



**Brenda O'Neill**  
**Jasper, Alabama**  
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Location: Milo's Hamburgers, Jasper, Alabama  
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:02.04]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Today is March 4, 2020. I am in Jasper, Alabama, at Milo's Hamburgers with Ms. Brenda O'Neill. Ms. O'Neill, would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:14.29]

**Brenda O.:** Hi. I'm Brenda O'Neill with Milo's Hamburgers.

[00:00:20.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. That's great.

[00:00:21.25]

**Brenda O.:** Okay.

[00:00:23.04]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, could you give me your birthdate?

[00:00:25.06]

**Brenda O.:** You really want that?

[00:00:27.15]

**Annemarie A.:** If you're okay with it.

[00:00:30.00]

**Brenda O.:** Okay. January 20, 1957.

[00:00:34.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Great, thanks. And tell us a little bit about where you were born and raised.

[00:00:37.29]

**Brenda O.:** Well, I was actually born in Michigan, and we moved to Alabama when I was five years old. Been in Alabama ever since. I was raised up in a little, tiny place called Brookside until we moved closer to Forestdale. I lived there until . . . two years ago, or a year ago, and I moved to Jasper.

[00:01:02.23]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Where's Brookside?

[00:01:04.26]

**Brenda O.:** Brookside's a little . . . it's really off the map. It's a little, tiny town, and everybody knows everybody. But it's just a small place.

[00:01:17.07]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about your family. What were your parents' names and what did they do?

[00:01:24.02]

**Brenda O.:** Joseph and Lucille Falls. My dad was a plant worker. My mom was a stay-at-home mom until the kids got a little bit older, and then she went to work for a bakery.

[00:01:35.15]

**Annemarie A.:** Oh, that's nice! What was the name of the bakery?

[00:01:40.00]

**Brenda O.:** Bishop's Bakery.

[00:01:42.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Great. What did she do there?

[00:01:45.19]

**Brenda O.:** She put cakes together and wrapped and a little bit'a everything. I mean, she was one of those type people, she just got her hands in everything.

[00:01:56.05]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And do you have siblings?

[00:01:57.16]

**Brenda O.:** I do. I have two brothers and a sister, and I'm the oldest. One of 'em—he's an electrician, one of 'em's in the Army. My sister is actually in the Army, and then I have an installer of stereos and stuff like that.

[00:02:22.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. Well, tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up in Forestdale. Tell me a little bit about that city.

[00:02:28.17]

**Brenda O.:** Well, Forestdale has changed a lot. Forestdale was one of them places where everybody hung out, just had a good time, enjoyed life. And it was a simpler time then, so everybody knew everybody. And sometimes, that was a good thing; sometimes, it wasn't a good thing, 'cause everybody knew everything about every body. But everybody stuck together, even when things got bad. They knew how to draw together and draw out each others' strength for each other.

[00:03:04.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And where'd you go to school?

[00:03:05.18]

**Brenda O.:** At Gardendale. Gardendale Vocational Center.

[00:03:10.27]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. And what did you study there?

[00:03:14.14]

**Brenda O.:** Business. Business, office education.

[00:03:19.27]

**Annemarie A.:** Great. Well, let's talk a little bit about getting into your first food and beverage job. Could you tell me how old you were and what that was?

[00:03:29.16]

**Brenda O.:** Actually, I started with Jack's Hamburgers when I was fifteen, and I was one of those kids that didn't have a whole lot of confidence in myself, and I had terrific managers that helped me build up my confidence. They took my weak points and turned 'em into strong points. At that age, you know . . . a lot of women weren't in management at the time. So, I was one of the first female managers with Jack's Hamburgers. I started that at eighteen, and I started goin' to different stores to give vacations or fill in this, that, and the other, and that's what started me in management.

[00:04:19.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about some of those folks who you said built up your confidence and turned your weak points in your strong points. In what ways did they do that, I guess?

