

Claude and Donna Black
Williams Plum Street Snowballs – New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen

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[Begin Claude & Donna Black-Plum Street Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, April 4, 2011. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana on Plum Street at Plum Street Snowballs, and I'm with Miss Donna Black. And if I could get you to say your own name for me and your birth date, if you don't mind, we can get started?

00:00:20

Donna Black: Hi, I'm Donna Black. I'm the owner of Williams Plum Street Snowball Stand for the last 32 years. We've kind of walked into it blinded but we've gotten a lot better at it and it's lots of fun. You put smiles on people's faces and the kids come around the corner saying, "Woo-hoo. Yes, the sno-ball's open. The umbrella is out. Everybody is happy." It's really a--a fun job. And you know I wouldn't be doing it this long if we didn't enjoy putting smiles on people's faces.

00:00:51

SR: Someone else just entered the room, too—the co-proprietor?

00:00:57

DB: Right, my husband. **[Laughs]** His name is Claude. Say hi.

00:01:03

Claude Black: Hey, how are y'all today?

00:01:04

SR: Good. Good to see you. Could I get your birth date? Is that okay?

00:01:07

DB: Oh, July 26th.

00:01:09

SR: Great, so you said you've been here since 1975?

00:01:19

CB: Seventy-nine.

00:01:22

DB: Oh 1979. I knew I wasn't going to get it right. **[Laughs]** They all kind of blend together;

1979.

00:01:28

SR: But the stand itself existed before that?

00:01:30

DB: Right. It's been here since 1945, so that's a long time to have the neighborhood flow and the ambiance of being in a neighborhood and having people come from all over the United States. I'm telling you, Japan, Australia, France. They come in and they point, you know, because we don't know what they're saying. **[Laughs]** But you know it's really cool to have a--a job per se that people come from all over the--the country to come get a sno-ball. They take a streetcar; they'll take a taxi cab. They'll ride their bikes. It's like old home week. People will come out and go, "Oh, look, I haven't seen you in a long time and la-la-la **[Gestures]**." So they stay out and sit on the chairs and talk forever. **[Laughs]** So it's really nice.

00:02:19

SR: Who owned the stand before you? Was it the original owner?

00:02:22

DB: No, we're the fifth owner since Mr. Williams has owned it, but we're the longest owners since he sold it.

00:02:29

SR: And who is Mr. Williams?

00:02:31

DB: He was the original owner and got the idea of putting them in the--in the Chinese food pails and getting the whole ball rolling of making the City of New Orleans what it is.

00:02:42

SR: Did you know him ever?

00:02:44

DB: We did. We used to run into each other quite frequent. He would drive by and check on us to make sure we were still holding our end of the bargain up and keeping the business going.

00:02:55

SR: What was his first name—or is? I don't know if he's still alive.

00:02:58

DB: Do you know Mr. Williams' first name—Sydney?

00:03:00

CB: Sydney.

00:03:01

DB: Sydney Williams, right, and he had it for the longest time. He had a furniture store and he started doing sno-balls, correct?

00:03:09

CB: Actually Sydney Williams was a--he was a prisoner of war in World War II. And upon his release he rented—which was a grocery store at the time; rented the grocery store and made it

into a furniture/hardware store. And as an additional income out of the back doors, he ran his sno-ball stand. He eventually ended up closing the furniture store and just running the sno-ball stand, and his doctor advised him because of his heart condition that he had to give up the sno-ball business. So at that time he sold it to two brothers—I mean a family by the name of Acardo, and the Acardo Brothers ran it and they are in the plumbing business. And their plumbing shop now is located over on Willow Street, in about the 8200 Block of Willow Street. And they ran their plumbing shop in the front and the sno-ball stand in the back.

00:04:17

And they ran it only for about two, three years, and then they sold it to two brothers and a brother-in-law, who with their joint command ran the stand for about six years. And then they had a disagreement of who was actually going to work here, so that's when they decided to sell it. And my sister at the time was in the sno-ball business with a shop located in the River Bend area and heard that this was for sale. And my—so she was talking with my father, and my father made the connection with the previous owners and bought it for me and called me on the phone and said, "I bought you something." And that's how we became the owners.

00:05:01

SR: That's quite a story.

00:05:04

CB: Yes.

00:05:04

SR: Let's see. There were a couple things I just wanted to clarify. First of all, could I get you to officially introduce yourself? Could you say your name and your birth date?

00:05:13

CB: Yeah. My name is Claude Black and I am married to Donna Black. And I am born on April 10th.

00:05:21

SR: Thank you. First of all, does your sister still have a sno-ball shop?

00:05:27

CB: No, my sister retired her sno-ball shop and now lives in Houston.

00:05:35

SR: What was—what is her name?

00:05:38

CB: Her name is Madeline Sinclair.

00:05:39

SR: Okay, and were you looking around for a sno-ball stand when your father was generous enough to buy you—?

00:05:46

CB: No, actually I was in the construction business and building single family homes and--and he thought it would just be a good opportunity to buy a goldmine.

00:06:00

SR: What did you think when you heard this news?

00:06:02

CB: That--that was—yeah, that was interesting. I have never, you know, been into the sno-ball business and so it was an interesting education.

00:06:16

DB: Self-taught.

00:06:17

CB: Yes.

00:06:19

DB: They just said, “Here’s the recipes. Here’s the stand.” And okay—

00:06:26

CB: “Here’s some keys.”

00:06:26

DB: “—okay, bye.”

00:06:27

SR: Were you looking for a career change?

00:06:29

CB: No, not at the time. [*Laughs*] Because actually I still continued and I’m still in the construction business and real estate, and so in my free time I do that.

00:06:43

SR: I just--I just think that that’s so funny. Were you—I mean, were you happy? Did you thank your dad?

00:06:52

CB: Oh yes. Many times, yeah, because over--over the years we’ve--we’ve had all of my nieces and nephews helping me so it was strictly a family business that--that we all could benefit from.

00:07:04

SR: Did your father ever work here?

00:07:06

DB: Oh yeah.

00:07:07

CB: Yeah. He--he would come in and sit. At that time my dad was 65, when--when he bought it, but he would come in and help me, and my mother would come occasionally and help me.

00:07:17

SR: What was your father's name?

00:07:18

CB: Douglas Black.

00:07:21

SR: And your mother?

00:07:21

CB: Inez.

00:07:23

DB: And they had 13 children, so we had lots of nieces and nephews to go around. [*Laughs*]

00:07:31

SR: Big workforce.

00:07:33

CB: Yes, correct.

00:07:34

DB: And we only had three, so—. [*Laughs*] Our workforce is slim.

00:07:37

CB: And all their friends.

00:07:38

DB: Yeah, and all their friends.

00:07:39

SR: Were you married at the time, when—?

00:07:40

CB: Yes.

00:07:42

DB: We've been married 35 years.

00:07:43

SR: And did you have a career at that point?

00:07:46

DB: I worked at a doctor's office. I worked at Orek, the vacuum cleaner company, and I'd come—work there during the day and then come here and work here until 9 o'clock at night. So it was long days, you know, and my children worked and they came here after school. And all three of my girls—Toni, Sam and Andi—they have a good work ethic because we instilled them: you come to work and you do your thing and, you know, that's it. That's the way it is. So it's really paid off in the long run because they don't realize that they're learning other things, you know: self-respect and work ethics and communication with other people, and they just don't have that clue until the light bulb goes off and you go, "Oh, wow. You know that wasn't so bad after all." *[Laughs]* So it worked out really wonderful.

00:08:39

SR: How old are your girls now?

00:08:41

DB: My oldest, Toni, is 32, almost 33; my middle girl, Sam, she's 28; and my youngest is 26—her name is Andi.

00:08:51

SR: Do they work here at all?

00:08:53

DB: Definitely, yes. My oldest one does all our coordination for all our outsourced caterings and gets everybody where they're supposed to be, and then my other two will come in and work when we do Jazz Fest, French Quarter Fest. And one lives in Baton Rouge and one lives in Jackson. So they come in when we say, "Help!" [*Laughs*] And they put their best foot [forward], you know, to come in and help, so it's really wonderful.

00:09:22

SR: Well there are worst places to spend your time, I think.

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DB: Yeah, you can eat your way through it.

00:09:27

SR: Well that is just a great story, how that started out. Were you—had either of you been involved in the food business at all?

00:09:38

CB: No.

00:09:38

DB: Oh, well, we worked at the pizza place.

00:09:40

CB: Oh, I take that back. We--we met at a pizza parlor and she was my manager.

00:09:48

DB: Still am. *[Laughs]*

00:09:51

SR: Where was that?

00:09:51

DB: On--it was called Fireside Inn and it was in Metairie on Veterans Highway.

00:09:56

CB: It's not longer there but—.

