



Sonthe Burge
Holy Trinity + Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church
Birmingham, AL

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Interviewer: Michelle Little
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:03.17]

Michelle L.: All right. Today is August 6, 2019, and this is Michelle Little. I'm interviewing Sonthe Burge for the Southern Foodways Alliance project. We're here in Sonthe's home in Birmingham, Alabama. To get started, if you'll just give us your full name and date of birth, for the record.

[00:00:25.03]

Sonthe B.: My full name is Sonthe Bokas Burge, and my date of birth is 12-21-1957. And my place of birth is Pensacola, Florida. I was born in Pensacola, Florida.

[00:00:39.10]

Michelle L.: All right. Will you tell me a little bit about growing up in Pensacola, a little bit about your family growing up?

[00:00:45.17]

Sonthe B.: Well, I grew up in Pensacola, Florida, and it was great. Pensacola was where I was born, and then we lived there about three years. Then my father, who's a pharmacist—I'm the daughter of a pharmacist and a school teacher—and my dad wanted to open a drug store in Gulf Breeze. At the time, Gulf Breeze was just a little town with a post office, not even a traffic light. Then you drove through it on the way to Pensacola Beach. There was a small, two-lane bridge that crossed the Three Mile Bay, and my father and mom were some of the very first residents of Gulf Breeze. They built the house in Gulf Breeze

probably in 1960, and so we moved to Gulf Breeze, and my dad opened a drugstore there. I grew up, I'd lived my whole life in Gulf Breeze. Went to Gulf Breeze Elementary, Gulf Breeze Middle School, Gulf Breeze High School, and worked at my dad's drug store. So, it was really a lot of fun in a small town, like I said, with no traffic light and three miles from the beach. So, after school, we'd ride our bikes to the beach or spend a whole lot of time out there. Lot of outdoor time, lot of water fun.

[00:01:58.27]

Michelle L.: Did you have brothers and sisters?

[00:02:00.20]

Sonthe B.: I do. I have a brother, he's younger. And his name is Victor Bokas. And Victor lives in Orlando. We grew up in a very traditional Greek family, so my parents were born in this country, but all of my grandparents were born in Greece. They, when I was about nine, my mother's dad—his name is George Anetopolous, he came to live with us. So, first of all, we were a little different than everybody else in Gulf Breeze because, obviously, I was the only Sonthe. And my mother's name is Aspasia. People—then we had Victor. My dad had the most common name, which is George. But we grew up in a really close-knit Greek family where food was really important. Both of my grandfathers were restaurant people and in the food business. They loved to cook a lot. That was a lot of fun. I got a lot of inspiration and early education from them two in the kitchen.

[00:03:05.05]

Michelle L.: Did you grow up in Greek Orthodox Church?

[00:03:09.10]

Sonthe B.: I did, yes. There was a Greek Orthodox church in Pensacola, and that's the church that I grew up in. I was baptized in that church and got married in that church, actually by the same priest, Father Constantine **Lefteris**. He was there and he baptized me and married Greg and I when we got married in 1980 in that church.

[00:03:27.25]

Michelle L.: So, you were just talkin' about some of the food growing up, but what were some of your favorite family traditions centered around food maybe, or what were some of the favorite dishes you might remember from your childhood?

[00:03:42.28]

Sonthe B.: Well, it's funny, because Greek cooking is very fresh and really clean. Like my mother never made a casserole and there were really no processed foods in our house. Everything was very fresh. So, I remember a lot of Greek chicken that was basically chicken with butter and lemon and garlic and fresh herbs from oregano and that sort of thing. A lot of rice, a lot of yogurt, a lot of salad, a lotta greens. A typical Greek salad does not have lettuce in it. It would be tomatoes and cucumbers with onions and feta cheese. There was a little Greek market that was right across the street from our church, and we would go there. As soon as you walked in the door, you smelled feta. You know? But we had our own— we had a garden in Florida, and we had cucumbers and tomatoes.

My grandfather, we loved to garden. I grew up loving to grow things. Kids just like that. And so we would make salads from all of our veggies that we grew, and then we would have the real traditional, like what I call fancy Greek, [Laughter] things like the *moussaka* or the *pastitsio*, the Greek grape leaves *dolmades*, *spanakopita*, *tiropita*, gosh. Baklava. My mom made all these things, and my grandmother would come over and help or the grandfather would be in the house. A friend from church would come over. When you prepare these meals, it's almost like you're cooking for an army. Your whole entire—not only your kitchen gets dirty, I think your whole entire house gets dirty. [Laughter] You know, things are . . . we'd have pastries that would be cooling on the dining room table and bread that would be rising in the laundry room. You know? Over the dryer.

[00:05:39.28]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] That's great. So it's the whole family is helping cook, or was it mostly your mom in the kitchen?

[00:05:48.26]

Sonthe B.: Well, when my grandfather came to live with us, he was a huge help, 'cause he was a restaurant man. So, Mom was in the kitchen a lot. I was always in there whenever I could. I just, I loved it. So, my grandfather, my mom, and I—my brother wasn't that much into the cooking. He was an artist; he still is an artist. So, he likes just to paint and draw and design. That's really his gifts. But I really like to cook. So, I started at a really young age in the kitchen. They would always just let me help. Even if I made a mess; I

never got in trouble. It was like, "Oh, that's okay. Let's do this." So, I think my mom was just real positive, and my grandfather was, too, and encouraging. So, it just stuck.

[00:06:38.07]

Michelle L.: What was one of the first dishes you remember learning?