[00:04:33.00]

**Brenda O.:** Well, they installed in me that I could do anything, but I had to have the confidence in myself. They could give me all the teaching, but I had to receive it. So, I took from bein' scared of everybody—now, customers never scared me. Customers were like-- they were interesting, they were fun to be around, but my managers, it was like, I'm afraid I'm gonna screw up or I'm not gonna do this the right way. One of my managers, which was Billy **Sittle**, he said, "You are gonna mess up. And then you're gonna grow from that." So, he was one of those that always had a positive influence. Louis Walton, which was with Jack's Hamburgers forever, he was the type of person that when you met him, he made you feel at ease, and he was one of the top managers in the industry. But he knew people. He knew how to install in them, and he would pull it out of you. He would talk to you for a few minutes, and it was almost like he had an inner strength in him to pull out what was inside of you, your potential.

[00:05:59.07]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:05:59.17]

**Brenda O.:** Yes.

[00:06:00.23]

**Annemarie A.:** So, you said when you were eighteen, you started doing managing—manage work. How did your job then change?

[00:06:11.23]

**Brenda O.:** Oh, from me bein' just a regular employee to doin' what I was told when I was told and how I was told. To directin' people to do what I had learnt and to teach them the right way to . . . more or less, bein' an overseer. That's the way, in the beginning, I just thought what would be called now a team leader. But they were strokin' me into provin' that I could be who they thought I could be, so that was really interesting. And even havin', you know, at eighteen, you . . . were workin' with kids your age, and then you had to work with the older bunch. Sometimes, people accepted you for that even though you were eighteen, and sometimes you didn't. So, you had to prove yourself. I think that was the biggest challenge that I had, to prove to the thirty- and forty-year-olds that I could work just as hard with them, beside them, and it get on an even keel. Even though I was their manager, I wanted to prove to them that I didn't think I was all that; I was just workin' to accomplish what we needed to accomplish.

[00:07:42.21]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes a lot of sense. Well, tell me a little bit about some of the responsibilities you had at the beginning as a manager.

[00:07:51.02]

**Brenda O.:** Well, most of my—[Coughs] I'm sorry. Most of my responsibilities was trainin' the crew, makin' sure the money was goin' where the money's supposed to be. I didn't do a whole lotta scheduling then, but food cost, making sure that we were puttin' the right



amounts on everything, makin' sure that we weren't throwin' a lot of waste away, and encouraging people. I think that was the biggest part of my job, was to encourage people. I think the reason that they put me in the position was to show that age is not a factor; it's what your perception can be, and if you want to be on up there, you had availability.

[00:08:46.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And you mentioned, too, that you were one of the first women to work in a managerial position. What was that like? How did your gender, the fact that you were a woman, kind of impact your job, either positively or negatively?

[00:09:03.15]

**Brenda O.:** Well, a lot of—when you're eighteen, when you're really not grown-- you think you are but you're not-- and bein' a female, it was hard to show people that I could be just as much of a role model as a man could. That was durin' a different age. Now, it's changed totally. You don't have to prove yourself as much. But when I did it, you had to prove that you could do it, and you had to stand up for yourself in a lot of different situations. I remember we went to a meeting one time, and one of the managers said, "Well, if she's gonna take a man's job, she's gonna have to be a man." That kinda got under my skin a little bit, but that was one of those challenging times that, I'm a female, but I'm gonna work just as hard as a man will. So, proving yourself that way and not gettin' on the defensive—because I never wanted to be defensive, I wanted to show them that they had given me the job because they had seen me as a person, not as a female or a male. So.

[00:10:27.18]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. That's really powerful. Well, could you tell me, how long did you work at Jack's?

[00:10:33.27]

**Brenda O.:** Ten years.

[00:10:34.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. What year did you leave?