00:10:00

DB: Yeah, it's gone like everything else around in New Orleans. We're here today, gone tomorrow, but we'll still, you know, going to keep it going 'til we—.

00:10:06

SR: Yeah, not Plum Street.

00:10:08

DB: No, it'll be here 'til I guess forever. *[Laughs]*

00:10:12

SR: So you mentioned that when your father bought the place they handed you some recipes. How many recipes were there, and did you keep any of them?

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CB: Yes. We still apply some—most of the original recipes that were handed to us and—

00:10:32

DB: A lot. [*Laughs*]

00:10:35

CB: Right, and--and we apply them the same way that they were given to us.

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DB: We've added here and there: strawberry shortcake, Bananas Foster, lemon meringue, strawberry cheesecake, king cake. So there's been some flavors that we've learned over the years of—you know, like a mad scientist you go in and you go, "Oh, that tastes good. Oh no, that doesn't taste good." [*Laughs*] But you know I guess it's all trial and error, and we taste and--and add a little bit of this and get rid of that, and it all comes to be.

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SR: But you have a lot of flavors, so did—they had a lot of flavors when you bought the place?

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DB: Right, they had a lot and we just added to the mix, and I don't think we can add anymore because we're out of space, so—. You know we're at a standstill. *[Laughs]*

00:11:27

SR: Did Mr. Williams come up with those recipes, do you think, or was it someone in the interim?

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DB: I think it was him.

00:11:31

CB: No, he—those recipes are from--some of them are from Mr. Williams. Now when Mr. Williams actually operated the stand he had to—there was no one actually that manufactured extracts as they do today. So he had to come up with the flavor really from scratch and use an extract—without using an extract. He had to develop his own extract. And one of the flavors that is like that is chocolate. It's still made the way he does it.

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SR: I don't want you to divulge any secrets, but when you say that I don't know exactly what you mean.

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CB: Well the--the chocolate is made from--from scratch just like your grandmother made hot chocolate; it's made from scratch, so it's sugar, powder, and all the ingredients to make it into a liquefied product. As of today you can buy a chocolate extract that you could add just to water and--and make it into a syrup. It's not anything close to what the taste of ours is.

00:12:52

You can also take Hershey's cocoa syrup bought at the store and water it down, which a lot of stands do, and it's not anything close to the way we do it. And we do it the old-fashioned way, and that is--that is probably the one signature flavor that Mr. Williams did that we still do it 65 years later.

00:13:14

DB: And the orchid, the orchid cream.

00:13:14

CB: Well the orchid--the orchid cream—at that time, he--he had his own extract so we use an extract that's different than other people use but it's not--it's not developed the same way he did because after a time there was a company here locally called Charles Dennery, and Dennery started making extracts and he was buying then the extracts from Dennery and so he didn't have to prepare it. And that's how I think he got to an expanded list, because they would be making flavors that--that he couldn't do.

00:13:57

SR: I wonder how big his list was before he was able to buy extracts. Probably not that big.

00:14:03

CB: No, I would not expect it to be that big.

00:14:07

DB: And you used to come when you were a little boy, so—.

00:14:09

CB: Yeah, I mean it was—I came here when I was a child, and--and just like most of the customers that come here and say they've been driving around the neighborhood trying to find us, I can remember as a child driving around and my mother trying to find this place. So because I attended Lusher Elementary, which is just a few blocks away, and so this--this was one of our spots that we'd come to in the afternoon after school, too.

00:14:36

SR: Can you describe, for the record, why it's hard to find this place?

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CB: Well just like in many parts of New Orleans is there's one-way streets, and--and so you're going up--up one street and you can't turn on that street because it's a one-way going in the wrong direction so you got to go to the next street and go around the corner and go to the next

street, and then low and behold you're on the wrong street, and then so that's why you kind of like drive around the neighborhood until you can find the place.

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SR: That's true. I've done that many times in this neighborhood myself. And then you have to see your sign, which is on a building that looks a lot like a house.

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CB: Yeah, it blends in with the neighborhood, so that—

00:15:22

DB: Unless you've heard it from word of mouth or—

00:15:26

CB: Somebody else brought you.

00:15:25

DB: —somebody else brought you here and then you're trying to do it again, it's quite difficult. We get more phone calls saying, "Where are you? How do you get there?" And it's like I'm not good at directions but I'll try. There's a—the streetcar barn over here and the zoo is over there, so just keep going straight and when you see Plum Street take a left and you're there. **[Laughs]**

00:15:47

SR: Cell phones probably made that a lot busier for you.

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DB: Yes, yeah cell phones and--and MapQuest or whatever they call it has helped me out in that respect because they can almost find us but it's hilarious. People go, "I'm in the East. Where am I supposed to go?" It's like, "Oh no, get back on the interstate," you know. [*Laughs*]

00:16:08

SR: Well that's fascinating to me that you came here as a child. Do you remember what kinds of flavors you would get then?

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CB: No, I don't remember the flavors; my favorite flavor then, no.

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DB: He's got lots now. [*Laughs*]

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CB: Yeah, I have lots now. It depends on my mood and--and the way I'm feeling that day.

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DB: Whether it's hot or cold or chilly; it depends on what you get, is what the weather is outside. The hotter, you get regular flavors; if it's kind of cool you get the creams because they're more rich and not thirst-quenching like the regular flavors are, so—.

00:16:45

SR: That's funny. I was—when I came the other day I was telling some out-of-towners the same thing. They didn't take my advice. I'm like, "You really need to be hot to appreciate that one," because it wasn't very hot out.

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DB: Yeah, that's exactly right. And we have people from out of town all the time and they'll—I'll say, "Well, have you eaten your way through the city yet?" And they're going, "We're working on it." But you know a lot of people tell me that. It's like it's true. You come to the city and you'll eat your way through it. That's the way life is around here. We revolve it around food. *[Laughs]* Thank goodness for our sake anyway.

00:17:17

SR: Right. When you would come as a child, was it Mr. Williams who would be working here?

00:17:22

CB: Yes; Mr. Williams would be, and the keen thing about Mr. Williams is that he would—the shop was much smaller than it is now. There was only one door to come in and out. But he would greet you in his white starch-pressed shirt, long sleeve, with his initials on the collar, on

his cuff, and--and it was just him and his wife, daughter, and he had one other gentleman that helped pick up and clean up around, but he—that other fellow didn't actually make sno-balls.

00:18:00

SR: Strictly family?

00:18:02

CB: Right, strictly family. And so that would really create a line virtually around the corner, you know.

00:18:11

DB: And we do that now from the time we open to the time we close.

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CB: We do that now but our service is much smoother and faster. We've expanded the receiving area some and—.

00:18:22

SR: It's funny that you say it was much smaller because it can't get much smaller in there.

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CB: It was. The—

00:18:31

DB: It was just that one little counter and it was like—

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CB: There was only one small—that real small counter.

00:18:35

DB: —dropping sno-balls on each other trying to get in and out.

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CB: And those two doors were not together. When I first bought the stand, I had to take the door from the middle of the building and move them. I moved them together and so that you could create an in and out—

00:18:52

DB: A flow.

00:18:54

DB: —flow.

00:18:55

DB: Trying to—without everybody wearing it. *[Laughs]*

00:18:58

CB: So you had just one set of doors to come in and order and turn around and face the crowd and walk back out with your sno-ball.

00:19:04

DB: It was a fight. *[Laughs]* Because people were going, “I can't get out! I can't get out!” It's like, “Oh jeez.” *[Laughs]*

00:19:09

CB: And the--the most memorable thing that I had is--is that Mr. Williams had a size that was—the cheapest size was on a meat tray and it was a cardboard meat tray that you got your sno-ball on. It had no sides to absorb the juice, and--and so he would pack the ice on top of the meat tray. It's a flat meat tray and you would no sooner get outside and do like this *[Gestures]* and everything would fall off.

00:19:44

DB: Or it would melt and it would be all over you. *[Laughs]*

00:19:47

CB: Yeah, and so that was the first thing that I took out of this place. *[Laughs]*

00:19:52

DB: Well nobody could handle it; we gave it to the pets. The dogs would come in and we'd make them a sno-ball on that and they would—they could handle it. Four legs could handle it better than two legs. *[Laughs]*

00:20:03

SR: So even--it even survived the other owners after Mr. Williams?

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CB: Yes, it even survived the other owners, but it—I didn't see a purpose in it and I had an endeavor that that's got to go. I can remember spilling that on me. I don't remember what flavor I got but I do remember spilling that on me.

00:20:19

DB: And just paying for it and then it's all gone; it's on the floor and [you] think, "Man."

[Laughs]

00:20:26

SR: How much did that cost when you inherited this place? Do you know the cheap—what was the cheapest?

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DB: I don't even know—maybe 20-cents?

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CB: Yeah, I think the cheapest sno-ball was probably 20-cents.

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DB: Twenty-five maybe.