[00:06:41.02]

Sonthe B.: Well, the first dish that I made, it wasn't a Greek dish. It was French toast. [Laughter]

But probably, things like the *koulourakia*, the cookies that we make for the Greek food festival. Those are some cookies that I used to make a lot. My mom still makes those, and I do, too. Even the baklava. When I got married, Mom and I made eight pans for my wedding. [Laughter]

[00:07:14.05]

Michelle L.: You cooked the food for your wedding?

[00:07:15.04]

Sonthe B.: Well, we just made the baklava. We made eight pans of baklava for our wedding.

[00:07:20.08]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:07:21.21]

Sonthe B.: And making the baklava is not that labor-intensive, but it's the cutting and cupping that takes so long, because you make it in a huge sheet pan and it's layers of phyllo and butter and then the nuts, so that's the easy part. But the hard part is actually havin' to cut each piece, take it out, put it in the cup, and then you have all that syrup and nuts and everything gets on your fingers. It's messy and it's time-consuming. So, that's really where a lot of the labor is, in cutting it and cupping it.

[00:07:53.00]

Michelle L.: Okay. And by cupping—I mean, could you explain if someone's never made baklava before? 'Cause I don't know what cupping—

[00:08:00.18]

Sonthe B.: So, you're gonna make it in a big sheet pan, and you take a whole sheet of phyllo dough—which is probably like a 9x12 or even larger—and once you've put it all together, assembled it, then you take a knife and you score the phyllo. So, you go ahead and you cut your pieces all the way through, because you don't want to cut it after you've baked it. Because then the phyllo will crack and crumble. So, we cut it while the phyllo is moist, with all that butter on it. So, out of one pan, you may have eighty to a hundred pieces, depending on the size of your pan. And you want your lines to be straight. So, there's all kind of little tricks that you would put toothpicks on the ends and try to draw a line all the way through with dental, or even attach dental floss and then make your cut line on that. But my mom has this knife that her father gave her from the Alice Cafe. That was the name of his restaurant in Greenwood, Mississippi. So, he had a little restaurant called the

Alice Cafe. She has this knife that looks like a sword. It is so big, and it honestly will fit across a half-sheet pan. So, we make our baklava in that half-sheet pan, and then she can take that knife and just, in one swoosh, cut one whole vertical length. [Laughter]

[00:09:20.04]

Michelle L.: Oh, my gosh.

[00:09:22.01]

Sonthe B.: So Mom's always said, "Don't let anything happen to this knife." Seriously! Because that's the hardest part, is trying to cut a straight line. At our church, actually, because we make so many pans of baklava—we make thousands of pieces, hundreds of pans—that Stephanie Dikis and her father made a grid that will fit over a full sheet pan. And it's a metal grid, and it's a cutter. It's like a huge baklava cutter. It was brilliant. So, we use that at church.

[00:09:58.02]

Michelle L.: And he just made it—himself?

[00:09:58.29]

Sonthe B.: Make the baklava in the whole sheet pan. Yeah, they designed it and built it themselves. Or had somebody build it. But they designed it, and you get perfect, uniform sizes. So, it's wonderful, because we're making hundreds and hundreds of pans. And like I said, that's the hardest part. But then we still have to go back with a knife and kind of

re-score each piece, go all the way down, carefully lift it up, so that you don't so that it'll look really pretty, even when we put it in the paper cup. So, that's what the cupping is.

We're putting it in a paper cup.

[00:10:32.09]

Michelle L.: Gotcha. Okay.

[00:10:33.21]

Sonthe B.: And then we're putting it in a box to pack, or in the display case or tray to be sold.

[00:10:40.00]

Michelle L.: Oh, my gosh. [Laughter] So, you said your grandfather's restaurant was in Mississippi . . .

[00:10:46.08]

Sonthe B.: Right. It was in Greenwood, Mississippi.

[00:10:51.12]

Michelle L.: Okay. And how did he end up in Mississippi?

[00:10:52.10]

Sonthe B.: You know, it's a long story, and I'm not sure I can connect all the dots, but I know that when he came from Greece, he came to New York through Ellis Island. And he had

some family in New York and stayed there for a while, but there was also some friends and some family he knew in Memphis. So, he went, he was there in Memphis and I think, from Memphis, somehow ended up in Mississippi. In Greenwood, Mississippi. I need to—that's a good question. I need to go back and research that and connect those dots. [Laughter] I know there was also—so, I feel like that's pretty much, it was New York to Memphis, Memphis to Greenwood.

[00:11:39.11]

Michelle L.: And how long did he have Alice's, the restaurant there?

[00:11:42.18]

Sonthe B.: Gosh, I don't know. I mean, probably . . . so, he retired when I was nine. And I mean, had it from the time my mom was born. I mean, right after she was born, probably. I mean, I bet he had it for forty-somethin' years.

[00:12:03.13]

Michelle L.: Wow. Was it a lot of traditional Greek dishes?

[00:12:05.05]

Sonthe B.: No, it was more just like a meat and three. They had the little booths, you know, that you went and sat in. And so, I remember goin' there a few times, but again, my recollection's not that great, because when I was there, I was five or six or seven. [Laughter]

[00:12:26.15]

Michelle L.: Right, right. So, you grew up in Florida, and then how did you end up in Alabama?

Take me through . . .

