



Spencer McMillin
Former Chef at Caritas Village
Memphis, Tennessee

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Annemarie Anderson: Please introduce yourself and then we'll kind of go from there. The questions are super-easy.

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Spencer McMillin: Sounds good.

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AA: So, I will slate the tape here. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance with a remote interview with Mr. Spencer McMillin. Mr. McMillin would you start and introduce yourself; tell us who you are and what you do.

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SM: Okay; well my name is Spencer McMillin. I've been a chef in Memphis for thirty years. I started cooking in 1983. I've done many things in Memphis. The last thing I did for the last nine years before Caritas, I was a culinary school instructor at L'Ecole Culinaire.

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AA: Cool.

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SM: I also at-- concurrently was working for Mike Connolly, Jr. from the Grizzlies as his private chef. Before that--

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AA: That's--

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SM: --before that I ran a bunch of restaurants, EJ's Brasserie, Erling Jensen's Bistro Concept, Café Samovar which was a Russian restaurant down on Front Street. I was there for five years. It was my first chef job, and it was an amazing [Laughter] interesting experience. And then you know I-- River Terrace; I've just been around you know. I counted it the other day; it was 25 restaurants in Memphis that I've worked at.

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AA: That's crazy.

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SM: Yeah; yeah, I've been around. I've been around the block.

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AA: That's so good. Well, and so I know that-- I've-- I've been reading as much as I can about Caritas. But if you would explain to us and tell us a little bit about what Caritas Community Center and Café is, what it does, and then how you got involved?

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SM: Sure. I guess you have to start at the beginning. In 2006, a woman named Onie Johns was disillusioned with her life in Germantown, Tennessee, which is kind of an upper-class suburb. And she just had a calling to go down to the Binghampton neighborhood, which right now it's being gentrified, but back then it was kind of a rough and tumble neighborhood. And she felt the need to give back to the community, so she opened Caritas Village. And her mission was to break down walls of hostility between cultures and races and create a place where people of all cultures, races, creeds, etcetera could come together and break bread. So, she ran a little soup kitchen from 2006 to 2018, and she bowed out and Mac Edwards, who is a very well-known restaurateur in Memphis-- he used to have the Elegant Farmer and The Farmer, Pharm2Fork, very involved in the farm-to-table community-- he took over. Shortly into his tenure he needed a chef, and he knew that the school that I was working at, L'Ecole that I had mentioned before had closed, so he called me up and said, "Hey buddy; come help me out." And I thought I'd be there a couple weeks helping my friend out and then I realized what a beautiful situation it was. Mac being involved in the farm-to-table community, the farmers-- he was one of the leads of the Farmers' Market when it started ten to fifteen years ago; we had all local produce, local meats from Marmilu Farms. I had farmers bringing me just crates full of stuff, and for a chef it was an amazing opportunity. So, I saw opportunity in it, and I ended up staying. And, you know, forming relationships with farmers and chefs. Really beautiful situation, but really one of the biggest things about Caritas is the activism, the food activism, the taking care of those who can't be taken care of. So, part of what we did at Caritas-- and this is what Onie did as well-- is feeding anybody who needed a meal regardless of their ability to pay. So, we would have maybe 20, 30 people a day come in and request what we called a house plate and it was all farm-to-table, chef-created, but we fed the homeless, we fed the disenfranchised a free meal. And, you

know, that was a beautiful thing for me. Another beautiful thing was partnering with local chefs once a month for local dinners that I called chef-partnership dinners, where I would pick a chef, maybe that I hadn't cooked with or one that I had a fractured relationship with or somebody that I really liked, and I would just invite them in and we would cook a three-course meal for up to eighty people. And, it was just a beautiful way to raise money for Caritas and continue the mission. And, let's see; a couple months-- April 10th, we shut down, because of COVID. So--

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AA: Could you talk-- go ahead; sorry.

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SM: No, no; in the lead-up to the shutdown, of course COVID happened mid-March when everything got serious. My wife and I were on a RV trip to Asheville with our father-- my father-in-law. And we realized two days into the trip that it wasn't appropriate to be traveling. Restaurants were closing up. Our friends were losing their jobs. So, we turned back around and went back to Memphis, and in the trip from Pigeon Forge to Memphis we created what we called The Restaurant Workers Unity Project, which kind of extended the mission of Caritas from taking care of those who can't take care of themselves in the neighborhood to not only taking care of them, but taking care of our fellow restaurant workers who were out of work. And, we-- after getting back and realizing that we needed to kind of expand it a little further because not only restaurant workers were losing their jobs, a lot of people were losing their jobs. We opened it up to the whole community. So, we did The Restaurant Workers Unity Project for three weeks in the lead-up to that April 10th shutdown. And, we fed 4,300 people for free based upon the

donations of farmers, other restaurateurs who were shutting their operation; the Rendezvous restaurant, probably when you think of Memphis you think of the Rendezvous restaurant. They closed down and they gave us everything they had as far as barbecue, sauces, and everything. I mean, they gave us probably 200, 300 pounds of meat, so we were able to feed people for free. And, we didn't incur any expenses. It was a beautiful thing. But, I would say-- I just wrote the book. There was about 30 different restaurants and about 30 different individuals that just kept coming up to Caritas and giving us food and telling us they loved what we did. So, we just kept going until we ran out of food.