00:20:39

CB: But some customers will say they've paid as little as a nickel for a sno-ball.

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SR: In this spot?

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CB: In this spot in the early '50s.

00:20:51

DB: And they will come back and say, "I used to come here 35 years ago." And it's like, "Tell me," you know. [*Laughs*] We'll--we'll hear all kind of stories: how it still tastes the same. As--as long as it tastes the same, we're all right.

00:21:05

SR: So now you—the containers that you use are—. Well, can you describe what the containers for the sno-balls are?

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CB: We still use a traditional container that's been tradition with this—associated with this stand. It goes back to—way back in the--in the '50s and '30s and '40s, you would buy your oysters in that type of container at the grocery store, their local meat market. And so they were considered to be oyster pails. Now their most common use is in a Chinese restaurant, and they would pack your food in that.

00:21:48

So the modern era around here associates them with Chinese food pails. But they are a paper carton with a waxed lining that does hold liquid very well, but we over-fill the cup to past its maximum so as soon as the juices start flowing—because it's over-filled for its maximum—they start coming out. And so everybody associates that type cup as to leak but it's actually just overflowing. And so to compromise with the modern era, we have instituted some traditional waxed paper—waxed-lined cups and we have three sizes of those. And those are more popular with the--the general public that is not associated with authentic, or trying to go back in time.

00:22:58

SR: Well that's interesting. I had no idea about the oyster pail. So that's what you think of when you see those, huh?

00:23:04

CB: Right, correct. And some people have told us that you would also buy your goldfish in that when you went to the pet store. They would pack your goldfish—

00:23:13

DB: Put them in that.

00:23:14

CB: Now they put your goldfish in a plastic bag, but before that they would put them in that.

00:23:19

DB: So it wasn't because they leak; it's that we over-flow them, so—. They got to do what they got to do: sip up the juice. [*Laughs*]

00:23:27

SR: Were sno-ball stands in general serving their sno-balls in those containers when y'all were growing up?

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DB: No.

00:23:34

CB: In general, here locally they were trying to—they tried to copy us and—or copy Mr. Williams—by instituting that cup, but that cup actually—or that container actually is very expensive. And so they learned it quickly that it's very expensive compared to the other types of

cups that they have out there. And so they--they choose not to, and it's not popular with the modern world. So--so they choose to use some other type of container.

00:24:11

SR: Do you think Mr. Williams started that, or were there other places using that kind of cup?

00:24:15

CB: No, it was—that was Mr. Williams' signature that he used. That and the disgusting little flat plate. [*Laughs*]

00:24:24

SR: Mr. Williams sounds—

00:24:26

CB: Nobody used that flat plate. [*Laughs*]

00:24:28

DB: If they did they didn't use it right. [*Laughs*]

00:24:31

SR: Do you have any photos from the Mr. Williams era?

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DB: No, we sure don't.

00:24:34

CB: No. At--at one time—I don't know where that photo is—at one time we had a photo of the original side of the building when we bought it. It was unpainted, an unpainted—long, long time; it was so unpainted—

00:24:47

DB: Rough looking.

00:24:48

CB: —that the original boards on the building were curling off of it. That's how unpainted it was. And so when I bought the building, the first—when I bought the stand, I didn't buy the building. I only bought the stand and then the owner of the property lived next door. And that—and after the first summer that I bought it, she died in the next winter, and so the next winter—. That's two years; the next winter, I bought the building. And so the first thing I had to do when I bought the building is take all the siding off of that one side and put new, brand new siding on it.

00:25:25

Now the rest of the building has the original siding on it. And if you look really closely at it, I had to re-nail it all back on the thing because it was just like curling off the building. And I've then since painted it, but a lot of the siding now has to—needs to be replaced on those other three sides.

00:25:46

SR: Now is the entire building for the sno-ball stand, or does somebody live in some portion of it?

00:25:51

CB: Well we have a single-family apartment that's next door. It's a three-room apartment. Where we're sitting at today was the apartment's original kitchen. This was not part of the sno-ball stand.

00:26:03

DB: Yeah, that door right there is—it didn't have all this space.

00:26:07

SR: And where we're sitting today, is this what you consider your kitchen?

00:26:10

CB: Yes, this is our kitchen. So this was the apartment's kitchen and that door was there. But in—in the early '20s this, like I said, was a family grocery store so that was their entrance into the grocery store through their house.

00:26:28

SR: Well, where were you making the syrups before you had this kitchen area?

00:26:33

CB: They had a small—

00:26:38

DB: Pot with fire.

00:26:41

CB: —they had a seafood burner to--to warm their—they didn't have essentially any real hot water here. They had an old kerosene-lit, or natural-gas-lit hot water heater that was from the 1800s that only supplied enough water for you to wash your hands.

00:27:02

DB: Scary.

00:27:03

CB: And it didn't supply enough water for you to make anything. So they would have to boil their hot water, and they boiled that in a seafood pot which was in the other area up there. And it was—still looked at that time like a--a hardware store. It had a loft in it and the wood floors were—

00:27:22

DB: Low ceilings, wood floors, and—

00:27:25

CB: —the wood floors had been removed so you could see the creepers behind--between the concrete. And after I bought it, you know we cemented all over that and then re-designed it and put the kitchen over here and took the kitchen out of that. And that's when we re-designed the front area so that you had an in and out door.

00:27:43

DB: So we've learned a lot over the years. [*Laughs*]

00:27:45

SR: Gosh, I can't imagine that situation.

00:27:50

DB: Yeah, it was freaky. [*Laughs*]

00:27:50

CB: And the metal shelves that you see on the shelving where we have our flavors when you're ordering at the sno-ball stand, that is an original. It's an original to the stand, and that's--and that's been confirmed by Mr. Williams. He's been in the stand before he passed away and he explained to me that those were original.

00:28:09

DB: And then we added the trough that's underneath to keep all the cream flavors cold because they have to be refrigerated, so we throw all our scrap ice where we keep our—instead of going into the refrigerator and coming back and going back and forth, which would drive you crazy, we just wind them up and throw all the spare ice so nothing goes unused. We make a mistake with a sno-ball, you bring it home, you eat it. The spare—all the spare ice goes on the trough for the cream flavors, so we use, you know, every nook and cranny, and everything that's scrap we can use somewhere else. *[Laughs]*

00:28:46

SR: So the cream flavors need to be refrigerated. The other flavors don't need to be, huh?

00:28:50

DB: No, the other flavors don't need to be refrigerated. They stay on the shelf maybe a day and we use them, so there's a pretty good turnover of syrup.

00:28:59

SR: I have so many questions now. I didn't know about the deep history of this place.

00:29:05

DB: It's really unique.

00:29:06

SR: It is. I guess I'd like to go back to something you said, because you mentioned earlier the orchid vanilla cream. And that, as far as I understand, is one of your real signature flavors. So that was one of the recipes that you bought?

00:29:23

DB: Right. That was--that was one of the several recipes that we purchased and we have kept it pretty true to form from when Mr. Williams had it, and people will come back and say, "Oh I've got to get the orchid. It is so good." And you know we--we just try to keep it to the original floor mat of what he was trying to do because when we bought the stand they called it "Plum Street." And we said, "Mr. Williams deserves the credit," so that's why we put it "Williams-Plum Street," because other people know it by "Plum Street" and [Claude's] generation— he knew it as Mr. Williams. And we just, you know we just figured he deserved the credit because he's the one that started this great creation of sno-balls, so that's how we felt when we bought it.

00:30:16

SR: Can you describe the orchid vanilla cream for me?

00:30:18

DB: Um, what comes to mind first is the color. The color is such a beautiful light purple, not too dark, kind of elegant purple. And it makes a beautiful sno-ball. It tastes wonderful and it makes you think you're in Hawaii or some grand location like that. And people thoroughly enjoy that flavor.

00:30:45

SR: Can you compare it to anything, just for the record, so people can get an idea of what it tastes like?

00:30:54

DB: Let's see, it kind of tastes like French vanilla ice cream, but a more classy type of vanilla.

00:31:02

SR: It's funny because the first time I saw it—I agree it's a beautiful color, but it's not one of the like bright colors. It's not like a kiddie color.

00:31:12

DB: Yeah, it's not dull and it's not bright. It's just kind of—not refreshing but kind of gives you that a-ha moment where it's like, “Oh, this is really good.” So you know it's one of my favorites.

00:31:27

SR: And it was always that color?

00:31:29

DB: It was always that color.

00:31:33

SR: Mr. Williams must have been thrilled when you renamed the stand?