[00:12:34.15]

Sonthe B.: Okay. So, after Gulf Breeze High School, I went to the University of Florida for college. Actually, I went to Pensacola Junior College for a couple'a years, and then went to University of Florida. But my plan was to be a pharmacist, because I loved workin' at the drug store. I always really liked science and math, and so I really thought that pharmacy would be a good match for me. It was somethin' I liked, and I loved the way my dad had his drugstore and the relationships he had with his customers and all of that. I was startin' off in pharmacy and in chemistry, and then my sophomore year at Pensacola Junior College, I took a nutrition course as an elective. So, after that course—or during that process—I realized that I would rather teach people how to eat right to stay well, instead of givin' them pills when they're sick. So, I went home and told my parents. I said, "I really don't want to do pharmacy. I really want to go into nutrition." And so they were fine. And it was funny, though; when I graduated, my dad loved to tell me that he sent me to Florida to be a pharmacist and I graduated a farmer. [Laughter]

[00:13:48.03]

Michelle L.: A farmer!

[00:13:49.07]

Sonthe B.: 'Cause in nutrition at Florida was in the College of Agriculture. So, my Bachelor of Science is from the College of Agriculture. It's food science and human nutrition. So, after that, I went to Florida State to get a master's, because at the time, I knew I wanted to be a registered dietician. There were really only two routes to become a registered dietician; you could do a dietetic internship, or you could do a master's degree and have work experience. Well, since I decided in the middle of my college career that I wanted to be a dietician, I was really—I was kinda behind, I wasn't on the right track to get the internship. I applied for a couple of internships, and at the time, you could only apply for two. Like now, you can apply . . . students graduating with degrees in nutrition can apply, I think, for as many as they want. But I can only—at the time in 1979, you could only apply for two, and I didn't get either one. So, I had to go with the other option. So, I went to Florida State and started my master's there, and I did some work for a professor named Eleanor Whitney. She wrote textbooks, and her textbook was called, *Understanding Nutrition*. So, I was her graduate assistant, and I really just loved the way she could take nutrition and make it easy for everybody to understand. So, I've always—she sort of planted that seed in me. She was really one of my first mentors. I thought, "This is what I want to do. It's not that complicated." Even though the courses were. Nutrition about chemistry and all of that science that we had to take, but how does it translate into real life, practical stuff? That's what Dr. Whitney was so good at. Well, she was one of the professors—well, the head of the department, this is kind of a different story—she decided, she took a job at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. So, when she came and told me that was transferring, at the time, my boyfriend at the time, Greg, was

livin' in Jacksonville. So I thought, "Well, can I go with you?" [Laughter] She said, "Well, let me look into it." She came back several weeks later and she said, "Yes. You can transfer and you'll be in the College of Allied Health Services, but you can do your master's." And she was a registered dietician, the professor that was goin' to be head of this new department. Anyway, so that's what I did. So, I transferred to Jacksonville. Well, anyway, Greg and I got married before we moved to Jacksonville, and I finished my master's. So, I got married in [19]80. He had already graduated, had been workin' in Jacksonville for a year. I started workin' with the Public Health Department, the Duval County Public Health Department with the W.I.C. Program while I was finishin' my master's. He decided, durin' that year, to go to law school and started applying to law schools. And was accepted at Cumberland. So, that's what brought us to Birmingham. So, basically, the day I finished my master's program, we packed up and drove to Birmingham for Greg to start law school. So, he started in . . . I guess September of 1981. And I started working at U.A.B. at that time. What I had to do—I had my master's behind me, but I had to get six months' of work experience in order to qualify to sit for the exam. So, there are a lot of hoops you had to jump through. So, luckily, at the time, Sandra Dillon was the director of dietetics at U.A.B., and she had this position in food service. I did not have any food service experience and I really needed it, so I took the job. What's so crazy is, the job was—at the time—it was the worst job I ever had. Like, I hated this job. I had to be at work at 4:45 in the morning, and I got off at 2. All right? So, we did all the preparation—it was called the East Base Kitchen in Jefferson Towers at U.A.B., and we prepared all the food for the hospital beds, for the hospital patients. All the food was prepared out of this kitchen, and this is in [19]81. So, I was getting up—basically, I was

getting up and going to work when Greg was going to bed after studyin' and bein' in law school. We would pass each other. I would walk out the door and see him still at his desk, and it was hilarious. It's hilarious now, it wasn't then. But what's so funny is, I did that for about nine months and then I said, I gotta—I want to do something else. So, I did that and had all the requirements I needed to sit for the exam. I sat for the exam, took it, and passed it, thank goodness. I guess in April of now maybe [19]82 is when I became a registered dietician officially. And I went to Sandra and said, "I want a clinical position. Please. Just anything." And she said, "Well, the next position that comes open is yours." And luckily, it was only a couple'a weeks, and one of the girls that was a clinical dietician was going to be head of dietetics at Children's Hospital. So, I was able to take her position. So, I worked there for several years, until I had my first child. And took a break from that.

[00:19:31.14]

Michelle L.: Wow. You said that was called the East Bay or the—

[00:19:34.11]

Sonthe B.: Well, no. East Base, B-a-s-e. That's what it was referred to then. It was in Jefferson Towers, but it was referred to as East Base for some crazy reason. I don't know.

[00:19:45.09]

Michelle L.: That's—the dogs are barking, in case the transcriptionist hears that.

[00:19:52.09]

Sonthe B.: Maybe, I might go and let them out and they may be quiet.

[00:19:57.14]

Michelle L.: Okay, sure.

[00:19:57.14]

Sonthe B.: I'm going to do that.

[00:20:00.10]

Michelle L.: Let's try that. We're gonna take a brief intermission to let the dog out.

[00:20:19.24]

Sonthe B.: Sorry.

[00:20:20.29]

Michelle L.: That's okay.