[00:10:37.24]

**Brenda O.:** [19]73. I think it was [19]73. Yeah, I believe it was [19]73. Then, I went to work for a bank. That was not my thing. Everything was structured and there was—you did this, this, this, and I got bored, because there was no surprises and there was no . . . I mean, the people were great; they were really great. But, there was no surprises. I felt like I was . . . just, you do this, you do this, you do this, and at the end of the day, you go home. And there was nothin' interactive or surprises pop up that you had to challenge. It was all formatted. Then, I went to work for . . . Carlite doin' their computers, workin' on a computer, ordering, takin' care of the guys. That was fun, but by 9 o'clock in the mornin', I mean, I'm used to a fast food place. So, you had to have everything together and then you went into this massive whatever was goin' on, so I was used to getting in there, gettin' paperwork or whatever done, and then goin' into full-blast service. So, I went in at 7:30. By 10 o'clock, I was through. And I was so bored. I said, "I can't do this." So, I went to

work for— I actually had a man that was in there, I was workin'. And he says, "I'd love to have you come to work for me." I said, "Doin' what?" He says, "Really, just overseein' the park." I said, "The park?" He says, "Yes. Homewood Park." I said, "Oh, okay." So, I went there, and it was the same thing. I'm not used to havin' everything done and gettin' through, and then I got the rest of the day to do nothing, 'cause that is boring. To me. Some people, it's great for, but not for me. I need to be busy all day long. So, when Milo's Hamburgers opened up, I applied for them and they were openin' up a new store in Forestdale. I thought, "I really don't know that much about Milo's, but I need to get back into doin' what I know." So, when I applied and he, Dean Chitwood, made me an assistant manager and I was used to bein' the general manager. I said, "Well, this is okay—" 'cause I just had a brand-new baby. He wasn't but six months old. I thought, "Well, this'll be great, 'cause I'll have more time with him." So, I trained with them. He was great. I mean, he sent me to a couple of different stores, and then when we opened up the Forestdale store, I had never seen so many people in my life. We opened up, and it was massive. It was heavy duty work. We went in early; we got off late. You were tired when you got off when we first opened. I stayed there, workin' as an assistant for about six months, and then I got promoted to G.M.

[00:14:35.16]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. There?

[00:14:38.09]

**Brenda O.:** Yes, at the Forestdale store. I stayed there ten years, I guess, and then they moved me to another store. They moved me to **Valley Avenue**, and I loved that store. A little bit. You know, I'd been at Forestdale for ten years, so it was like, nerve-wracking to go into a whole different store, different crew, different managers, but they were all really good with me and helped me even grow a little bit more. So, I stayed there for a while and then went back to Forestdale, I believe, and worked there for a little while. It's just progressed over—I've been to . . . a lot of different stores to help out, to work, whatever I needed to do, because they believed in, at the time that Dean had the stores, it was a little bit . . . it wasn't as conformed as it is now. Because when Tom [Interviewer's Note: Tom Dekle, CEO of Milo's] took over the stores, it was a different culture. He transformed what we believe is fast food into bein' a family-oriented place. When you walk in, everybody's supposed to be family, from customers to employees to management. It's a family-oriented thing, and it just . . . it was a completely different place. So, he has made Milo's . . . a place that is so easy to work for. And he believes in people. So, that—and this has been over, I guess a fifteen-year span, somethin' like that, and it's so different. At one point, when I didn't really want to go back to fast food because it was always . . . you gotta do this, you gotta do that, you gotta have this. With this company, it's not you, it's us, and that makes a huge difference. Huge.

[00:17:20.02]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, what year did you start at Milo's, do you remember?

[00:17:27.04]

**Brenda O.:** Um, [19]86.

[00:17:30.22]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, great. And tell me a little bit about—I'm kinda interested in this because it's a chain of restaurants, so feasibly, wherever you go, you'll get the same product, but I'm wonderin' about—you're talkin' about cultures of restaurants, both with employee culture and also just the people who go who are either regulars to the restaurants or people from the community. How is that different within the restaurants that you've visited? Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:18:01.24]

**Brenda O.:** You mean with Milo's or with the different restaurants?

[00:18:05.10]

**Annemarie A.:** With the different Milo's restaurants. So, like, you talked about bein' in Forestdale and then goin' to the Valley Avenue store. How are those restaurants maybe different from one another, like within each community?