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AA: That's great.

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SM: Yeah.

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AA: Well, you've kind of explained like how it kind of happened, but I want to go back and ask some specific questions.

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SM: Sure.

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AA: And, I was wondering, can you kind of like-- you've taken us back to that moment you guys were like going on vacation and then decided that like you were coming back. But can you put-- could you like kind of describe how you were feeling, like your thought process about all this when you realized that like the Coronavirus, COVID was something that was really going to impact you and the community that you worked in?

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SM: Sure; yeah, absolutely. We-- the day, to give you some perspective, the day we left town was the day that Tom Hanks announced that he had Coronavirus. Up until then, you know it was--it was scary. It was--it was in the news. People were starting to worry. But we felt pretty confident about, you know we were going to stay in campgrounds, and you know, kind of avoid the public anyway. But the day we left it was Friday the 13, Friday, March 13th. We all kind of looked at each other and said, "Do we really want to do this?" You know we were-- I was nervous. My father-in-law was nervous, and my wife was nervous. And we decided to yeah; let's just push on. Let's not let this ruin our life. So, we pushed on. Saturday the news was grimmer. Sunday the news was-- you know, my father-in-law heard that the President was going to shut the highway down and that travel was going to be prohibited. And, we realized quickly that it was getting apocalyptic. And, Kristin and I, my wife, we talked about what to do about Caritas. Do we shut it down? Do we just do to-go like the rest of our friends were doing and hope that things get better? And that's when we decided no; Caritas is about giving back and taking care of people. It's a Latin word that means love of all people. So, to be true to that mission, we had to go back and kind of brave it out and take care of as many people as we could. But it was a scary thing. I was talking to my friend, Kelly English, who owns Restaurant Iris, and he was getting a

little panicky. We were talking about forming a coalition of chefs to figure out the next move and how to deal with this whole thing. It got serious that weekend. And, when we got-- when we got to Memphis, we felt the panic. This was during the beginning days where there was no toilet paper. People were panic-buying staples. You couldn't find toilet paper or hand sanitizer or masks or anything. So, it quickly turned into a scary situation.

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AA: For sure. Well, talk to me a little bit about what it was like to decide to like open up the café. What was it like to equip and run a café in those early days and throughout the three weeks that you guys stayed open in a pandemic?

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SM: Sure.

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AA: What did that look like for you?

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SM: Sure; yeah. When we decided to do the project, we got back to Memphis. We're a small café; we seat about 70 people. We talked to our cook, Kat-- Kat Barth, and we told her our plan of cooking for the public for free, no money is passed, and we'll just run out of what we got, and then we'll close. Everybody was on board. Our--we are a volunteer-based--our food runners, they run the food out of the kitchen, they're all volunteers. Our cashier is a volunteer. So, we had

a tough time; should we ask our volunteers to come in during this pandemic? What if you know somebody gets COVID and then we're responsible and we've made somebody sick? So, there was a lot of deliberation in the beginning. But, like I said, we realized that this is what Caritas is about. We're going to have to figure out a safe way to feed people. So, what we did is, in the beginning, it was just working off what The Rendezvous gave us the first couple days. We did barbecue nachos. And, we served them outside; we didn't-- we closed the dining room, but we served them outside one of our windows, one of our big picture windows that look in on the dining room. And, the first two, three days, you know we had maybe thirty, forty people show up. And, this was before you know masks were-- you better have your mask on or you're not doing your part. Masks were still kind of a questionable thing, so we didn't have anybody in masks. Nobody was wearing masks. And, then we you know two, three-- one week becomes two weeks and then people had heard about us. Restaurant workers were getting laid off, you know in the hundreds, and they came to us. So, we-- at the end of that three-week run, masks became a thing and we ended up feeding 400 people a day. And, you know thank God that the restaurant community in Memphis is strong. To feed 400 people between two cooks, myself, and Kat, we would have been overwhelmed, just completely overwhelmed. But, because of the volunteer efforts of guys like Steph Cook who owns a place called RAWK'n Grub, he just came and worked for free. We had so many cooks. Melissa--Marissa Griffith from Sweet Grass, she came and volunteered her time. And, we would have four or five people in that kitchen pumping out 400 meals. It was a beautiful, beautiful situation. And, it was kind of ironic that outside you have this air of panic and tension and worry, but inside cooks were cooking, servers were serving, and it seemed normal. So, it was-- it was scary in the beginning, but once we got up and running and realized what a beautiful thing we were doing, everybody was kind of happy, which sounds

completely ironic during a time like that. But, it was such a positive experience that you know we all felt pretty good about what we were doing. And what--

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AA: For sure.