[00:20:23.02]

Sonthe B.: [Inaudible 00:20:25]

[00:20:39.28]

Michelle L.: And so, to become registered—you said you had to work in the food service industry, so there were a lot of different types of . . . internships that you had to . . .

[00:20:51.05]

Sonthe B.: Well, right. There are several competencies that have to be completed. So, dietetics is such a huge umbrella, basically. You have the clinical aspect, which most people are familiar with; you have the public health community. [Dog howls] Oh, dogs again. Let's take a break and then we'll put them out.

[00:21:13.18]

Michelle L.: Okay. We're gonna put the dogs back out. [Laughter]

[00:21:16.00]

Sonthe B.: Goodness gracious. This is what I did not want to have happen. What are y'all doing?

[Inaudible 21:23:14] You're never this bad! Let's see, where am I gonna take you girls.

[Inaudible 21:35:24] Sorry.

[00:22:24.00]

Michelle L.: That's okay.

[00:22:25.29]

Sonthe B.: Okay. We can start with that question over again, and that way, you can just delete that—

[00:22:31.01]

Michelle L.: We were talkin' about the different internships and different competencies for completing . . .

[00:22:37.10]

Sonthe B.: Right. So, right. So, there are these competencies that have to be completed. Like I mentioned, there's the clinical, the public health, the community. There's food service administration, management, that type of thing. So, that's why I was in the kitchen, learning the food service. [Coughs]

[00:22:57.10]

Michelle L.: Okay. You said, at your first university, the department was housed within agriculture?

[00:23:06.04]

Sonthe B.: Um-hm.

[00:23:06.04]

Michelle L.: Is that still the way it's structured at some universities, or has it split off into its own—is nutrition and dietetics usually its own entity now, or is it still . . .

[00:23:21.20]

Sonthe B.: No. Usually, the Department of Food Nutrition or Food Science and Human Nutrition is housed in another major college. So, like at Florida, I'm pretty sure it's still in Agriculture. I'd have to double check on that. If they have a Human Science, that might be the case. I know at Auburn, it's in Human Science. At Stanford, it's in the College of Public Health. So, it'll be housed in one of these other, larger colleges. You know, when you think about dietetics as a whole, we're fairly new to the game. When you think about it. I mean, I think there are about seventy thousand dieticians, compared to hundreds of thousands of nurses and doctors and other professionals. So, our profession's growing, which is wonderful for us. I feel like these programs are getting larger and there's more and more interest; young people getting more and more interested in food and nutrition.

[00:24:20.07]

Michelle L.: Hm. Well, that's exciting.

[00:24:20.24]

Sonthe B.: It is, it is.

[00:24:23.09]

Michelle L.: So you ended up in—you settled in Birmingham after your husband decided to stay here for his career. [Laughter]

[00:24:30.20]

Sonthe B.: Right, yes. So, we always thought we'd go back to Gulf Breeze, because actually, we met in high school. Even though we did not really date until our senior year. We both went to our senior prom together because neither of us had a date and we were really good friends. So, we went together. And Greg went to Florida State, I ended up at Florida, but we reconnected when I was at Florida State. We always thought—or at least I kinda hoped—that we would end up in Gulf Breeze. But they say Lady Justice is a jealous mistress or whatever. [Laughter] So, Greg's law practice kept him here in Birmingham. We've been in Birmingham for thirty-eight years, so Birmingham is home. This is where all of our children have been born. I've been a member of this church—our church—Holy Trinity Holy Cross since we moved here in [19]81. Almost for thirty-eight years as well. So, it's definitely home. We like it here.

[00:25:31.23]

Michelle L.: And has the congregation grown a good bit since you started attending Holy Trinity?

[00:25:38.08]

Sonthe B.: It really has. The congregation has grown, and there's been changes, really positive changes. It's a really vibrant and wonderful faith community to be a part of.

[00:25:52.20]

Michelle L.: So, the food festival, when did the Greek food festival start? Was it . . . ?

[00:26:00.27]

Sonthe B.: Well, I mean, I have to check on that for sure. I know we're getting close to fifty years. I mean, we're getting really close. I think we're in the high 40s now. It's really close. It's been—I don't think we've had the fiftieth anniversary. I think I would have remembered that. [Laughter]

[00:26:17.24]

Michelle L.: Right, right.

[00:26:19.14]

Sonthe B.: So, the festival has been going on for a very long time.

[00:26:22.13]

Michelle L.: So, when you started attending there in the early [19]80s, it was already—

[00:26:27.20]

Sonthe B.: It was already in full swing. I was in my mid-twenties at the time, so I was part of the adult dance group.

[00:26:34.02]

Michelle L.: Tell me about that. [Laughter]

[00:26:36.24]

Sonthe B.: We were called the Zorba Dancers.

[00:26:40.17]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:26:41.21]

Sonthe B.: Yes. It was really fun. We were all young adults and so we were entertainment in the big—this is when the food was served upstairs in the gym, and there was a stage in the gym. So, we would perform at night. We would do these traditional Greek dances in our full costume, Greek costume, authentic Greek costumes. There were men and women and we performed this whole routine, choreographed routine.