[00:18:18.23]

**Brenda O.:** Well, there's a lot of difference. And I tell people all the time: you're-- the personalities that are in each store. You've got to learn them. And you've got to, like one store may be where people—home life has a lot to do with everything. It really does. If people are motivated and feel like they can do anything, that store's gonna be easier to

run. But when you've got stores that maybe the people are not taught what other people are taught or they're . . . a different community, they're livin' in fear all the time, stuff like that, you've got the ability to show them the other way. You know? Most of Milo's stores, they all have different personalities, but the culture is the same. It's teachin' the culture, because we're not just hiring employees. We are building the future. I don't care what anybody says. We work with a lot of young people, and what you teach them is gonna go on to the future. Sometimes, sometimes you fail, because they're just not willing to learn, but even though you feel like you failed, on down the line, it comes back to 'em. "Well, when I was here"—'cause we hear that all the time, what you're teachin' me is not necessarily just what's behind that counter thing, it's real-life stuff. It's integrity, honesty, what you are put here for. You know? That's what Milo's is really all about, is makin' people—we teach people when they come in the door as an employee, "Okay. Every person that walks in that door is somebody's mother, brother, friend, whatever." But you need to look at them as they're your mom. How would you treat your mom? And that's what I think Milo's is all about. It's not just about Milo's hamburgers, because we can make it out to be that. I think, a lot of times, restaurants look at that. Well, they're just gonna be here for a short time; I'm not gonna take a whole lot of time with 'em. But those little, bitty things that you're teachin' somebody, your'e showin' them, and you're showin' them that you have respect for them. Because sometimes, that's where we lose it. People don't think they—well, I'm just a little crew member. They don't have no—we do. And teach them how to have respect for theirselves.

[00:21:33.06]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. That's wonderful. And how did your early—we talked about your early, formative experiences at Jack's, how does that influence what you try to teach your crew members?

[00:21:45.25]

**Brenda O.:** Well, some of the stuff when I first started with Jack's, I was . . . I thought, I'm gonna do somethin' with me. You know? And I had to be brought down a notch or two sometimes. Because when you think, "I'm gonna do it," you're not gonna do it. It's gonna take everybody around you to help you. But if you're not willin' to say, "I was wrong," you're not gonna go nowhere, because you're gonna step up on that ladder, and you're gonna come right back down it. So, it's kinda like, the things that I learnt is: it doesn't have anything to do with age; it doesn't have anything to do with gender; it has to do with your mindset and where you want to go and where you see yourself goin'.

[00:22:39.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's wonderful. Could you tell me—you just talked a lot about the culture of Milo's, just both your personal ideas about it and kind of the general ideas of the culture here. I was wonderin' how that ties into your idea of hospitality and what hospitality means to you?

[00:23:01.01]

**Brenda O.:** Hospitality is makin' people feel wanted and feel special, because to me, hospitality is, if the little child you go to their level. An older person, you don't treat 'em like they're

old; you treat 'em with respect. We have a lot of people that come in that you can see it on their faces; they just had a rough day. A simple smile, a simple, "Is there anything I can do for you today?" That goes a long ways with people, because when people realize that you're not a dollar amount to them, to you, that they feel like, "I'm valued." And I think that's the biggest thing that we're tryin' to get across. It doesn't matter teenage kids, you know. They can be a bit of challenge sometimes, because they can be . . . not so respectful sometimes, and it's okay. Because if you show them the same disrespect that they're showing you, that's their culture. And sometimes, you can turn somebody around just with, "Hey, you doin' okay today?" And lettin' 'em know that they're a person. They're not a dollar amount, and we need to show them that. Even when somebody's ugly to you or whatever, shake it off, let it go, 'cause you don't know what that person is goin' through.

[00:24:50.16]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure, that's a great explanation. I was wondering, too with that, what is service for you? So, could you kind of talk me through your ideas of service?

