



**Brenda Salser**  
**Bessemer, Alabama**  
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Date: February 4, 2020  
Location: The Bright Star Restaurant, Bessemer, AL  
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
Length: Twenty seven minutes  
Project: Career Servers

[Interviewer's Note: Ms. Salser was on shift during the interview, so audio contains interruptions.]

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:00.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Today is February 4, 2020. I'm Annemarie Anderson recording in Bessemer, Alabama at The Bright Star restaurant, and I'm here with Ms. Brenda Salser. Ms. Salser, would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us your name and what you do.

[00:00:17.13]

**Brenda S.:** My name is Brenda Salser. I work at The Bright Star restaurant in Bessemer. I am a server, manager, cashier, in charge of all the servers' scheduling, bartenders, cashiers. And I also serve tables.

[00:00:32.27]

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

[00:00:34.20]

**Brenda S.:** Oh, yeah. I have a large plate, but I enjoy it.

[00:00:38.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, let's start off and, would you tell us—if you're comfortable with it—your birthdate and the place you were born?

[00:00:46.05]

**Brenda S.:** I was born January 16, 1949, here in Jefferson County.

[00:00:50.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And did you grow up here?

[00:00:53.03]

**Brenda S.:** I grew up till I was about nine, and from nine till about nineteen, I moved to California—San Diego—went to school there, went to one year at San Diego State, then moved back here, where I was from.

[00:01:04.18]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you tell me your early memories of Jefferson County, Birmingham, and Bessemer and just the general area?

[00:01:11.26]

**Brenda S.:** I was never really familiar with Bessemer until I really started working here, because I lived in Birmingham. Then I moved to McCalla. So, when I moved to McCalla, that's when I learned about Bessemer. I just really—it's really strange, I'd never really heard about this restaurant. I just came in here one day to look for a part-time job. I was working at another job full-time. I needed supplement income, and this is where it is. This is where I learned all about Bessemer, from here.

[00:01:41.05]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit—I'm interested in your early food memories of Birmingham. What were some of the restaurants you might remember from it?

[00:01:50.12]

**Brenda S.:** Michael's, which was a steakhouse in Birmingham. The Fish Market, Sarris's, over on Highway 31. Lovoy's Restaurant, that's where I worked for thirteen years as a server, very popular, family-owned restaurant. It is not in business now, but that's what I remember about Birmingham.

[00:02:12.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. How do you spell that restaurant's name, just so I—Lovoy's?

[00:02:12.25]

**Brenda S.:** L-o-v-o-y-s. They're out of business now, but they were on Green Springs, and then at some point they moved to Soho's in Homewood, and then eventually went out of business. But I worked there. That's where I had my first serving job. Then I needed a part-time job, so I came to work here at the Bright Star. Then this is so much closer to my house, and Mr. Jimmy wanted me here, so I came to work here full-time, which is the best decision I could've made.

[00:02:43.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, let's maybe get into that, and we'll talk a little bit about your job. So, you said you spent a year at San Diego State?

[00:02:53.06]

**Brenda S.:** Uh-huh.

[00:02:53.06]

**Annemarie A.:** Could you tell me a little bit about your education? What did you major in?

[00:02:56.20]

**Brenda S.:** I did business machines; calculators and business machines, small computers. It's been a long time ago, so it wasn't like it is now, and I did a year there and then we moved back here.

[00:03:07.23]

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

[00:03:07.23]

**Brenda S.:** Went to work for the phone company as a switchboard operator, worked there for a while. But then, because of transportation issues, I ended up not—being able to work there. So, I came to work in a restaurant.

[00:03:24.02]

**Annemarie A.:** So, what drew you to get a job in the restaurant industry?

[00:03:26.16]

**Brenda S.:** I had a friend that I knew. Me and my husband at that time would go to a restaurant, Lovoy's. My husband knew the owner. We would go there and eat on the weekends, and they needed a server. I wasn't working at that time; I had just had my youngest daughter. So, they talked me into comin' to work there. I did, and I've never looked back.