00:31:36

DB: I think he was. He was--he was honored, should I say? You know you work your butt off all those times so you deserve—like people say, you know, “Well it’s just a sno-ball stand.” I said, “It’s my 30 years and his 30 years of blood, sweat, and tears,” you know because it’s a lot of work. People think you’re just pouring syrup, but it’s got to come from somewhere. And we get here at all hours, and you know we enjoy what we do and it’s a thrill to see people—. Of course the dentist probably likes us too, but you know **[Laughs]** it’s just all-around fun. Some days are more hectic than others but that’s in anything you do in life. You’re going to hit rough patches—you know, between [Hurricane] Katrina and didn't know if we had a building and didn't know if we had the stand, but life goes on and you just go roll with the punches. It takes you a while to learn that, but you know you treat life—and things that are around you, you’ll appreciate them a whole lot more.

00:32:35

SR: Well could you take me through a typical day, like what time you get here and what you do first?

00:32:43

DB: Let’s see. I go to sleep the night before thinking, “What do I have to do the next day?” **[Laughs]** Thank goodness for iPhones because I keep it all in my iPhone now. I never thought I would say that. But you know I go to the grocery store in the mornings. I pick up my supplies. I get cream. I get, you know, the fruit juices that we serve here. And then I’ll come here and make

syrup and make more syrup and make more syrup [*Laughs*]; make chocolate some days. Then I open the doors and make ice because I like to have control of the ice, because I know what's coming out, the product that's coming out of that machine, and I know it's temperamental. They're all temperamental. They all have personalities, believe it or not. You just have to have the right touch with them.

00:33:36

Everybody will come in and say, "Well, anybody can learn that machine." It's like, "Ah, no." It's got to have a certain touch and it's got to, you know, do its thing and you have to work with it. And then we serve customers all day and sometimes I'll go outside and cheat and sit and talk to people and—because I like to talk. And then we go home and start all over again the next day—do housework whenever. [*Laughs*]

00:34:03

SR: Well it's interesting to me that you go shopping at the store. What--what do you buy at the store? You don't get deliveries?

00:34:10

DB: The grapefruit juice, the orange juice, the apple juice. Most of that is just like, you know things that you have 10 of and then you don't have any of. So I do that in the morning or go pick up my extracts, and sometimes I get deliveries delivered to me so I have to be here early and—. So it's--it's a 16-hour day minimum most days.

00:34:35

SR: When you're talking about the juices, do you serve sno-balls with just juice on them?

00:34:41

DB: We serve them with orange juice, apple juice, grape juice, grapefruit juice, for a lot of people that don't want the sweets and don't want their children to eat the sweets, and we have a lot of runners that come in and they don't want the sweets. So you know, we figured we'd compromise; at least give them something that they can enjoy while they're watching somebody else eat the other stuff. And then we have sugar-free flavors also, which the diabetics don't feel like they're left out either. So we try to market to everybody who wants to have a sno-ball.

00:35:13

SR: Did you have sugar-free—did you inherit any sugar-free recipes, or is that all you?

00:35:19

DB: It's all us.

00:35:19

CB: No, actually we didn't inherit any sugar-free recipes at all; nor did they have any natural fruit juices. And--and I evolution(ed) into a more healthy sno-ball with—we started first by serving fruit juices, I guess mostly because that's what we wanted to serve our kids that were here.

00:35:39

DB: Uh-hm, because they were here all day long and they didn't need any more sugar. [*Laughs*]

00:35:42

SR: Right.

00:35:44

CB: And then from that, with the evolution of natural sweet--artificial sweeteners, we have developed some sugar-free flavors. And I withheld from actually making sugar-free flavors because I didn't like the way artificial sweeteners tasted with sno-balls—with the sno-ball syrups. Not until they came around with some of the Splenda and re-development of better-tasting artificial sweeteners have we actually incorporated into sugar-free. And so our sugar-free variety is small, and we only have like five or six flavors, but I can tell you they are the worth the taste. They're better—you cannot tell almost I would say—you cannot tell that it's sugar-free. And we've had customers say, "Is this really sugar-free?" And we tell them, "Yeah, we make it." And we make sure that—even some of the extracts have some sugar in them, so that's why our list is only small.

00:36:51

SR: I see. Now I think I'm getting a handle on exactly how a syrup is made—a syrup that's going to go on a sno-ball is made—but let me just see if I have this correct. So you have an extract or combination of extracts and you add it to a simple syrup that you make?

00:37:15

CB: Right, correct. Now--now some of our flavors, it's--it's a combination of an extract that is specially made for sno-balls and some extracts that you don't find at those sno-ball manufacturers that we go out every day into the real world at the grocery store and buy that extract to mix in with the flavors.

00:37:42

SR: Like something that you would find in the baking aisle?

00:37:44

CB: Right, in the baking aisle or--or something like that.

00:37:47

SR: Okay.

00:37:49

CB: So that's why she's always at the store.

00:37:52

SR: So when you make the sugar-free, do you make a simple syrup out of something like Splenda?

00:37:58

CB: Yes, there is a--there is now a sugar-free mix that is made especially for sno-balls that has not only some of the Splenda in it but it also has some gelatin in it that makes the flavor hang on the ice. Because that was one of the problems with the other previous—the early editions of sugar-free, is that it was so thin that it would just run through the ice and then you couldn't see the color.

00:38:30

SR: But sugar is automatically—I mean, is naturally thicker?

00:38:34

CB: Yeah, sugar has gluten in it, so it's a natural thickening agent into—simple syrup is a natural thickening agent with water, so it hangs on the ice.

00:38:48

SR: Interesting.

00:38:48

CB: And gives it that color.

00:38:50

SR: So we're sitting next to the syrup tank—

00:38:57

CB: Yeah, we make it in—at this time of the year we’re only making 25-gallons at a time. But by the end of the week when we start doing our big festivals—we have the French Quarter Festival and the Jazz and Heritage Festival—we make it by 55-gallons at a time.

00:39:15

SR: How many gallons does this tank hold?

00:39:18

CB: That one holds 25.

00:39:20

SR: And where do you make it?

00:39:24

CB: Those actually we make on-site, the 55-gallons. We make that on-site.

00:39:29

SR: Over a propane burner or—?

00:39:31

CB: No, no, we just use hot water and an industrial mixer and mix it up together and—

00:39:39

DB: Keep stirring ‘til you can't stir no more. *[Laughs]*

00:39:40

CB: Keep stirring ‘til you get it all mixed up.

00:39:45

SR: And here, I don't see an industrial mixer. Do you do it on the stove or do you—?

00:39:48

DB: It's a hot water heater that comes right out the spigot and we do use a drill and spin it with a drill.

00:39:55

CB: It's sitting over there behind the mixer. You see that—?

00:39:58

DB: We used to stir it with this old paddle. *[Laughs]*

00:40:03

CB: Yeah, we used to have a wooden paddle. We still have it.

00:40:06

DB: The wooden paddle is still there.

00:40:07

CB: We still have it. This is our wooden paddle that has been here—this was here when we bought the place.

00:40:12

SR: Wow, I'll have to get a picture of that.

00:40:16

CB: And—

00:40:16

SR: So that's what the previous owners were using to stir their syrup?

00:40:21

CB: Right, right, and now we stir it with this.

00:40:25

DB: With our drill.

00:40:25

SR: I see. It's like a whip attached to a drill.

00:40:30

CB: Right.

00:40:30

SR: Where did you get the attachment?

00:40:33

CB: Well this is actually a paint stirrer but you can't use the galvanized paint stirrer. We had to actually get a stainless steel one, so you know—to put in the water.

00:40:45

DB: We're trying to—you know you'd be stirring forever trying to get 100-pounds of sugar to dissolve into this—.

00:40:50

CB: You can imagine trying to stir a 55-gallon drum of sugar and water with a paddle. [*Laughs*] You have to use some kind of mechanical thing to make it stir up, and that's what we use.

00:41:08

SR: How many pounds of sugar go into the 25-gallon?

00:41:12

CB: Um, it's--it's about 100 pounds that go into that.

00:41:18

DB: At a time.

00:41:18

CB: When we make it in 55-gallons, that's about 300 pounds of sugar to put in a 55-gallon drum.

00:41:25

DB: So we go through a lot of sugar. We keep the sugar mill very happy. *[Laughs]*

00:41:30

SR: You don't pick up your own sugar, I'm guessing.

00:41:31

DB: Sometimes—

00:41:33

CB: Well I have been known to go get it myself. But--but right now we have somebody delivering it to us. But an institution, restaurant, supplier place, and they—when they come that's 30 bags at a time, and that's about a week's supply.

00:41:49

SR: Thirty 100-bags or 50-pounds bags, and you mentioned that you have to sometimes go pick up extracts?

00:41:57

CB: Right.

00:41:59

DB: Yes, I go from the West Bank. I have several different locations that I get them from because, again, I'm picky with what they taste like and how they come out. So I get them from different suppliers, and you know it's just in--in what you know and what you know tastes good.

00:42:18

CB: Let me say that here living in New Orleans, which is an original location of the invention of sno-ball syrups, so we have—here locally there are about four, five extract companies, sno-ball supply companies that make these extracts.