[00:25:02.14]

**Brenda O.:** Hm. That's a hard one. Um . . . service to me is lookin', main focus on one person at a time, 'cause if you're distracted by this, that, and the other, peoples' gonna realize that. So, one-on-one communication, eye contact, a smile, and always a "please" and a "thank you." That goes a long ways with me, because if I walk into a place and—"I'll be with you in a moment," and they're snappy, it's like, "Okay. They're havin' a bad day. Let's see



where this goes." To me-- and we're gonna make mistakes. We make mistakes no matter how hard we try; we're gonna make mistakes. But make up for it. Apologize sincerely, not this, "Oh, I'm sorry." Your voice, your body language, everything plays a factor. You don't—even though you know that you're generally sorry, they may not pick up on that. So, you've gotta make sure that—put yourself in your place. How are you seein' this? And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But you gotta do the best that you can do. At the end of the day, when you can say, I either messed up and I made up for it, or I messed up and I'll have to do better next time.

[00:26:43.25]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, walk me through a typical workday for you here. [Laughter]

[00:26:51.23]

**Brenda O.:** Now, that's funny. Typically, I come in, got a little bit of admin stuff to do, probably takes me fifteen, twenty minutes—dependin'. If I have orders to make, then that's gonna take another time, and that's important, because if I don't order what I'm supposed to order, then people don't get what they're supposed to get. So, that's a little bit of time-consuming. Comin' in, to see where my crew's at, because they get here before I do. They do breakfast. So, they're here at 4 a.m. So, by the time I get here at 7 or 8, they've done had three or four hours under their belt. So, my job is to come in, see how they're doin', make 'em feel like, "Hey, we're gonna do this today." And lettin' 'em know, "I'm here. What y'all need?" And bein' a part of their job, because their job is my job. It's not my job is their job. So, bein' a part of that and lettin' 'em know that I'm a team player. So, do the

little bit of admin stuff; walk out, see where we're at. See if there's breaks to be cut so we can get goin' so that we're ready, go with lunch. Makin' sure that all our product's here. If there's not somethin' that we need to get, then we need to get it, A.S.A.P. Then, just entertaining customers. I like to tell 'em, "We're entertaining customers." When they walk in, regardless of what is goin' on, we just want to make 'em feel like, "You're a part of us." We want to have a clean dining room, we want to have good food, we want to have great service; so, all of that. That's what we do every day, is just makin' people feel like they're welcomed. We got a good product. We got a great product here. We can have a great product, but if we don't service it well, even the smallest little thing can make their experience not so great.

[00:29:13.10]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. That's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too, about—you talked about goin' and openin' other restaurants, other Milo's restaurants in Alabama. Could you talk a little bit about that experience, too? [Laughter]

[00:29:32.25]

**Brenda O.:** Well, the first—I opened the Cullman store. I had . . . I got to open the Cullman store, and I never experienced that before. I had went to store openings after the store got opened and worked, and I didn't know what it all detailed. So, when they said—and of course, my supervisor, he was side-by-side with me on everything. But, you know, the store's bein' built. I'm hiring people and trying to get orders together and . . . trying to get the best crew that I can and takin' 'em to other stores to train. That was exhilarating. It

was a lot of work. But I was so thankful for that, because it showed me what all came—you know, we come in, in a finished product, but when you open a store and you've got people to train, you've got orders to make, and all at once, you have this massive—and I'm talkin' massive, when you first open a store, everybody wants to try it out. So you've gotta make sure everything's perfect, and you're not working with a crew that has worked even four months, so you're startin' out. Of course, with Milo's, I thank them so much, because they send other people from other stores to help you out to make sure that everything's gonna line up. So, it was exhilarating. All at the same time, it was like, you didn't have time to think, "Am I doin' this right? Am I—?" With Milo's, it was real simple, because they knew what to expect. So, if I started fallin' down on somethin', they were there to help pick it up and move it forward. So, it was really great. Then, we get . . . Cullman going, and I get to open this one. I had just enough, just a little bit of experience in knowin' what I needed to do with this one, so it made it easier. But that was in a three-month span. So, it was exhilarating and . . . it was a lot of work. I was tired, a lot of times. Sometimes, I'd just drop off the face of the earth; I gotta have some rest, because my mindset doesn't need to go where it doesn't need to go. You know, when you get really tired, things start happenin' to your mindset, and it's all negative. So, you've got to have that rest. You've gotta understand, you are not a robot, you are a human being, and there are set things that you've got to do. So, with this one, it was a little bit more easier. Our opening was massive. It was so much fun, and so many different people. And their mindsets as to, "What are we gonna do?" So, it was a lot of fun. I wouldn't say I wouldn't ever want to do it again, 'cause I like bein' stable, but I'm tellin' you, I am grateful for that experience.