[00:03:47.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Do you remember your first kind of, I guess, day or days in the restaurant industry?

[00:03:53.18]

**Brenda S.:** Yes, I do. I didn't know anything about restaurants; I didn't know anything about the food, but they taught me that. That's where I learned everything. I'll never forget the very first time I waited on somebody, and the girl that was trainin' me, I went to take their order, and I pointed my pen at somebody for the next one, and she about had a fit, so I never did that again. But that's where I learned everything, was there.

[00:04:15.16]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Who was—

[00:04:18.17]

[Unidentified male]: I'm sorry. I need to turn the—

[Pause in recording]

[00:04:20.28]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. We were talkin' about your first server, your first service position at Lovoy's. Could you tell me a little bit about maybe some of the folks there who taught you how to be a waitress?

[00:04:36.01]

**Brenda S.:** Well, Linda was the one that talked me into goin' to work there. She taught me. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Lovoy were also involved in the restaurant. They taught me, as well. It was Italian food, and it was not a very big menu; it was very simple to learn. [Snaps fingers] It was just easy. When I came to work here, it was so easy for my transition, because so many of the customers I waited on them at Lovoy's. They were customers there and here both.

[00:05:06.20]

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

[00:05:08.23]

**Brenda S.:** I waited on their children when they were babies and then to now, they all have children of their own.

[00:05:13.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Do you remember what year you started waitin' tables?

[00:05:18.07]

**Brenda S.:** 1979. Long time ago. [Laughter]

[00:05:24.13]

**Annemarie A.:** What year did you start workin' here at the Bright Star?

[00:05:28.11]

**Brenda S.:** In the mid-[19]80s. I worked here part-time for, like, three years. I worked here when I wasn't workin' at Lovoy's.

[00:05:37.04]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. So you picked up shifts here.

[00:05:40.08]

**Brenda S.:** Uh-huh.

[00:05:40.14]

**Annemarie A.:** So, how did you get this job here?



[00:05:47.01]

**Brenda S.:** I came in to apply for a part-time job, and the guy that was in charge then, the general manager, Tommy Finley, he told me they didn't hire part-time people here, that everybody here was full-time. So, the next day, the head server, Sherry, called me. I knew Sherry too, 'cause we knew her husband. She called me, she said, "Mr. Nicky wants you to come in and talk to you. He's one of the owners." And he hired me. He said, "I don't care if you're part-time or not. I like the way you look, the way you present yourself. I want you to work here." So, that's how I got to work here.

[00:06:24.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, could you tell me about how is the Bright Star different than other places that you've worked, or how is it similar?

[00:06:31.15]

**Brenda S.:** It's very organized here. They have a certain system, the way they take the orders from left to right. You don't ask people who has what; who's eating what. You know exactly—once you take the order, you know exactly where the salads go, exactly where the food goes. Any dessert, it's just a matter of gettin' it right in order. The owners here really do—they don't ask you to do anything they wouldn't do themselves, and it's a good place to work. Very organized. Extremely organized.

[00:07:01.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes a lot of sense. I'm wonderin', too, so you talked about when you started—when you came here, and everybody here is mostly full-time employees. Could you talk a little bit about some of those folks who you first worked with, or who you've worked with throughout the years who were kind of an important part of front of the restaurant?

[00:07:23.00]

**Brenda S.:** Yeah. Sherry, the server that hired me, of course. Brenda Adams, and she still works here three days a week. Ms. **Micky**, she was from Japan. She was a waitress, been here a long time. Ann **Mull**. There was a lot of them. Faye. A lot, they've been here a long time, and they all taught me. It was actually easy to learn, 'cause their system was so easy. We didn't have a computer at that time; everything was hand-written. Eventually, through the years, we got into the computer, point of sales system.