00:42:47

Now if you lived outside of the city you would have to call them up and ask them to ship you what you need. So--so we're fortunate enough to not have to do that and to get—. So with Donna being a personal talker, she likes to actually visit with the proprietor of the sno-ball extract vendor and chat with them, get to know them, and so that—and instead of having any product delivered here, she will go twice, three times, wherever she has to go here locally and drive to go visit with them and pick up her extracts that she needs.

00:43:31

SR: Well, go back to what you were saying a little bit about New Orleans being where sno-balls were invented—do you think?

00:43:37

CB: Yes, the manufacturer of a traditional sno-ball machine is George Ortolano, and George Ortolano, he had his sno-ball—he manufactured the sno-ball machine and had a shop on Magazine Street where he actually assembled the machine. And he sold—in addition to assembling machines, he would sell you the extracts.

00:44:08

I mentioned that Charles Dennery was then an institutional manufacturer that would manufacture all kinds of products nationwide, and they were here locally and they manufactured the extracts that Mr. Ortolano could sell to individual sno-ball shops throughout the world. And so that's where we developed some of our flavors from.

00:44:36

There was another local entrepreneur, Eisenmanns, and Eisenmanns—they at the time didn't have a sno-ball machine that they assembled, but they had a niche where they made their extracts, and they made theirs from scratch, from oils and whatever to make it taste like a sno-ball extract. And so they manufactured their extracts. And so we--we got a working relationship with them and started buying our stuff from them. And--and in the years past, they started manufacturing a machine, so now in the marketplace you have actually two--two manufacturers of sno-ball machines.

00:45:31

The Eisenmann brand has almost disappeared. Mrs. Eisenmann left town after Hurricane Katrina and sold her business to another outfit called Southern Snow. And Southern Snow manufactures the machine and they manufacture their extracts from--from the oils just like Eisenmann's did. And the other local guy here is Sno-Wizard, and Sno-Wizard makes theirs from extracts—I mean and from oils, and he makes his own flavors too.

00:46:03

Charles Dennery actually closed their operation altogether, sold their recipes to an outfit in Covington and they manufacture extracts and sell them to distributors who we buy from.

00:46:20

SR: What is that outfit called?

00:46:25

CB: I don't remember the name of it. It just slips my mind. We buy it under a different brand, you know because they--they're manufacturing it for them and sticking their brand name on it, so I don't know.

00:46:43

SR: So George Ortolano—is that what you said?

00:46:46

CB: Ortolano.

00:46:47

SR: Ortolano, I haven't heard of him. So when was he doing that?

00:46:53

CB: He was here—George Ortolano and--and Ernest—I think it's Ernest Hansen—were the only two manufacturers of sno-ball machines. And Mr. Hansen never—

00:47:16

DB: Amounted to much.

00:47:17

CB: —no, he never produced his machines for--for other people. He only made a machine for his--his own business. George Ortolano, on the other hand, he started producing machines and selling them to other shops so that they could open their sno-ball business.

00:47:33

Now there are--are some other varieties of ice-crushers that make what's commonly known in the other parts of the country as sno-cones. But then--but those sno-cones, the texture of the ice is nothing close to what a sno-ball machine can make. A sno-ball machine is going to make ice like you have snow falling from the sky.

00:48:07

SR: So the machine that you have now—was that bought with the business?

00:48:14

CB: Not the one that's--that we're operating right now. We still have the one that we bought with the business. We replaced it last year.

00:48:26

SR: Is that—was that one Mr. Ortolano's?

00:48:27

CB: That was a George Ortolano original.

00:48:32

SR: Where is that?

00:48:32

CB: We--we have it in the other room. We still have it here. We—we actually have five machines that we have here and—

00:48:43

DB: So when one breaks we just move that one—no. *[Laughs]*

00:48:46

CB: Yeah, when one breaks we just take that one out into the room.

00:48:50

DB: And so I don't know how to fix it. Move it.

00:48:52

SR: Because you do off-site and catering?

00:48:55

DB: Right.

00:48:58

SR: So Mr. Ortolano—did he have a sno-ball stand or he was a machinist?

00:49:02

CB: Yeah, Mr. George actually had a sno-ball stand and just like any evolution he--he no longer operated his sno-ball stand. In the--in the old times, you had the guy that would walk up and down the street and hand-scrape your ice with a hand-scrapers.

00:49:21

SR: Do you have a hand-scrapers?

00:49:23

DB: I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world.

00:49:24

CB: And then Mr. Hansen started with his machine and Mr. George Ortolano started building his machine about the same time. And--and he had a sno-ball stand that he actually built the machine for but then decided just to concentrate on building machines and--and selling the extracts and not operating a stand.

00:49:51

SR: Do you have any idea around what year that would have been that he was making the machines?

00:49:55

DB: Nineteen thirties maybe?

00:49:57

CB: No, it—I'm going to gather around 1940. The stand is here in 1945 and so it was a relatively young thing when Mr. Williams first opened it.

00:50:13

SR: And previous to that it would have just been hand-scraping, like there were sno-balls. I wonder if they were called sno-balls.

00:50:19

CB: Yes, oh yes.

00:50:18

DB: I think they were, yeah.

00:50:20

SR: Yeah, with the hand-scrapers.

00:50:21

CB: Yeah, with the hand-scrapers, because that's the way that you developed the word *sno* and a *ball* because you would hand-scrape it and then scoop it up into a ball and then sell it as a ball of snow.

00:50:35

SR: All right. Wow. I'm getting a history lesson. I like it. And I wonder why all of that happened here. Do you—just theoretically, do you think that it has to do with the weather?

00:50:46

CB: Theoretically is because that was the way to cool off. You know I mean we have some pretty hot sticky summers and so the--the hand-scrapers guy, you know he in those days—the ice man would ride up and down the streets and sell blocks of ice because they didn't have a refrigerator that run on electricity and so he would sell you a block of ice. So this--this other guy would have a block of ice and he would walk up and down the streets and just hand-scrape it and

give you a ball of ice and put some syrup on it that he might have made out of some concoction, and so then that's how that all developed.

00:51:27

And with the development of machines, the idea was to make sno-balls faster.

00:51:36

SR: And it sounds like there is a big extract industry. Does that exist just because of and for sno-balls, or is there—does it go beyond that?

00:51:45

CB: Well the--they use some of the same extracts in candy-making, but like you wouldn't buy this [*Gestures*] bottle as a candy-making [extract], but the guy that's making the banana oils would sell it to a candy-maker who is making banana-whatever candies and so they would use that oil in candies.

00:52:15

SR: So just for people who didn't see you point, you pointed to an imitation banana flavor. So they wouldn't use that in candies but they would use the oil that goes into that flavor?

00:52:27

CB: Right, right.

00:52:30

SR: All right. How many flavors do you have here at the stand?

00:52:34

CB: Well you know—

00:52:35

DB: Seventy—

00:52:37

CB: Yeah, I was going to say that that is a contested question [*Laughs*] because if you count the sign outside—outside it's probably 72. But if you actually really read all of the flavors and add them up it's more like 83 because there are some hidden ones that [are] on one sign but not on the other sign.

00:52:58

SR: What are these stray flavors? Are they ones that you added on?

00:53:00

CB: Well those--those are the new ones that we've added and--and we haven't redone the sign since we bought the stand, so the--the master sign that's on the front of—you know that you order from. And so—

00:53:12

DB: Duct tape on some of the old ones that we can't get anymore and—

00:53:16

CB: So they'll—

00:53:17

DB: We keep saying we need to get a new one but you know you hate to mess with what we've been doing all this time, so we just kind of leave it the way it is.

00:53:27

In fact, I had a guy from California come in one day and he goes, “Wow. I want to open a sno-ball stand because I heard y'all were really good.” He says, “But this building is really antiquated.” That's New Orleans. You know it's a hole in the wall, a big hole in the wall, but that's what everybody knows and that's what everybody likes to see. New Orleans people are very traditional; they don't like changes. They like everything just kind of like—you know after one season you come back and you go, “Oh it's still the same. Okay, everything is good.” You know after Katrina, “Oh, everything is good. Plum Street is open; it's good.” You know so everybody likes that safe way of things.

00:54:10

SR: So you said that you have duct tape over some that you can't get anymore. What are those?

00:54:15

DB: Champagne is one of them.

00:54:17

CB: Champagne, ginger ale, anisette.

00:54:20

DB: Yeah, different things that there is just no way that we could create—.

00:54:27

CB: See and those go back to—anisette, ginger-ale, Champagne—those goes back to the days of Mr. Williams when he would take some concoctions and make something taste like ginger-ale or anisette. And--and in the new modern world we don't, you know—we tried and worked with those but—

00:54:46

DB: Just couldn't do it.