[00:33:20.18]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, y'all opened this restaurant in 2018?

[00:33:24.05]

**Brenda O.:** Um-hm.

[00:33:26.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, great. And when was the Cullman opening?

[00:33:27.09]

**Brenda O.:** 2017.

[00:33:29.10]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, so you had back-to-back.

[00:33:33.08]

**Brenda O.:** Yes, yes. Well, actually—wait a minute. We opened that store in July, and we opened this store in October. Yes. So, it was the same year.

[00:33:46.27]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Wow.

[00:33:49.03]

**Brenda O.:** But it was fun. The supervisor, Evan Smith, that I had, he was so supportive. Rob Lidden was so supportive. Tom Dekle was so supportive. If it looked like I was gettin' overwhelmed, it was like, "Go take a break." "No, no, no, I got it—" "Go take a break." Because one of the things that they always ensure us to do is, if we're gettin' overwhelmed, we're not focused. We're lettin' too many things come at us at a time, and it needs to just slow down, take a deep breath, rest, and come back where you know you're supposed to be. So, I am very grateful for these guys. They taught me a lot.

[00:34:46.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, so, you've been here for a while, and you have plenty of experiences. But I was wonderin', both here in Jasper and also the other places that you've worked, how do you develop a rapport with customers? How would you . . . could you talk maybe a little bit about some of the regulars you might have and the way that you've developed a relationship with them?

[00:35:12.25]

**Brenda O.:** Well, I think one of the things for me, anyways, is, you see a customer come in and normally, they order the same thing every time, and you say, "I got it on the grill." Or, one of the things is, like, you haven't seen 'em in a while, "I haven't seen you in a while. Everything okay?" And gettin' to . . . listen, that's the biggest thing, is you listen. Even if they've got a negative comment, that you think is negative, not necessarily negative. What it is, is a way to improve. Because some people will say, I think y'all ought to do

this or y'all ought to do that. Well, we're in the business of people, so if that's somethin' that they think, then you take it to the owners and say, "Can we kinda try this?" And go from there, because peoples' input—I mean, they're payin' good, hard-earned money for what they're getting here, so they should have an input. And, if it's possible, then sometimes it happens, and sometimes, you just have to go over that barrier and say, "Well, we'll do this for you." You know. Gettin' to know children. I think that, to me, is . . . that's my heart, because children are so smart. People don't give 'em a lot of credit. But if you can get their little spirits off on you, which is always positive, that's a big incentive. For me, just talkin' to kids, we have people—you know, they'll come in and they'll say, "Well, this is so-and-so's birthday today." So, we wait. We let 'em eat. Then, we come out here and we sing happy birthday to 'em. That's one thing that I will say about Milo's, is they are into the communities as far as what is goin' on, and if we can help as . . . a company, then we're gonna help. We had a group of . . . special needs basketball players, and they were in the tournament, and these were—they filled up the whole dining room, and they were so loving. And, at the end of 'em, when they started to leave, we were sayin' our good-byes or whatever, and they come up and hug me. That melted my heart, because a lot of people want to put 'em off or whatever. We should never put anybody off. Even if they're rude or whatever, somethin's goin' on, and we need to fix it. Sometimes you have a fifteen-minute window where you can just talk to somebody and make their day. So, I think perception is a lot of it. We had a lady and a gentleman come in, and the gentleman was a lot older. He went and sat down, but you could tell somethin' wasn't right, so I asked his wife. I said, "Everything okay?" She said, "He's just havin' a really bad day." I said, "Do you mind if I go ahead and talk to him?"