[00:07:54.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And Sonya and I were actually talkin' about this in her interview, the point of sale system and how that kinda like changed the way the restaurant kind of made things a little more efficient. Could you talk about your experience with technology and the way that that's kind of changed in your career?

[00:08:13.01]

**Brenda S.:** Well, it changes everything, because every time you write something on a piece of paper, it's hard to—the computer system, you can go back and look at things. You can

change things, and you can make sure everything's right. It's more efficient, and it's a better way to handle your business. It's different. If you turn something in to the kitchen, you know the time it went into the kitchen. If it's a while for it to come out, you know you can take the ticket back and say, "Hey. This has been in here thirty-five minutes, forty minutes." Well, when you hand-write it, there was no, nothin' there.

[00:08:47.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes a lot of sense. That's great. I'm wonderin', too, so for people who don't know, who've never visited The Bright Star, could you kind of describe the restaurant and tell them kind of what you guys serve and what your restaurant's like.

[00:09:01.12]

**Brenda S.:** We serve steaks and seafood. It's a good seafood restaurant. Our fish comes in whole two to three times a week from the Gulf. We have our own fish room where they clean the fish, cut 'em, fillet 'em and cut 'em into fish steaks as we need 'em. But we have a Greek-style tenderloin, which is one of our signature dishes. That steak will absolutely melt in your mouth, and the customers love it. They love it. As far as a steak, you won't get any better. But the seafood's good. We have good fried shrimp. At lunch, we have good vegetables and some meat and three-type thing. We have a lot of seafood on our lunch menu, though. We have salmon, catfish, snapper, amberjack, which we got some in today. We have good food, good seafood, good steaks.

[00:09:51.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you kind of walk me through a typical workday for you?

[00:09:55.26]

**Brenda S.:** Okay. It just depends on what I'm doing. A manager, a server. If I'm a manager, when I get here, I make sure everything is set up and ready to go for that shift. Make sure all the dishes durin' the day get back to the dish hall so we can get 'em washed and brought back out. Make sure all the servers know the menu, and just check the customers; make sure all the guests are okay. If there is a problem, take care of it. Make sure that it's handled right. As a server, I come in and set my station up and get ready to take care of my customers, my guests.

[00:10:33.07]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, I know you're also the head server here. What are those responsibilities that are a part of that title?

[00:10:42.19]

**Brenda S.:** I make all the scheduling for the servers. I have a calendar, or we have HotSchedules now where they can request time off. I take care of all that. I make sure that I also do reservations as well. So, I have to look at the sheet for the next day and make sure I have enough servers. You plan on so many servers at the beginning when you make the schedule, but as you add parties and different reservations, you may have to get other people to work. So, that's what I do, basically. But I do servers, cashier, hosts, bartenders.

[00:11:16.21]

**Annemarie A.:** That's a lot of—

[00:11:19.05]

**Brenda S.:** Yeah. It is a lot. [Laughter] It's a big schedule.

[00:11:21.29]

**Annemarie A.:** I believe it. There's a lot of dining rooms in here. So that's pretty—that's great.

Could you tell me a little bit, too, about—I'm interested in how you guys are a pretty well-oiled machine here. How do you go about training new hires, like new servers?

[00:11:43.13]

**Brenda S.:** In fact, I'm training two right now. I go over the menu with them. I let them work with another server, and I work with them as well. I watch them to learn the menu, explain to 'em about the food, and like to—the week, the times they're training, to recognize the food and the place, make sure they get the orders come out in the right order, left to right. Just things like that; make sure they're aware of the food. And give good service.

[00:12:16.19]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes sense. What's good service to you?

[00:12:17.24]

**Brenda S.:** Good service to me is prompt service. People that come in at lunch, and especially in this restaurant here, they don't like to sit unattended for very long. That's what I do as a manager also. If I see someone sitting, I go get their drink order. If the server's busy and can't get their order, I get their order and turn it in for the server. If I need to serve salads, I do that, too, and that catches the server up; gives them a little bit of breathing room. But you want to make sure that they're recognized. Nobody likes to sit unattended for a long time. You make sure that you recognize 'em, get something in front of 'em, whether it's water, a cocktail, wine, whatever they want to drink.