00:54:49

CB: They have some--even some new modern-world sno-ball stands that--that say that their flavors are natural and--and natural flavors, like blueberry or strawberry or natural flavors that they'll sell at different—because they want to be in that natural flavor [business]. We're not that but that would go back to you can't buy that at a grocery store or—so.

00:55:21

DB: Try and wing it. [*Laughs*]

00:55:25

SR: Right. I wonder if you'd even have an audience for something like anisette.

00:55:30

DB: No. [*Laughs*]

00:55:30

CB: You know that is one of the reasons we don't--we're not serving anisette, but anisette was—it's kind of like a licorice flavor and it's interesting. You know it's interesting to order it off the sign, but after about four or five bites you're tired of it.

00:55:50

SR: I'm interested to know your most popular, and then maybe your least popular, or the flavors that you just keep around because you have some regular customers but they're not great sellers—?

00:56:02

CB: Strawberry is the most popular flavor in the world.

00:56:07

DB: And chocolate is really popular.

00:56:09

CB: Chocolate is really popular.

00:56:10

DB: Our chocolate.

00:56:11

CB: Strawberry—to give you an idea, at a particular one-day event at French Quarter Fest or Jazz and Heritage Festival, we sell 55-gallons of strawberry in one day.

00:56:29

SR: Is that because it's more refreshing or it's just people know that?

00:56:34

CB: It's just the—it's just the universal known flavor. Now we use ice cream in a variety of different flavors and so we buy a lot of ice-cream extract. And so—and then we're known for our chocolate, so chocolate is--is one of our signature flavors. And so we--we sell a lot of chocolate too.

00:56:58

SR: So when you say you use a lot of ice cream, you mean ice cream flavoring?

00:57:02

CB: Yeah, the extract ice cream is used in a lot of flavors to get our flavor, so we use a lot of that extract and it makes you think you're selling a lot of ice-cream but--but it's just in a combination of different flavors.

00:57:15

SR: What about some of the less popular ones that you know you have to keep around?

00:57:20

DB: Tootie-fruity and passion fruit.

00:57:23

CB: Cinnamon.

00:57:26

DB: Cinnamon, rum—that's about it.

00:57:30

CB: Well we keep plum—

00:57:34

DB: No, not plum—rum.

00:57:34

CB: —yeah we keep plum here because--because it's Plum Street and it's one of those flavors that—

00:57:43

DB: Are misunderstood.

00:57:43

CB: —it's misunderstood and it's really, really refreshing.

00:57:46

DB: Very delicious.

00:57:49

CB: It--it tastes like a grape, but it's more—it's smoother than grape and it's just a misunderstood flavor. So we don't sell a lot of it but if we can get somebody hooked on it they'll come every day for a plum.

00:58:03

SR: Oh really? I'll try that. And then cinnamon. I noticed the cinnamon when I was walking by and that sounds like something I would like. What kinds of people order cinnamon?

00:58:15

DB: The kids with ironclad stomachs. *[Laughs]* Now we do have a red-hot, which kind of tastes like the cinnamon toothpicks, and we do get adults that get that. And I'm saying, "Are you sure you really want that?" And they go, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah." And they love it you know. It's just—like kind of like violets, those candy violets—either you like them or you don't. And that's—or beer. You know some people grow up drinking beer, some people don't, so—.

00:58:42

SR: What's the difference between the cinnamon and the red-hot?

00:58:46

DB: It's got another—red-hot has got another combination in it with the cinnamon also.

00:58:52

SR: And the rum—does it taste like rum?

00:58:54

DB: Nasty. *[Laughs]* Yeah, not one of my favorites.

00:59:01

SR: Who orders that one?

00:59:02

DB: People that—kids that think they’re going to get some kind of buzz out of it. Or fuzzy navel—woo! [*Laughs*] You know it’s like, “No, no buzz; just the fuzz.”

00:59:13

SR: Do you have a flavor called fuzzy navel?

00:59:15

DB: Uh-huh.

00:59:17

SR: Oh that’s funny.

00:59:18

DB: So it’s kind of peachy, orangey; it kind of tastes like the drink but—

00:59:23

SR: Tell me about the newer king cake flavor. I like the idea of that.

00:59:26

DB: Oh people will come in and say, “Can we get the Mardi Gras flavor?” You know because we’re so Mardi Gras orientated. It was a bunch of us back here playing *mad scientists*. Throwing this, that, and that together, and we said, “Oh, let’s do this and put that in.” And we decided that’s what we’d call it was Mardi Gras. We’ve had it, what, for two years now?

00:59:46

CB: Yeah.

00:59:46

DB: Two years, so it's--it's a new baby.

00:59:49

CB: That was one of those experiments that we--that they sat around and just toyed with this and toyed with that, and then after they toyed with the flavor for a while somebody yelled in the room, "That tastes like king cake!" And that's how we developed that flavor.

01:00:02

SR: What color is it?

01:00:05

DB: Purple. [*Laughs*]

01:00:06

SR: Oh.

01:00:08

CB: Well it's purple today but it depends on who is making it because, like I said, it's a concoction of this and that and--and so if you get heavy-handed with the wrong flavor it might be light brown, like a king cake. You know it can change colors on you.

01:00:21

DB: Depends on which--which hand has gotten in there. [*Laughs*]

01:00:27

SR: Where do you keep your recipes? Do you have a cookbook or in your head?

01:00:30

DB: In my head.

01:00:33

SR: All of them are in your head?

01:00:34

CB: Yes.

01:00:35

DB: We keep saying we're going to write them down but we haven't done so yet. [*Laughs*]

01:00:41

CB: At one time we had--we had a book here that had them all written down and we--we felt—

01:00:47

DB: Brought it home and—

01:00:47

CB: —no, we felt intimidated that somebody might read them and--and write them down so we no longer have the book here. If you work here you--you need to ask us what flavor—how to make it.

01:01:02

SR: So if you need to call in sick, the flavors don't get made?

01:01:06

CB: No, they call us.

01:01:07

DB: They call us and say, “How do you make that? And so we'll try to talk it through them, but 95-percent of the time if I know that I'm not going to be here I'll try and make two batches or what I think that they'll use for that day, and then I'll come in the next day and make it, so that's why I'm here every day because it's all in the brain.

01:01:31

CB: One of the—

01:01:31

DB: I hope my brain doesn't go bad.

01:01:33

CB: —the flavors that we—it's really not a flavor but it's a topping that we have developed that—that we no longer serve out of a can—it's not prepared—is we make our own condensed milk. We make it from scratch from milk and water and sugar and mix it all together and pour it on top of your sno-ball, and it--it is a different tasting flavor than a store-bought can of condensed milk—more like icing than condensed milk.

01:02:04

DB: Some people like it; some people don't. My own children—

01:02:07

CB: —there again, that flavor, it's all in its personality of the person that's making it in how it turns out so we try to be the same person that's got to make it all the time.

01:02:19

SR: Why do you make your own condensed milk?

01:02:21

DB: We found a recipe one day and said, “Hmm, let’s try that. So ever since then—

01:02:27

CB: It’s just the signature that we wanted to develop.

01:02:31

DB: —yeah and we’ve got it. [*Laughs*]

01:02:32

SR: So that wasn’t a Mr. Williams thing?

01:02:35

CB: No, that was not a Mr. Williams thing.

01:02:37

SR: For people who don’t live in New Orleans, I guess we should just say that that is kind of a common topping for a sno-ball, huh?

01:02:45

CB: Yeah.

01:02:45

DB: Right, 95-percent of the people will get condensed milk on top of their sno-ball. Now you can get—

01:02:51

SR: Ninety-five?

01:02:53

DB: Uh-huh, because once they taste it—I’ll say, “Oh, just taste a little bit.” And once they taste it they go, “Oh man, got to have it.” And people will come in and they’ll say, “Can I have extra condensed milk?” So now we put it in a little cup and they pour it at their will whenever they want to. You know they’ll run out of it at the top and then they’ll just pour a little bit more as they eat through the whole sno-ball. [*Laughs*]

01:03:16

CB: We can serve up to two gallons of condensed milk a day.

01:03:21

SR: Is that a cooked product?

01:03:24

DB: Halfway.

01:03:25

CB: Yeah, it's a—

01:03:27

DB: It's a blended.

01:03:27

CB: —it's a blended hot product and it's not actually cooked on the stove, but it's a blended hot—. You have to use something hot—the hot water to blend everything together.

01:03:36

SR: Huh, and does it taste like canned condensed milk?

01:03:38

CB: It has a very similar taste to canned condensed milk. There's just—it's just a little something different about it.

01:03:50

DB: And if you tasted—compared one with the other, you can tell the difference.

01:03:52

CB: You could really tell the difference.

01:03:54

DB: And I've had people come back and say, "Oh, I don't like it." You know because it does have a different taste to it, but that's all right. You know to each his own. I'll give you another sno-ball. You don't like it—but most of the people like it.

