple of culinary schools in Richmond right now and that I'm really trying to talk to that they – they guiding, whoever is in charge of the school could give me a preliminary to teach them and then that way – but it – it wouldn't happen until I can get the space because they would need to go through the entire high school you know in order to go to culinary arts, which is a college.

01:07:49

So if I could get their curriculum I could teach them the full year period and so by the time they get into the culinary arts they probably would have learned a whole year of the first year at my school and they just go straight into the second and third year and graduate. And so that's part of the goal.

01:08:09

SW: Right now the girls, are they mostly in middle school or junior high?

01:08:12

IM: Yeah; in middle school and high school because they start at the age of 11 to 16. So they – they – the middle school, and the reason why I took that age, people ask me all the time, “Why you don't take 17 and 18 or something like that?” Because 11 – actually 11 to 15 is right – is coming right out of adolescence and they're not really teenagers yet because once you pass 16 then you're starting to form your own ideas and stuff. So that age between 11 and 13 you can

mold them easily because they – they're on balance right now because they're deciding and just entering teenage and they're just coming out of adolescence so you still got a little girl in there that you can mold. So that's why I picked that very crucial age group to train. And it's easy to kind of you know tilt them over. So they're not too young and they're not too old so most – most of the time when you get them, I won't say it's not good but most of the experience I've had the ones that I've gotten 17 and 18 it was harder to train them because they were already – . And then these are underprivileged girls in the projects and other places. They have already ideas of what they want and so it's so odd to get them grounded you know in the program, so I always take that age.

01:09:31

And then another question that I had a lot why I don't do boys? I take only girls. And I also tell them that I don't just teach them the art of cooking. We also talk about their – their spirituality. We talk about the period; you know we talk about some of the things that women go through – young women. Some of them are being bullied in school because they're overweight and we talk about things like that. And I don't want a boy in there with them. I mean they have these boys all day. And so they want – they want that sisterhood. And that's the reason why I take only girls because I go beyond just teaching them because sometimes they might have health issues. And I tried it; I had a couple of their brothers they brought in and sat in the class with them and they just couldn't function. They were giggling and they were replaying with them and – “Stop!” [*Makes mocking sounds*] and so they were not focused because it was just – because a guy was there you know. So that's the reason why I haven't taken boys you know mixing them up. They get that every day in school. I don't need to mix them up.

01:10:35

And another reason too is that I hear a lot of men say that you know. “Women need to learn how to cook; women need to do – .” Okay if you want them to learn how to cook you know you need them to focus you know so you don’t need them – you don’t need the boys there you know. And so I – and they have worked a lot for me because if I have – let’s say if I have a girl that is withdrawn, I’ve had a lot of them that come to me and they have problems at home, you know. They don’t – I mean they are so unloved you know. I make them hug. They hate that. Oh they hate to hug. I say, “Come give me a hug. They said “Ah, oh; I don’t hug chef.” I said, “Come on; just a little one, just a tiny one,” and they will do like this. [*Makes a hug gesture*] And I will like – they know that – they know the word, you know like, “Feelings, feelings!” You know I’m just telling them feel the hug you know. And so – so after a while they – they be like – they want a hug from me; as soon as they come in the door they’re hugging me. So it’s like almost deprogramming them. It takes like sometimes five weeks to get them settled, you know and actually enjoying it.

01:11:42

And then at the end of the 10 weeks they’re falling apart. They want to stay – one more time. I say, “It’s over.” “It’s over? Can I come after school? Can you – can you take me personally? Can you take me by myself chef? It’s over?” They don’t want it to be over at the end of the 10 weeks. They are literally crying they don’t want it over. At graduation they – they’re boo-hooing. They don’t want it over. They want more because now they see the benefit. They see the sisterhood because we talk about school. First when we get the class we do 20 minutes of just talking. “How was your day in school?” And everybody – “Woo this person did this to me. She did this – .” And then we have rules; we have like a sergeant. She’s the one that is the – what I do when I get in – also get them I look in the group for a leader, because lots of times these kids are – they have natural habits. And I had this one class; it was awesome after a while. Her name was

Boom Boom. Boom Boom was so disruptive. I mean I tried to throw her out of the class so many times. She was just so disruptive. But I didn't realize. I had to sit there and think; I didn't realize that she was a natural leader. She wasn't really disruptive; she was just leading but in the wrong direction. She was going in the wrong direction because she would come in and she would just bully them the wrong way. "You need to sit still. You ain't the chef so you should shut-up, da-da-da". And then they would just fall apart. "You don't talk to me that way."