[00:12:58.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too, about some of your regular clientele.

I'm sure that you probably have some call parties, but are there any memorable folks who you get to see on a weekly basis or regularly?

[00:13:13.19]

**Brenda S.:** It just depends. I have a lot of different call customers, and they don't come in every week sometimes. Sometimes they may come in every other week or once a month, but they come in regularly, you know? I enjoy my call customers. They're good. It's almost like a business aspect of it, you know? They're my customers, but I've had call customers all during the years. I used to have a group that came in on Fridays—it was like ten or twelve of 'em, every Friday. But as they've gotten older, a lot of 'em have passed away, and now it's down to two. They come in every Friday night. That's good.

[00:13:52.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good that they still come in. That's nice.

[00:13:54.09]

**Brenda S.:** Uh-huh.

[00:13:56.03]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, we've talked a little bit about what you think is good service, but I'm also interested in kind of like the idea of hospitality and how that's similar but not the same thing as service. I was wondering if you could give your definition for hospitality and what that means to you.

[00:14:10.13]

**Brenda S.:** Hospitality, to me, is to make the customers welcome. Make them feel comfortable when they sit down. Smile. Everybody loves to see someone smiling. You know? Just be friendly. Just make them feel at home here; make them feel like they're here, it's your home. Just treat this as your house, and take care of your guests the same.

[00:14:33.24]

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

[00:14:35.16]

**Brenda S.:** Okay?

[00:14:35.16]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense. Well, tell me, too, about . . . let's see. Tell me about . . .

[00:14:43.29]

**Brenda S.:** I'm gonna be right back. Gimme just one minute.

[00:14:46.24]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. You're good.

[Pause in recording]

[00:14:47.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, we're back. I was wonderin', this is somethin' that's interesting to me looking at Birmingham and how this project's been different from other places, and we've talked to a lot of women about their work as women in front of house and food and beverage. I was wondering, what has been your experience being a woman in this industry?

[00:15:12.08]

**Brenda S.:** Well, at the beginning, it was all men. And they just have started, we just have had women in the last years—of course, Jimmy really . . . trusted me in anything, watching the restaurant, and it makes me feel proud as a woman to know that I can do everything



that most of the men do. For so long, it was just all men managers, all men managers.

Now, it's changed over. We have more female managers here than we do men.

[00:15:40.26]

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

[00:15:41.09]

**Brenda S.:** So, that's good. I enjoy it, and I just think it sends a good message. I've had customers tell me that it's nice to see a female up front. You know? That—it's good. Real good.

[00:15:54.17]

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

[00:15:57.04]

**Brenda S.:** Like I said it, for a long time, it was just men. But now, as everything is in the world, now it's changed. Everything changes every day, and you have to change with it. I enjoy this part of it.

[00:16:10.07]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. Was that challenging, tryin' to break into that role?

[00:16:13.27]

**Brenda S.:** Well, it's not really challenging. It can be difficult at times and still is. Male dominance is very strong. I'm sure you know that as well as anybody when you're in a workforce, so you just have to be able to hold your own and do it. It's really not—you can do it. It's easy. It can be challenging, but it's okay. You know? You can win that challenge. [Laughter]

[00:16:43.08]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense. I was wonderin', too, when did you decide that this is what you wanted to do as a career?

[00:16:50.13]

**Brenda S.:** Well, I had four children that I had to raise by myself. I was workin' in an office makin' . . . \$7.50 an hour. When I first came to work at Lovoy's, I was still married but not . . . it was okay, it was just iffy. I had left where I was workin'. I just couldn't take—\$7.50 an hour is not a lot of money. Bein' as a server, you actually work on a commission. I mean, it's not a commission from the restaurant, but it is to you, because you give good service, your sales are good, you're gonna make better money. There was no . . . stopping what you could make. Some days are better than others, but average on a whole, if you gave your customers good service, they took good care of you.