01:04:09

SR: What are some other toppings?

01:04:11

DB: Oh whipped cream, strawberry topping, pineapple topping.

01:04:17

CB: Now we don't serve it here at the sno-ball stand, but the--the New World sno-ball stands have soft-serve ice cream and they'll mix it in with their sno-balls. It's very tasteful. We just have enough to do with sno-balls and we haven't included any ice cream products here, but--but in new world shops they use ice cream as a leader to—

01:04:40

DB: A "stuffed sno-ball," and we don't--we don't have to do that to—

01:04:47

CB: To get our customers in.

01:04:47

DB: —to get our customers.

01:04:48

CB: The New World sno-ball stands need that added income to get their customers in, but it is an interesting mix together.

01:04:58

SR: Do you do market research? Do you go to other sno-ball stands?

01:05:01

DB: He does; I don't.

01:05:02

CB: Yes, I constantly go other sno-ball stands.

01:05:02

DB: I'm not interested.

01:05:05

CB: And see what they're doing and taste what theirs is and--and compare prices and—.

01:05:10

DB: My car automatically comes to Plum Street, so—. It doesn't vary. *[Laughs]*

01:05:15

SR: Are there more sno-ball stands in New Orleans today than when you were growing up?

01:05:20

CB: No, there's probably less. You know when I was growing up they were at every corner just like a corner grocery store. And--and now with zoning laws and--and Board of Health requirements and—. I mean you could find them—when I was growing up, you could find them in parking lots and roadside stands and—.

01:05:39

DB: Somebody's yard, next door, you know.

01:05:42

CB: Yeah, you know someone's front yard or whatever. And so there are less sno-ball stands here in the city now but—

01:05:50

DB: But people pass up a lot of sno-ball stands to get—

01:05:50

CB: —it's still pretty popular.

01:05:51

DB: —to get to mine, which is quite a compliment.

01:05:55

SR: Well that's the next thing I was wondering. So today, I think—in my experience there is not a lot of variation in quality. Like you have a couple really good stands and then the rest kind of all taste the same. Was it like that when you were growing up, or was there more variation in quality?

01:06:16

DB: I don't know if it was convenience or quality. You know what I mean? Like they wouldn't go from around the corner if they had a sno-ball stand four blocks away; they're going to go the one that's the closest, which sometimes that outweighs quality and quantity.

01:06:37

CB: You--you're producing a fresh product, so if your product is not constantly rotating, just like in a restaurant, it--it changes its taste. And so here the product is turning over quickly, so—but at a neighborhood stand that's not well-known, that product might sit on the shelf for two weeks, three weeks before it's actually used and it's changing. It's fermenting, and you know it's doing its natural thing, and so in order to prevent that you have to put preservatives. We don't put any preservatives in our flavors. Our flavors are rotating fast enough that we don't need preservatives.

01:07:18

But if you have some roadside stand or just some--some backyard stand and you're letting your flavors sit on the shelf and you don't have any preservatives in it, your--your sugar water is beginning to turn into wine. And so your flavors are going to taste different.

01:07:42

DB: Nasty. [*Laughs*]

01:07:44

SR: Yeah. How many sno-balls will you sell at the stand on the busiest day of the summer?

01:07:51

DB: Shew.

01:07:51

CB: That's hard to—. You know I don't think we've actually sat down and figured that out.

01:07:57

DB: Don't have time. [*Laughs*]

01:08:00

CB: But one comment that I've always made is that I can order 10,000 spoons a week and still have to order 10,000 the next week.

01:08:10

DB: In the beginning of the early months people are real traditional, and I know I say that a lot in New Orleans but they are. They start off going, going, going, going, and then their life gets busy as the season—towards the end of the season, which is we open in March and we close in about the middle of October. So summertime is relax time. And then when school starts back in September, you know everybody gets into the mode of, “Okay, I can't do this. I got to do that.” So their--their gears are for school and getting their order back in order of doing this, going to school, getting the kids, and then you know sno-balls just kind of drop off the list, should I say. So summertime is—March, April, May, June is fun time and we're classified as fun.

01:09:12

SR: What do you do in your off-season?

01:09:16

DB: Clean house that I didn't clean all summer and be with my grandchildren, and we started taking vacations which we haven't done in a long time because we were, you know, busy raising children and doing things like that. We've all kind of narrowed it down; the two of us worked two jobs for 26 years and we're kind of just mainstreaming sno-balls. And we do catering when we close in October, but you know it's here and there. It's not anything—so we're really off for like two months. And then we start back with a bang. *[Laughs]*

01:09:55

SR: Yeah. You were telling me, Donna, before we started recording, some romance stories with sno-balls and crazy things that have happened with customers and sno-balls. Could you go into that?

01:10:08

DB: Oh sure. It must have been, hmm, maybe 25 years ago, I had a gentleman that came in the stand and asked me—what his name, I honestly couldn't tell you because I know flavors by people; I don't know names. And he came in and he said, "I've got this engagement ring for my girlfriend. I've got it in this little Ziploc bag, and I want you to put it in the bottom of a large pail. Well a large pail is, what, 16-ounces?"

01:10:33

CB: It's a lot of sno-ball.

01:10:33

DB: It's a lot of sno-ball. So we threw it in the bottom of the pail. And she came in and we were making the sno-balls and we got her flavor and they went outside and they were sitting on the bench. And we knew that the engagement ring was at the bottom of the pail. And she kept saying, "I can't finish it; it's just so much. I'm just going to throw it away." And we're all going, "No, don't throw it away!" We're thinking to ourselves, "Oh man." We kept peeking outside and checking to see if she discovered the ring.

01:11:04

So finally he—he finally had to tell her look: “Keep digging in the bottom of the pail and you’ll find something.” Well low and behold, ah, it was all exciting and you know we went out and we congratulated them. And they continue to come back with their three children to this day. You know they come in and they say, “Donna, you’re still here.” It’s like, “Where am I going to go,” you know? I’m still here and you’re coming back. So they come back and they tell their kids the story that their dad gave the mom the ring and it’s so sweet.

01:11:38

Then we have you know brides and grooms getting married up at the church and they’ll come in in their bridal gown and get a sno-ball and—

01:11:47

SR: Hopefully not spill.

01:11:48

DB: Hopefully—yeah, hopefully not spill. At that point they—you know they’ve already done their big thing and—

01:11:54

SR: Do you remember the flavor of the engagement ring sno-ball?

01:11:57

DB: No, I sure don’t. I wish I—it was probably almond cream, which is our wedding cake. But we’ve had people come in from—

01:12:06

SR: Wedding cake flavor?

01:12:09

DB: Yes, yes, wedding cake flavor. But you know you get all kinds of people. I mean we get celebrities. We get basketball players, NBA basketball players. We get the Mayor. We get uncountless people—singers in bands locally here in New Orleans. Now we have a Wall of Fame that we have them sign our pails. We have news broadcasters come in, and Frank Davis, who is on Channel 4, and you know just all kind of people. You just never know—the Mayor of Kenner. We’ve gotten everybody from high class to, you know, just everyday normal people, which makes it fun. And we try to treat them just like them, you know. Everybody is the same, which makes it fun. You just never know who is going to show up—in a limousine or not. **[Laughs]**

01:13:06

SR: Right. What about—did y'all flood here with Katrina?

01:13:10

DB: No; we lucked out. I--I call it we were the top of the ant hill because we got no damage. Now a few months later they had a tornado that hit and it hit across the street, down the block, and that way, and missed us. So I figure we have guardian angels watching over us, which is great because we were freaking out when we saw trailers and insulation on the trees. And I’m thinking, “Oh please, don’t let anything happen to my building.” You know that’s your lifeline

and you try to protect it, but you know we lucked out again. And we count our blessings every day that things have worked out the way they have—good life, good people, and we just keep on going.

01:14:02

SR: Did you open up that year after Katrina at the same pace?

01:14:04

DB: We did, we did. People were coming back to the city. In fact they had a bunch of looting a block away from us and the neighbor down the street happened to stay during Katrina and they were coming to loot the sno-ball stand. And he had his shotgun out and said, “You guys keep on walking.” So he saved the sno-ball stand from being looted. So you know, and then people started coming back and they’re going, “Oh, this is normalcy. Plum Street is open again.” You know they feel like everything is going to be okay, so that’s quite a compliment when you know things are looked at that way.

01:14:44

SR: What is the best part of running the stand, and the most stressful part?

01:14:52

DB: Being married; no. [*Laughs*] Who is the boss probably is the most stressful thing because I do it my way and he wants it done his way. So we kind of clash pretty regular, but you know 35 years of marriage, you’re going to clash at something, so what do you do?

01:15:09

CB: There's two times of the year that we're most--most appreciative, and that's the day we close for that season and the day we reopen. And the day we close we're more appreciative that we're going to be on vacation for the next three months. On the day we reopen it's that we're going to get to see all of our friends.