She says, "No." And she kinda looked at me funny and I thought, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have done that." But when I came out and I'm just talkin' to him. Well, he got to laughin'. She came up with the food and all and she said— and just listenin' to him. He needed somebody to listen to him. And he started to leave, and he said, "Thank you so much. You made my day." And I said, "And you made mine." He passed two weeks later, and she came up, and she said, "I just want you to know, he has never had—as long as he's lived, never had somebody come out from behind the counter and say, 'What's up?'" She said, "That just made his day." So, it's really the little things. You can pile people up with all kinda stuff, but makin' them feel the inside, is the most important thing.

[00:40:11.08]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too. I haven't asked this question yet; I was wonderin', so, you started off in food service and in food and beverage and then decided to kind of move on to somethin' else. Why'd you come back? Why did you decide to make this your career?

[00:40:32.21]

**Brenda O.:** I loved the energy. I loved—I guess I love non-structure, because it's, you start off your day and you've got a plan, and it can go under real quick, and you've gotta come up with a plan in a fifteen-second time frame. So, it's never boring. It's never boring. This is one of those industries that there's always something goin' on. Even if you have where you don't have that busy of a day, you got plenty of things to clean, and it's constant. This business is not for somebody who wants to lay back and take it easy; it's ever-moving,

ever-moving. The different type of people that you meet, I mean, that—you meet all kind of people. You meet people that are down on their luck; you meet people that are rich as all get out; and you meet people that are just like you, everyday people. You know? And it's just interesting. The whole thing is interesting. And it's what you make it. This business is not for everybody, but it was for me. I'm not—I can't sit behind a little cubicle and do work and feel like I'm accomplishing anything, even though I did. Really and truly, it's just amazing. It really is. The companies that you work for has a lot to do with it, too. If they are supportive, or if nothing you do is ever right, because that'll pull you down. But with Milo's, it has been a . . . it's been delightful, especially over the past fifteen years. I've never seen people that, with other places-- and I'm not cuttin' anybody down-- but some people know how to pull people up, and some people know how to . . . just leave 'em alone and let 'em go dormant. With this company, it's pulling you out and teaching you and encouraging you.

[00:43:19.23]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I was wondering, too, what's the most challenging and the most rewarding parts of your job? Though I think you've probably talked about them.

[00:43:30.22]

**Brenda O.:** Well, I think the biggest part is that we have a chance to—it's the future. The kids and the future. And customers, they are so entertaining. They really are. Kids, I love to watch kids, 'cause they just make your day. Because a lot of times, we put on smiles that are not really smiles, but you keep on goin' until you get where you need to be. But kids



can make you just . . . see things through a different set of eyes, and it makes it worthwhile. 'Cause back here, that we're teachin', even people that—you know, we have moms that have started workin' after their kids got out of school, and they've been out of that workforce for a long time, and then it's like, I'm goin' back in full-force, and they learn stuff. So, it's just rewarding all the way around.

[00:44:44.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, I was wondering, too, if you could talk about the technical aspects of teaching and the way that you teach your employees?

[00:44:55.04]

**Brenda O.:** With every person, they're different. What one may learn one way, you gotta learn personalities, and you have to learn them as a person and where they're from. To me, somebody who has had a nurturing home life, they're pretty easy, because they're receptive to everything. Somebody who has not had that at home, then you've gotta pull them to the side and make them feel. Let them know: you're just as important as anybody else. And if it takes a little bit longer, well, that's okay, because we've got the time to do that. Somebody who maybe's got special needs or whatever, then that's a whole different ball game. Their learning compass-ability may be a little bit different, but if you take time and patience, and don't get overwhelmed with 'em, you can teach a lot of people a lot of different things. So, for me, it's personalities, and where they're at. And how far can they go? How far do they want to go? That means a lot. So, if they're wantin' to be—if they're wantin' to be average, okay, you're wantin' to be average. I can't fish that out of you. I still

think you've got potential, but if that's where you want to be, then that's . . . I'm not gonna push you over that. But somebody who's . . . thinks, I've had employees say, "Well, I'm just stupid." And that's just one of the things you do not say in here. Nobody is stupid. Nobody. Maybe you don't know everything and maybe you can't learn everything, but you've got potential, and we're gonna pull that potential outta you.

[00:47:04.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. That's really nice. I was wonderin', too, how technology, either, like, computerization or whatever it might be, how that's impacted and changed your job since you've had it.