[00:17:43.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes sense.

[00:17:45.26]

**Brenda S.:** And it turned into—I mean, I raised four children doin' it.

[00:17:48.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. We were talkin' about this, actually, and I've asked everybody about the conversation surrounding tipping—tipping, no tipping. There are a lot of complicated opinions about that. What are your thoughts about that kind of debate that's goin' on in the food world right now?

[00:18:08.02]

**Brenda S.:** What do you mean? About tipping?

[00:18:09.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. So, there are restaurants comin' out that are like, no tipping, and people are getting paid a higher wage to make up for that difference.

[00:18:16.29]

**Brenda S.:** I think that they should. I think tipping is a good thing, because it gives the server more incentive to sell. Because the more you sell, the higher your sales are, usually the higher your tip is going to be. I think that restaurants that are doing that, in the end, could be hurting their service, because you're making the same thing an hour. So it doesn't matter. You don't have to—I don't know if you understand what I'm saying. It doesn't matter. You can do a good job, a great job, or you can do, "Alright. I'm gettin' a paycheck

next week, and this is what I'm makin'." You know? I think that's good. It's an incentive to me.

[00:18:57.24]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes sense. I know, too, I've learned from talking to a lot of different people, a good experience at a restaurant and a good restaurant ecosystem, if you will, is really helpful if front of house and back of house have a good, collaborative relationship. Could you talk about the relationship of front of house and back of house here, and what kinda relationship you guys have to have?

[00:19:29.07]

**Brenda S.:** It's hard. You have to have a good relationship with the back of the house. We've changed—we lost so many people that have been back there for so long. You have to be able to get along with them, and you have to be able to treat them with the same respect as anyone else. That's the same thing with the dishwashers. You know, the dish hall is probably the hardest job in this restaurant. Probably the most overlooked. But those people that are in that deserve more respect than anybody, because that's a hard job. And even the cooks, as well, they . . . you just have to be able to get along with them. Respect 'em. Don't look down. Talk to them, just talk to them with respect. Because if you don't, there's problems, and that's the way with any restaurant, I'm sure. But you have to treat 'em with respect.

[00:20:23.28]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. I wonder, too . . . are you good?

[00:20:31.00]

**Brenda S.:** No, go ahead. You're fine. I was lookin'—

[00:20:35.01]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me about the most challenging and the most rewarding parts of your job.

[00:20:41.02]

**Brenda S.:** The challenging, to me, I don't know . . . is handling the servers, because there's so many different personalities in this group. I have so many younger ones that I've hired recently, but I've been blessed in the fact that this last group that I've had have been very well. Making sure that everybody looks presentable and neat—because I'm a believer that you should look neat and have makeup on. Nothing, the customers want to see someone that looks nice. That, and to me, that's the hardest part about my job. The reservations I can get through no problem, but tryin' to keep the servers at an even base—get 'em here on time. Bein' in a restaurant, it's different than other, it's not like workin' in a corporate office. We have to be on time. It's hard to get 'em here on time, but we try. [Laughter] We try our best. That's, to me, is the hardest, is handling the servers.

[00:21:54.24]

**Annemarie A.:** How many folks do you manage on any given day?

[00:21:58.13]

**Brenda S.:** Fifteen.

[00:22:00.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's a lot of people.

[00:22:02.26]

**Brenda S.:** And tonight, I've got everybody right now. I've got the dish hall, the whole thing, until somebody else comes in. But, you know, that's not a problem. I've got it. We're not busy right now. It's early, so I'm okay.

[00:22:15.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes sense. What's the most rewarding part of your job? What's your favorite part?

[00:22:19.28]

**Brenda S.:** I enjoy watching the customers enjoy their food. I've done this so long. People go out to eat; our food is pricey. It's not, you know, it's good food, but it's pricier. So, you want to make sure they enjoy everything. Just watchin' 'em smile and enjoy, I do a lot of parties—retirement parties, rehearsal dinners, birthday parties. I enjoy bein' a part of those families, and watchin' them enjoy their family.