01:15:28

DB: Yeah, I mean they're like family. You've been around them 35 years—I mean 32 years, whatever. And--and when they move away it's like, "Where did they go?" You know during the winter we miss them. I'll see them on the street and they go, "Hey, sno-ball lady!" And it's just a hoot because as long as you call me something nice it's good. You know so **[Laughs]** we've developed babies that have been in the womb; they go away to college; they'll come here their first day with their driver's license: "Look, Miss Donna. I got my driver's license. Guess where I came to? Plum Street!" So it's like I have 30,000 kids. **[Laughs]** It makes it fun.

01:16:07

SR: What about when you all tire out? Is there anyone in your family that's as devoted as you are to keeping this place going?

01:16:16

DB: Hopefully our children. **[Laughs]** You know because we've busted our butts for 30 years and we'd hope to continue on the legacy of what we've tried to build up.

01:16:29

CB: Our oldest daughter right now, she runs our office and coordinates all of our phone calls and bookings and scheduling and all of that, so she would probably be the most likely that would be—and the only of our three daughters that live here locally. My other two daughters figured out how--how not to have to work here every day and they left town.

01:16:58

DB: Because it *is* work.

01:17:00

CB: And they didn't leave too far because if I really get in a jam they only live within two hours and they'll be back.

01:17:06

SR: Yeah. Well you were saying they come back for Jazz Fest and French Quarter Fest.

01:17:09

DB: Right, right, yeah, they know where their bread is buttered. [*Laughs*]

01:17:15

SR: Let me see what I—I jotted down a couple things I wanted to make sure to ask, and I know you probably need to get going to your day. Oh, two things about you two: Where did y'all grow up? I didn't ask that.

01:17:31

DB: I grew up in Metairie and I knew nothing about sno-balls, Plum Street anyway. And he, since he came here, he said, “Donna, this is the place to buy.” And I’m thinking, “Oh no, what did he get me into?” I mean we had a line to the corner and it was him and I when we first bought it and I said, “We just can't move fast enough.” So that’s when we started recruiting friends and family and you know made it to be fun. But then we’ve had kids that come in one day and said, “Oh, I’m not coming back here. It’s too much work.” They never come back.

01:18:04

CB: Yeah, yeah. I--I grew up in the neighborhood. My family home was around the corner from Tulane University, which is just up the road from here, and I attended Lusher Elementary as a child and went to McMinn, and so I--I knew—this was my stomping grounds. When the opportunity came, I didn't turn it down.

01:18:35

SR: Then my other question is: What are your favorite flavors? Do you still eat sno-balls, and what are your favorite flavors?

01:18:45

CB: Like I said before, my favorite flavor is the mood of the day, and so I have about—I don't know—maybe a collection of 10 or 12 of them that I rotate from day to day.

01:18:59

If I really want a pick-me-up, it's--it's got to be iced coffee. It's like frozen cappuccino, and I like it with a little bit of chocolate on the top and make it into a mocha cream. And if I'm really trying to be thirst-quenching, I've got to get the sugar-free pink lemonade with a splash of strawberry on top.

01:19:16

Before I made sugar-free pink lemonade, it used to be the natural fruit juice of grapefruit juice with a splash of watermelon top. And so occasionally I will go--go retro and go back to that flavor.

01:19:35

I've recently fell in love with cherry, and strawberry is always a favorite. And I have some new ones: mango and--and kiwi together; some of the clear ones, if I feel like a clear day, I'll go clear strawberry or clear raspberry.

01:19:54

SR: Tell me about that. Why do you have clear?

01:19:55

CB: Well--well the parents really derived that. You know they're trying to--to give their child a flavor that they won't wear the rest of the day. So those flavors, they taste like the other flavors

but they just don't have any food coloring in them. And they're pretty tasty, and--and so like I said, if I'm on a clear day and I feel like I'm a clear day I'll be in a clear flavor.

01:20:23

DB: Me, on the other hand, I'm not a big sno-ball eater. I'm not a big sweet eater.

01:20:29

CB: So if hers has Budweiser in it, that's probably the one that she'll get.

01:20:32

DB: *[Laughs]*

01:20:34

CB: Even though we're not making a Budweiser flavor but—.

01:20:37

DB: But I do like strawberry. I will add strawberry and ice and add lots of water and kind of make it a strawberry drink. But my—my really favorites are half-orchid and half-coconut-cream, and half-cream-ice-cream and half-almond-cream, which is wedding cake. That's about it; I'm not a big—. You know people will come in and say all the time, "What's your favorite flavor?" And I'm thinking to myself, "Nothing." Sometimes I say that, which I probably shouldn't, but you know—or they'll come in and try to put two flavors together and I'm saying, "Oh you really don't want to put those two flavors together. They're going to taste nasty." *[Laughs]*

01:21:18

SR: Well yeah. I guess that was my—I was going to ask: Is there a combination that people come in and get regularly that you just don't understand?

01:21:26

DB: Oh, they get cinnamon and chocolate or grape and chocolate. Grape and chocolate I can understand because it kind of tastes like a tootsie-pop, but these kids have ironclad stomachs and they'll just put anything together. Or they'll say, "How many flavors can you get on top of it?" Me, I'll say, "Three. That's it. That's the max." So but it's--it's quite interesting what their stomachs can allow.

01:21:50

CB: You know at one time we had a flavor called toxic waste. We no longer have it but it--it was a combination of about six or eight different flavors that just tasted like toxic waste.

01:22:03

DB: It looked like it too. [*Laughs*]

01:22:03

CB: And it was really popular with the kids but we just eliminated the--the flavor.

01:22:08

DB: We ran out of space and got—

01:22:10

SR: How did you come up with that?

01:22:12

CB: It was just a mix.

01:22:13

DB: One of those days.

01:22:14

CB: One of those days you're sitting around and, "Let's mix this and mix that."

01:22:16

DB: When it rains and we have nothing to do, which is rare, and we just—

01:22:20

CB: We sit around and mix flavors.

01:22:19

DB: "Okay, taste this. Put that in a spoon and we'll taste that, and—"

01:22:22

CB: So the word came out of the discussion, “Well that tastes like toxic waste.” And we said—
and we started doing that one for a summer and then—

01:22:33

SR: The rainy days give you something to do?

01:22:33

DB: Right, right, right.

01:22:35

SR: Do you stay open when it rains?

01:22:37

CB: Basically unless it’s flooding.

01:22:39

DB: Like the other night when it was—I looked out and it was knee-deep.

01:22:45

CB: Here in New Orleans you have, you know, you’ll have your typical little rainy sprinkles all
day long or you’ll either have a gully washer. And a gully washer is just too much to handle—

the surface drainage area—and so you'll have water from street to street and it's just well better you go home.

01:23:02

DB: Because nobody is coming out in it anyway. One night I was sitting here and I kept saying, you know it's raining, it's thundering, it's lightning and it's raining and it's raining and it's raining. And I looked outside and there was water coming past the bench up to the building and I said, "No wonder nobody is coming down the street. I need to get out of here." *[Laughs]* I said, "It's time for me to close the doors and get out." You know and it's like, "Hello!" *[Laughs]* The bell didn't ring. I was just busy doing busywork. You know if there's nobody here we have things to do. And I was just busy piddling and doing—and I kept thinking, "There's nobody coming in." And I walked out and looked out the front door and went, "Yeah, it's time to close the door." *[Laughs]*

01:23:44

CB: Now the building has never flooded, not even in Katrina. The floods--the floods, like she said, we live on—we're on an ant hill. The Katrina floodwaters only stopped four blocks away.

01:23:59

DB: Scary.

01:23:59

CB: My father explained to me early, early that when developers actually build the street, the reason they build the street lower with the curb is because it is part of the drainage. You have your sub-surface drainage and then you have the curb from street to street. And so it is very, very real to true that we will have water from curb to curb on a gully washer day.

01:24:28

SR: Wow. What would y'all say to someone who decides that they want to make a living selling sno-balls?

01:24:36

CB: Be persistent. This is—this business is like a small restaurant, and if you go into the business with that mentality—that you're running a small restaurant—it's very seasonal and so you have to prepare yourself that there are times that you're not going to make money because it's so seasonal. And then when--when the season is ripe, you need to be in it with two feet and running.

01:25:05

DB: And be there all the time.

01:25:07

CB: And be there all the time just like if you were running a restaurant.

01:25:10

DB: Because nobody runs your business like you do. You got to put your heart and soul in it. Some days better than others, but you got to love it. *[Laughs]*

01:25:26

SR: Well thank you for giving me your time. I think we should wrap this up. You've got 50-pound bags of sugar to deal with. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

01:25:34

DB: Thank you very much.

01:25:37

[End Claude & Donna Black-Plum Street Interview]