[00:27:09.21]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:27:09.21]

Sonthe B.: So, we would do that and get the whole crowd up on their feet clappin' and singing. It was really a lot of fun. So, did that; that was my first introduction, or baptism, would you say, [Laughter] into the Greek Food Festival, was as a Zorba dancer. From there, just sort of . . . really, I had little children then. After those years, between working and then having children, I really didn't have a whole lot of time to be very active. But our priest at the time, Father Emmanuel Vasilakis of Blessed Memory, his wife is also a registered dietician. Garnett Vasilakis. So, Garnett knew that I was a dietician; she knew that I had

worked at U.A.B. in the kitchen. She knew that I had this background in quantity food production. So, she would always—you know, just gently nudge me to, "Why don't you get in the kitchen? We need you back there." You know. "We need you to help. Why don't you help with the pastries?" I was completely intimidated by the whole process, because the Birmingham community and their festival was so much larger than anything I had ever seen in Pensacola. We had a very small food festival. Now, today, when you go to Pensacola, it's huge. But back when I was growing up there, it was pretty small. This festival was already really big, so I was really kind of intimidated by the whole point and the whole fact of, "I don't know anybody here." It's not like I have a Mom, a sister, an aunt or somebody that can . . . that I can feel comfortable around. Now I do. But Garnett was really, really encouraging and kept that way, and then another very close family friend, Georgia Kosmos, also really encouraged me. And probably by the time my oldest, Ryan, was about two, I decided that—you know, I thought, "All right. I'll say yes. I've been tellin' these people 'no' for five years." [Laughter] So, okay, I will. I told them I would help with a workshop, and I thought I was gonna go and just help. But apparently, their idea of help was me bein' in charge of it. [Laughter] So, and it's funny, because I've been doin' it ever since. So, it's crazy to think that, only for the *koulourakia*, so that's just one particular cookie. We have different women are in charge—and men—are in charge of different things that we make for the festival. So, that *koulourakia* was my thing. Back then, the women in charge, the recipes I think pretty much guarded them with their life. They guarded them in a vault. So, even though I said I would make these, they did not share a recipe with me.

[00:30:11.16]

Michelle L.: Really.

[00:30:11.16]

Sonthe B.: Yeah. So, I went and got my mom's recipe, which is the only recipe I had ever made.

And so, in Birmingham, Alabama, where to this day and for the last thirty-three years, we've been makin' my mother's recipe from Greenwood, Mississippi and Pensacola, Florida. [Laughter] And I've given it out to anybody who asks, because that's the other thing that's so funny is, those women would never share a recipe. And I'm flattered when you want a recipe, you know? So I've had over the years, as soon as I get every workshop, somebody will say, "These are so good. May I have the recipe?" "Of course you can have the recipe." I mean, I'm happy to share the recipe.

[00:30:54.28]

Michelle L.: So you're usin' the term 'workshop.' Can you explain the . . . what that is?

[00:31:00.08]

Sonthe B.: Okay. Well, when we—the workshop is what I call the cooking for the actual festival. We're gonna make two thousand dozen *koulourakia* for the food festival.

[00:31:16.21]

Michelle L.: Two thousand dozen.

[00:31:16.21]

Sonthe B.: Right. These cookies are individually rolled and twisted.

[00:31:21.16]

Michelle L.: Oh, my gosh. [Laughter]

[00:31:25.21]

Sonthe B.: And so you have a workshop, because the first day, it takes more—obviously, one or two people can't do all this. The very, very first time when myself and a handful of friends who all had little children went up there to do it, the year that I just didn't know what I was doing and said, "Sure, I'll be in charge or come help." We couldn't even get it up there to start. We couldn't even get to the kitchen until about 5:30 in the afternoon because we had to wait for our husbands to get home and keep the children, and then we could come up to the church and cook. We thought we'd be there till nine o'clock. We were just havin' the best time makin' cookies, rollin' cookies, and what we didn't project for was the bake time and how long you—and not just the bake time, but the cool time. Because once the cookies bake, they have to cool. Then you bag them after they're cooled, so we didn't project for that cooling time. We didn't leave the church that night till almost three in the morning. [Laughter]

[00:32:28.11]

Michelle L.: Were your husbands just calling up?

[00:32:29.07]

Sonthe B.: Oh, no, no. They weren't callin' at all. There was no cell phones in 1986 or [19]87, we were doin' this. No. I think we probably called them and said, "It's gonna be late." No one expected it to be that late. So, we learned really quick that we have to start earlier. Now, there's a team of women and men that will come up. We'll advertise the workshop in the church bulletin, on our website, and say, "We're gonna make *koulourakia* on these days." And so, the day before, I guess the chairperson, I go up and get everything measured and prepped. Even weeks or a month or so before that, I will send my grocery shopping list to the person in charge of buying everything, because—like, I have a recipe, and I'm gonna make the recipe that we make for the festival is my mom's recipe seventy times. [Laughter] So, we're gonna make about seventy of these recipes. Anyway, so I get everything in. I have to go in there and check it all in, make sure that we got everything that we ordered. Many years and many times it doesn't happen, as you know. They forget to send the eggs or they sent clove instead of cinnamon or somethin' like that. So, I go up there and check everything. Then, I start portioning everything out for a whole day. So, I just take those little, individual lunchroom trays and line 'em up in any free space. On bakers' racks or whatever in the church and go ahead and put all of the non-perishable ingredients out there. I'll measure the baking powder and I'll measure the cinnamon and I'll measure the sugar, and those types of things. I'll put a whole five-pound bag of flour on each tray, because once people start coming in to help and work, it's so easy to get distracted if I'm at the mixer. I don't know if I've put somethin' in or not. You know? So, this way, I can just look at my work off of one tray and I can see. When I get there that morning, there's usually two people that mix. So, I mix. Jackie Hontzas mixes. Becky

Kampackis and Angie Carter. So, there's really just three of us that work with these big Hobart mixers that are big kitchen style, not just a little KitchenAid.