[00:47:18.25]

**Brenda O.:** That's a rough question, 'cause I am not a computer-- nothin'. I'm old-school, and I try to learn, and that's one of those things that they're tryin' to teach me. And it's not goin' as well as I would like for it to, and it's like, "Okay. I can't do this. I'm gonna try the best I can, but I have people back there that are more computer literate, so it's like, 'Okay, this is your job.' It's way over, and that's okay." Because as a team, what I can't do, somebody else can do, so that's the way we do it. I . . . ugh, that computer stuff. That's not . . .

[00:48:09.15]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I can see that it would radically change, like, a fast food place like Milo's.

[00:48:16.09]

**Brenda O.:** Oh, it does. It does. Everything from your putting in applications to your payrolls, your vacation time—it changes everything, and it's like, "Oh. We didn't come this way, we went full pace, and I'm not ready for it." So, thank God that my supervisor is computer—I call him and say, "I can't do this." "Brenda, we been over this—" "I know, but—" "Okay, Brenda." So, he's real good about even sittin' down with me and showin' me what to do, how to do, and then I don't understand it and it's like, well, I just do it, because this is the way you showed me how to do it. But thank God we got—you know, it really bothers me that kids today don't know how to write in cursive. I say, "How you gonna sign a check? Gonna print your name?" So, some of the old stuff, I still think we need to implant it, even if they don't get it all the way. 'Cause I told one of my assistants, I said, "You know, I look at these kids and I think, 'You don't know how to write in cursive, but I don't know how to work a computer, so together, we'll make it all work.'" So, some of those things, just like the clocks. People don't know how to tell time on a clock no more, and I'm goin', "What?" But I can't fault 'em for that, because I don't know how to do some of the things that they know how to do, so it's really intertwining. I can teach you this if you teach me that. So, I think it's interesting.

[00:50:13.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, if somebody wanted to have a career, thinkin' about gettin' into a career in management something very similar to what you've done, what advice would you have for them?

[00:50:26.11]

**Brenda O.:** First of all, I think I would tell them to come in as a crew person. Because when you come in as a manager, you don't understand everything that that crew person goes through. To me, comin' in as a crew person and learnin' what all the detail stuff, what you have to do from the start to the finish, then you understand somebody else's job. It's real easy to come in and boss somebody around. I've seen that happen too many times, because you haven't walked in their footsteps. When you walk in somebody's footsteps and you know the ins and the outs of it, then it's easier to coordinate correcting, disciplining, and showing them the right way to do it. I mean, you can't come in as a boss and know all the rules, all the regulations, and just tell them what to do if you've never done it before. So, to me, bein' a crew member and walkin' and doin' what they do every day, and knowin' the ins and outs, little twerks that maybe can help you here and there, I don't think—you can have all the degrees you want to, but one of the degrees you've got to have is knowin' people are people, and if they're having' a bad day, "Listen. Take five minutes. Take five minutes." And say, "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Sometimes, they're not gonna tell you nothin', but just the fact that you took the time to say, "I care about you," takes a lot. It makes a lot of difference. So, that's the one thing. It's easy to boss people and tell people on paper what to do, but when you're workin' with the public, no, you've got to have that hands-on training.

[00:52:41.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, I think that I've asked all the questions that I needed to ask, but I was wonderin' if you had anything else that you wanted to add or anything you wanted to say that we didn't talk about?

[00:52:55.27]

**Brenda O.:** No, I don't think so. I think you covered it really well. You covered a lot of stuff I wasn't ready for, I don't think. Didn't have my mind—

[00:53:03.07]

**Annemarie A.:** I hope that's okay.

[00:53:03.07]

**Brenda O.:** Oh, yes. Yes, because you made me think about some things, even that I could do back here. So, that was good. That was good. Thank you very much.

[00:53:14.27]

**Annemarie A.:** Thank you. This has been a delight to talk to you.

[00:53:17.17]

**Brenda O.:** You're welcome. Oh, you're so sweet. I'd talk to you anytime.

[*End of interview*]