01:13:17

So I said "Okay." I sat her down and said, "Okay this is the leader." I said, "Okay Boom Boom you're in charge. You make sure you get here on time and you make sure you take the attendance and if anybody needs to speak you have to recognize them before they speak." That little girl took that thing so seriously. It was awesome. She was here; we started class at five o'clock and Boom Boom was here at quarter to five. She made her mom bring her here and she's sitting at the door with her pad. If you're late, she – kids shaking like this [*Makes a shaking gesture with her hand*]. "I'm sorry Boom Boom. It's my mama that made me late!" You know and she's like, "You late. You late." And I'm like, "Boom Boom just calm down now. You don't have to wave no gun – ." [*Laughs*]

01:14:01

And she had that class so tight and so after that I realized; I started getting a sergeant for each class, you know. And then we did things like gold stars. I brought out my grandma's gold stars. I used to give all kinds of gold stars. You know if you were good today you got a gold star. [*Laughs*]

01:14:22

SW: Did you call them energy?

01:14:23

IM: No; I didn't – I didn't go there. I just called it gold star. And so at the end of – but I never gave them the stars until the end of the program and then they got special recognitions, and some of them had five stars and 10 stars for this and this person did the work real good and so she got two stars and they would look forward to that star. And we did a little special certificate, separate from what they had – accomplishments. And each one of the certificates had stars. So many had like four or five of them [*Laughs*] besides the certificate and they love it. They're like, "Oh guess what; I got like six stars. How many stars you got?" They would say, "I got three. I ain't got none." And so it went on that way. So it's – it's – that is what this school is all about. It's very, very good and interesting.

01:15:11

SW: I've taken up a lot of your time.

01:15:13

IM: I'm fine.

01:15:13

SW: I'm – I actually just want to ask you one more thing and if there is anything you want to add; is there anything you want to add that you – ?

01:15:25

IM: What you want – am I covering what you want?

01:15:27

SW: Yeah; I don't even need to ask you half the questions 'cause you just naturally go into it so you've made my job very easy today.

01:15:34

IM: Yeah; it's like a story. I'm telling you a story.

01:15:37

SW: Because this project is all about female entrepreneurship in Richmond I'm wondering if you could talk about any of – I mean you've talked a lot about what it was like to get to this place, but if there is just anything else you want to add about the culture of female entrepreneurship here in Richmond or along the way like the challenges or upsides?

01:15:56

IM: Well the challenges – well what I would say to young entrepreneurs is that find your niche. It's what it's all about and what it's always been about in any specialty or profession – is to find your niche, especially if you are one of those that is very talented and can do multiple things. It's hard for people like us who are creative and talented to actually do anything because we don't – we want – we want to do a little bit of everything. And when you do a little bit of everything you never do anything.

01:16:30

So what you do with all of your talent is that you find the one that is the most important to you and you highlight that particular one and then all the other ones become subtitles to what you do.

01:16:43

And another thing that I would say to entrepreneurs is that do what you love; always do what you love because when you love what you do it's easier. It doesn't become a burden and it's easier to make money from it because when you sell it, you sell it from your heart. You don't have to read a script if somebody asks you and it's always at the tip of your tongue to talk about it because it's what you love to do. You don't have to always memorize it or you know – and usually gifts are not learned. They are actually given to you as you grow up – your talent. So you can take your talent and make your profession. And you can love it.

01:17:26

And so I mean that's what I say about entrepreneurship in terms of small specialty business – do what you love first of all. Find your niche and do what you love. And the rest follows.

01:17:42

SW: You've been very gracious with your time, so thank you.

01:17:44