[00:34:58.02]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:34:58.03]

Sonthe B.: Hobart mixers that we mix with. Then the other people that come, their job is to make little balls of the dough. And then, so we have people that will make little balls. Then we have people that will actually roll it into a little, straight line and twist it and put it on the cookie sheet. Then we have to put an egg wash on it, and then we bake them. So, there's really somethin' for everybody. We did a workshop in just this past July, and there were people from all ages. Probably a total of about twenty-five volunteers from our church came to help, in ages from ten to eighty-five. That's just the beauty of it all, because there's something for everyone there. It's just really fun. We're in there just elbow to elbow, you know? Rollin' these cookies and puttin' the little egg wash on them, putting them in the oven, bringing them out. Putting them on big tables, letting them cool, and then packing them in bags of a dozen. So, just over the time that we did in July, we went up there for two days and made seven hundred and fifteen dozen. So, we'll do this a couple of more times before the festival, because these cookies will stay really good and fresh for a good bit of time.

[00:36:29.07]

Michelle L.: Okay. So, the first couple years you did it, how far in advance did you start versus how far in advance you're starting now? Did you always start back in the summer for the ...?

[00:36:43.02]

Sonthe B.: We may have started a little bit closer. We've learned, because we're making so much more now, our quantities have grown so much. The city of Birmingham has embraced this festival, and we see about ten thousand people a day. So, we project to have about thirty thousand people come through. I mean, U.A.B. and all of downtown support us so well. And we just want to keep cookin', so we have to cook a whole—we're cookin' so much more now than we did back then. That whole area, the whole downtown, has grown so much. Now, people don't even have to drive. They can walk. They live across the street. They can ride bikes. So, our numbers are blowin' up. We're cooking earlier, and we do have the capacity to freeze some things. We have big, we have even big refrigerators that we can keep this food nice and cool so it'll be good. But the only thing that's really made ahead of time are the pastries.

[00:37:48.23]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:37:50.10]

Sonthe B.: And we will make the *pastitsio*, which is like a Greek lasagna. So, we'll make that in August, and the festival's gonna be the first of October. So, we're only doing that about

six weeks in advance. But that'll go in the freezer, and we'll make five hundred really large sheet pans to sell for the festival. So, five hundred, and you get about twenty-four pieces out of a pan. So, five hundred times twenty-four is the number of *pastitsios* total that we'll have. But then we'll make these quarter pans, about fifteen hundred of those that we'll freeze. We sell those to go, like as a casserole, so if you want to—that'll feed nine to twelve people. And we can do all that, believe it or not, in six days. We do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of one week, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of the other week. And then on the Thursday and Friday, the meat's bein' cooked for the time—so once all the meat's cooked and we come in and assemble it all. But what's so interesting is the—and I sit back and reflect on all of this, I think about that job in the kitchen, the food service job that I did not like so much. But that equipped me so well to be able to work in the church with all this festival, basically, because I . . . it helped. At the time, I had no idea what I was doing when I was down there. I was learning the ropes of a food line in a hospital and how to get food up to patients and that sort of thing. But I still had to order a big quantity of food. I had to plan menus for the hospital. I had to project how many green beans we need; how much rice you need, that kinda thing. For the bed count to feed so many numbers of people. It's just kinda interesting that I ended up benefitting from that so much; it's helped me a lot in planning and trying to calculate what I need for these baking workshops.

[00:39:55.02]

Michelle L.: And you said there's one—is there a group of people that's in charge of shopping for the . . . you know, you put together your order. I mean, how do you . . .

[00:40:01.24]

Sonthe B.: Now, we send it to one individual, and he pretty much gets it all. He will either get it from wholesalers or get it from local grocery stores, that sort of thing. Somebody that's involved, another person with a food background that knows the business and gets it that way for us.

[00:40:22.29]

Michelle L.: Do you know how many people that are working on the festival prep do have that kind of background in the food industry versus, you know, volunteers coming in that have never . . .

[00:40:34.26]

Sonthe B.: Probably, honestly, only probably about a fourth of the people have—or maybe a third—have an actual background. We have a lot of fabulous restaurateurs, Greek restaurateurs, in Birmingham that are members of our church, but unfortunately, they're working the rest of the day in the restaurant. [Laughter] So, they can't be there to help us cook. But they can give us a lot of advice and they can help us in those types of ways. We've certainly benefited from their knowledge over the years, in tweaking recipes and how to do things, buying kitchen equipment and that sort of stuff has been super beneficial. But most of the individuals that are up there are volunteers like you and I that maybe don't have a background. You don't have to, like I said—we had a little ten-year-old, she was rollin' balls. We have people that, college students and all sorts of, that's why

we throw it out there and say, "If you want to come and learn how to do this, or if you want to come, we can use you. We need your help because we're making so many."

[00:41:46.00]

Michelle L.: What do you think motivates—I mean, it's such an incredible effort. Every time I go, I'm just so amazed at how many people from your community are working. What do you think drives everyone to volunteer so much time? You know?

[00:42:03.08]

Sonthe B.: I've thought about that, you know. I've thought about that a lot. I think that it is probably the fellowship and the fun that we all have together up there. I've never been as tired as I've been on some of those days when I've worked up there all day, or even during the actual festival, working on the take out, taking orders from cars comin' through the drive through and that sort of thing. It really is about the fellowship. It really is a lot of fun. Getting to know people so well when you're spending time with them and working, you have to find things to talk about and laugh about or cry about, so you really build those relationships. I really think, at the core, there's a Greek word for friendship, *philos*, which is actually a type of love. I really think there is, there's just that *philia* or **paidiá**, is another Greek word; **paidiá** like a party. It's just that company, that fellowship, that we all just yearn for, that human connection. You get up there and you forget how long you've been standing doin' something, because you're just havin' so much fun, really. And you love the company so much. So, I feel like that's a lot of it. To me, it's so rewarding to see all ages up there. You know? To see the sweet little girl that was ten.