[00:22:52.08]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. How have you seen the Bright Star change over the years you've been here, either in terms of your position and the work here or even the clientele?

[00:23:06.27]

**Brenda S.:** The clientele, a lot of our clientele—our older clientele—are not here anymore. They've passed away. A lot of the churches that were around here have moved to suburbs. It's changed. We've changed a lot of the things we do. Of course, the point of sale changed a lot. We've changed a lot of the rules: smoking. Because when I first came to work here, they smoked in every dinin' room here. I was a non-smoker, and I was just about smoked out. But through the years, all of that's changed. It's a good, clean atmosphere. Our menu's changed. We've added some things, taken some things off that we used to have. So, it changes every day. Every day is a change.

[00:23:55.09]

**Annemarie A.:** I bet. How has Bessemer changed? How have you seen Bessemer change since you been here?

[00:24:01.16]

**Brenda S.:** These last few years under the mayor that we have now, it's really been a change for the good. He's built the new rec center. They're putting up new buildings. They did the sidewalks and put the benches out front. So, it's really upbeat. It's lookin' better, and it's gonna look even better.

[00:24:17.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good; that's great. Tell me, too, about—so, if you were to give advice—

[00:24:28.18]

**Brenda S.:** One minute.

[00:24:31.19]

[Unidentified female]: [Inaudible 24:32]

[00:24:32.01]

**Brenda S.:** You.

[00:24:33.11]

[Unidentified female]: Me?

[Pause in recording]

[00:24:33.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. And so, I was wondering, so if there's someone who's coming in and who's a new server and who thinks that this is something that they want to do and they want to make this a career, what advice would you have for them?

[00:24:47.02]



**Brenda S.:** You make it a career. So many of 'em ask me, "Can I make money here? Can I do it?" I said, "Yeah, you just gotta do the right thing. You've gotta take care of your customers. We've gotta get here on time. We've got to pay attention, because your customers will take care of you if you take care of them." But just to be a career, you learn. I've been here thirty-one years, and every day, I learn somethin' different. Everything changes every day. So, change with everything. Even if there's some things you don't like. Because nobody likes all the changes that goes on, but you just have to accept 'em and do 'em. Eventually, you may end up lovin' 'em. I just tell 'em, I've got some servers here that are raisin' families here. I've got one server who's like, twenty-three, and has three children. I mean, she . . . and they have a certain amount of money they have to make every week. I try and help 'em with those shifts, if they can make it, and still have their two days off; their off time. Just tell 'em, you know, you can make this your profession. Because really, it's hard to go if you haven't been to college to a business and make really good money, into the corporate world. It's really hard. You can do it. I've had servers and cashiers that have left here and gone to nursin' school. I've got a girl here now that's serving. She's going into business, and she's in her third year of college, but she's worked through here to help pay for her college. So, I've had all kinds. [Laughter]

[00:26:22.17]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure, I bet. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about or I haven't asked you that you want to say?

[00:26:30.03]

**Brenda S.:** No, I think that's all. I enjoy what I do, and like I said, I changed professions a long, long time ago. For me, that was the best decision. I know for some people it would not have been, but like I said, I had to have enough money that I had, and it was like a business to me. So, I did okay. I wouldn't change anything, and I don't look back. I enjoy it.

[00:26:54.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, thank you for talkin' to me.

[00:26:57.07]

**Brenda S.:** And meeting people like you, too.

[00:26:58.26]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah!

[00:27:00.11]

**Brenda S.:** That makes it all better. Got a pretty smile. That makes it right. [Laughter]

[00:27:03.29]

**Annemarie A.:** Thanks. Well, thank you, Ms. Salser.

[00:27:05.15]

**Brenda S.:** Thank you.

*[End of interview]*