We had kids that, before they went off to college, wanted to come up here and spend some of their last days before they go off to school, these girls were up here making *koulourakia* with us. You know? It was just so much fun, just to see them and get to hear about what they're gonna be doin' in the fall. And getting to know everybody. So, that's a real joy. It's a real joy for me.

[00:43:57.23]

Michelle L.: That's wonderful. I mean, how many hours are you on your feet? What are some of your longest days like when you're prepping? I mean . . .

[00:44:09.19]

Sonthe B.: Well, when you're prepping and cooking, you're on your feet the whole time. That's . . . I'll get up to the church at 7:30 or so in the morning. I know Becky when she does that *pastitsio*, I think she's up there at six in the morning. Then the volunteers come in around nine, and we take a break to eat lunch at, maybe, twelve and sit down, and then go to six o'clock. Sometimes, we've been there till eight o'clock. [Laughter] Again, it's just, when you have a lot of people show up—and you never know how many people are gonna come. Like there may be . . . twelve people that show up to help, or there may be thirty. So, if there's thirty people, I'm makin' more recipes. [Laughter] You know? That mixer's gonna keep going, because I have this help. But if there's only twelve volunteers, I may not do as much that day. It's kind of like, each workshop has their core group of people that have jobs that they know they do. As the chairman, for instance, I will call these individuals and say, even before I schedule the workshop, "Can you come?" There's a

lady, Nikki Javaris, she can make these *koulourakia* like a machine. They're beautiful. I'd be stupid to have a workshop if she couldn't be there. [Laughter] So, you know, I find out from the certain people that I know I can't do it without. We've kind of all found out what days are good, what's a good time, and then we set it up. Now, we've kind of gotten in a routine. Like, we know that *pastitsio's* always the last two weeks of August. But it's, yeah, they're long days. Ten, twelve-hour days, for sure. Ten- or twelve-hour days for sure.

[00:46:03.14]

Michelle L.: And are y'all, do you have a couple of kitchens there at the church? How much space do you have to—

[00:46:10.24]

Sonthe B.: Well, we have a pretty big kitchen. It's one kitchen, but it's pretty large. Then we have a banquet hall that we flow out into. So, we have a lot of good equipment, like some nice, high stainless steel tables that we can put out into the banquet hall to use for prepping. We have probably twelve or so convection ovens. In one of those ovens, we can put six big full sheets of cookies. So, it can go; it goes really fast. There'll be one person, and his job is nothing but the ovens, because you put 'em in for, let's say, fifteen minutes, and then we turn 'em and put 'em back in. It's almost like we're baking, the way you would bake at home, but for thirty thousand people. [Laughter] So, there's really no shortcuts. I was just thinking, because like I say, we do; we set the timer, we turn the tray, we put it back in so they're all evenly cooked. They come out and they sit and cool. We

use real butter and real ingredients, orange juice and vanilla and cinnamon. We're not cutting any corners on our food, because we really—I mean, at the end of the day, it all starts with good ingredients. You have to have the right stuff to start with. But the ingredients are not really that expensive, so it's amazing, what you can turn out. The Greek people must have been very resourceful with their cooking and their recipes, because most of their foods came from their land or just things that were in abundance. They've created some really amazing dishes from them.

[00:47:50.19]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Really amazing flavors, yeah.

[00:47:54.03]

Sonthe B.: Um-hm.

[00:47:54.03]

Michelle L.: So that that's the prep, what is it like the days of the festival behind the scenes?

'Cause coming there and eating, you can just kinda see the people, but what is that like during the middle of the height of the craziness? [Laughter]

[00:48:10.20]

Sonthe B.: Well, so, in the kitchen—when the actual festival, everything's made, all the *spanakopita*, the *tiropita*, the grape leaves, everything is prepared and has a special place, and there's people that are designated to be in charge of cooking those, and the pastries

have all been made and there's a special pastry area, and there are individuals that are in charge of plating those pastries and boxing them and having them displayed nicely. So, the real cooking mainly goes on in the main kitchen upstairs. That's where they're gonna cook the chicken and the *pastitsio*, which is like a Greek lasagna, and the rice will be cooked up there. The green beans are cooked somewhere else and brought in. Teddy Hontzas cooks the green beans for us and brings those in. We have, like, three hundred pans of green beans that'll be warmed up in our ovens. But it's just kind of a big, big, a ton of cooking going on. I think that Pete Graphos told me, they cook thirteen thousand pieces of chicken, Greek chicken. [Laughter] And then, I don't know, hundred pounds of—I mean, a lot of rice. We have this tilt skillet that we cook the rice in, and you can probably cook a hundred pounds of rice in that one skillet at a time. So, we've got some really great equipment up there, some great ovens and things that can cook things, but the *souvlaki*, that is cooked downstairs on a grill on an open fire pit. So, basically, once this food is all cooked, we have runners that take it to the different serving lines. So, the food will all get prepared, and then the runners will bring some to the downstairs food line. They'll shoot it out to the upstairs food line. Or they'll bring it to takeout. So, then, at these areas, you have these food lines and then people basically get their ticket, get in the line, and they just go through. Then you have servers that will actually take the food from the food line, put it in a plate together, and then they go that way, if that makes sense.

[00:50:21.20]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] It all makes—do you have someone that's sort of a traffic coordinator?

[Laughter]

[00:50:27.16]

Sonthe B.: Well, yes. Yes, you do. You do. You have someone that will see the tickets and go, "Greek salad!" And just can kind of call ahead. There're volunteers that are sitting there that are making these plates, basically off these steam tables. So, they're putting together plates for Greek chicken, a deluxe plate, a *pastitsio* plate, a veggie plate. There's these different options; there's just the gyro or a gyro and a salad or just a big salad. So, yeah, all of this is being served up basically just like goin' through a fast-food restaurant. It's basically a fast-food Greek restaurant for three days. Then, take out will be a having a fast-food restaurant on the street. [Laughter] Because the cars, we're luckily able to block off 19th Street now, and the cars just kind of sit there and wait for their food. But we've gotten—because we have so many steam tables in that outside area that's covered, we're able to get the food out to them pretty fast. They don't have to wait very long. I really enjoy talking to the people while they're waiting, and I think one of the fun things for me about the festival is actually meeting the people that come, and take-out—like, on the menu, everything has a number. So, number one, deluxe. Number two, chicken. Number three, *pastitsio*. It would be so easy for our customers to say, "I want a number one or a number two." But I love the way they all want to pronounce it. So, I feel like this is a chance for everyone to be Greek for a day. And people will go, "I want the *dolmades* or the *melo macarona*—" For, like, a *mella macaodonna*. But I love the way they, everyone wants to try and pronounce the Greek word. They don't want to take the easy way and just say, "Give me a number one." [Laughter] So, that's a lot of fun, goin' over the menus

with 'em and teachin' 'em the proper way to say the name, and talkin' about the food and that sort of thing. And I apologize for my dogs.

[00:52:39.08]

Michelle L.: No, it's okay. [Laughter] They're not picking up too much on the microphone, so I think we are okay. But yeah, that was gonna be my next question, is what it means to you and what it means to the other members of your church to have so many people from Birmingham pass through those three days? And what that's like for your church community?

[00:53:02.15]

Sonthe B.: It's overwhelming. It really is. Because I think we take a lot of the food and the culture for granted. I grew up with it all, and it's not really— and I think I probably do take it for granted. I love being able to share it with everyone else. I think about, there are a lot of festivals in Birmingham, but I'm not goin' to a festival every weekend. And I'm thinkin', "Where are all these people comin' from?" You know, that are comin' to this festival? So, I think for a lot of families, it's a tradition. A lot of people look forward to it. And the whole medical community of U.A.B. has—they come down with carts from the, I think the emergency room. They're pushin' a cart down 19th Street with an order, takin' food back to everybody.

[00:53:55.16]

Michelle L.: Oh, wow.

[00:53:56.03]

Sonthe B.: That's what I mean about the kind of support. Then you have the whole university down there now, all those students come and eat. We don't charge—a lot of festivals will charge an admission fee, but we don't charge an admission fee, we never have. So, it's very family-friendly. And the portions are so large that you can honestly share them. We have the church tours, and it gives people, too, a chance of going in and seein' our church. Because our church is the only Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Alabama. I always like to encourage people to come back, go into the cathedral, take a church tour. That sort of thing. So, it is—it's overwhelming. It's just a lot of fun. We get to see a lot of friends. It's a good time, it really is. It's a good time.

[00:54:50.22]

Michelle L.: Yeah. You said y'all did have a Greek food festival in Pensacola, but do you feel like the Greek festival phenomena—it does seem almost every city has one now.

[00:55:06.12]

Sonthe B.: They do. They do. And if you're the only game in town, that's great. [Laughter] And luckily for Birmingham, we are. This is the only Greek Orthodox Cathedral. But if you were to go to, let's say, South Florida where they have Tampa and Clearwater and St. Pete, or even Boston, for instance, where you may have ten or twelve Greek Orthodox churches in a metropolitan area, you could go to a Greek festival every weekend. So, then, it may not be quite as impressive or something. But I think that, for our festival—

and like, the festival in Pensacola now is huge, because they are the only one there. I do think that the Greek people take a lot of pride, always have, in what they prepare. The food is really good. The food is good and people are willing to get out and stand in line, just maybe it's sometimes super hot outside; we have an air conditioned banquet hall, but we also have a ton of seating downstairs. In the evenings, we can sit outside. So, I think people are willing to bear the elements for getting out and doin' something a little different for a really good meal and something that's a cultural experience for them and their children.

[00:56:30.00]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Absolutely. Well, is there anything that I haven't asked that you wished people knew about the festival or about the Greek Orthodox church?

[00:56:40.19]

Sonthe B.: [Laughter] Well, we've talked a lot, I know. And you've asked a lot of great questions. I really can't think of anything else. I would just, more than anything, we're just so appreciative and thankful to all the support that the whole community of Birmingham has showed us. We do give back to the community, so the festival does give back to different organizations within Birmingham, and even on a greater scale; mission-type work overseas and that sort of thing. We always encourage people to come and take a church tour, come visit our church. We have a great website, if people are interested, to go on our website and find out more about the Orthodox faith. Like I said, the festival is a way for everybody to be Greek for a day, but it doesn't really showcase Orthodoxy and

our faith. So, in order to really understand more about that, I think the website's a great place to start. And comin' to one of the divine liturgies and that sort of thing would be really nice, too.

[00:57:49.09]

Michelle L.: Great. Well, thank you so much.

[00:57:51.06]

Sonthe B.: You're welcome. Thank you.

[End of interview]