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SM: --what happened at the end is to give you the politically correct version of the event, we were having--my wife set up a system where everybody was six-feet apart. She created this cool little gated thing where she kept everybody apart, but when you have 400 people descending on your restaurant two, three hours, that gets kind of hard to keep up with. So, we did have people pushing and shoving and getting into fights, people cutting in line, and finally, my wife had to go out there and break it up. And, we decided at that point that it was getting unsafe to keep running. We realized after you know dealing with COVID for a month that this was serious, and we could be putting the volunteers and our own health at risk. And, we decided that day at-- that day of that last event to just shutter it. So, we shut that down, but there's a new project that we started that we're still actually involved with, and we can talk about that. It's called Feed the Frontlines Memphis. Have you heard of that?

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AA: I have. I saw it on your-- on the Caritas website. Could you talk a little bit about that?

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SM: Sure; yeah. About a week before the restaurant project, we shuttered that, I got a text from one of my friends, Caroline Norris that her and her friend Kelsey wanted to set up a nonprofit to not only take care of the restaurants, but to take care of the frontline workers, the hospital workers. So, the idea was to ask the public for donations, hire restaurants that were struggling, give them a nice, healthy boost, some of that donation, and they in turn would create chef-driven meals for the frontline workers. So, here we are I guess three and a half, four months later, and we're still because of the generosity of the public during that time, still able to feed the frontline workers. So, yeah, and the restaurant gets a \$1,500 allowance and they create a healthy meal you know preferably with local ingredients. That's a big thing at Caritas and that's a big thing with me and my wife is that these guys use local ingredients. So, they use local farmer ingredients to create a nice healthy meal for the frontline workers. The frontline workers love it because they're getting high-quality food and they don't have to pay, and they don't have to leave the operation to do so. And, the restaurants are thankful that they have maybe a little bit of stimulus money, I call it, to help pay their employees and help pay their vendors. So, when my wife and I-- we've got a couple chef friends running the operation right now while we're traveling. But, when we get back, Kristin and I are going to start cooking and delivering more frontline meals until the donation money runs out. It was amazing how everybody came together and donated. When we put the call out that we were going to feed the frontline workers we got \$50,000 just like that. I mean it was incredible.

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AA: That's amazing.

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SM: Yeah; yeah, total we raised \$80,000 to feed the frontline. So, if you do the math, \$80,000 divided by 1,500 you know there's 60 meals that we get to feed the frontline workers. And, we're very privileged and humbled to be able to do that work still.

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AA: That's great. How many restaurants have you guys partnered with to make that happen?

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SM: I think 25 to 30, you know. At first, it was my colleagues, people I knew, but we opened it just like with the Restaurant Workers Unity Project. We opened it up to all restaurants. Anybody who, you know, a little boost, anybody that needs some help, just contact Feed the Frontlines on the Facebook page, the Feed the Frontlines Facebook page, and we'll just put you on the list no questions asked. If you can-- if you can tell us that you'll provide a well thought-out healthy meal using mostly local ingredients, then we'd be glad to put you on the list. So, we had-- immediately we had about twenty, twenty five restaurants ask us if they could do it. We said, "hell yeah." Let's do it.

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AA: That's great. Well, this is kind of like going back a little bit but also coming into the Feed the Frontlines group, too, but I'm interested, too, in especially in this moment with the pandemic, there's like sometime-- sometimes a scarcity of like things and sometimes a surplus of things, depending on you know, like flour and meat and getting those things. And I was wondering

about the relationships that you talked about of people like Marmilu Farms and Humboldt and other people like that. Could you talk a little bit about the--the relationship you have with those farmers?

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SM: Sure.

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AA: And those local farms, and kind of what specifically they supplied and the restaurants, because you mentioned The Rendezvous. Jonathan Magallanes when I was talking about-- talking to him said that he helped you guys. So, if you could just talk about that.

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SM: Yeah; well, a big part-- and not to bore you with history, but when I was teaching at L'Ecole Culinaire, I became a big proponent of the farm-to-table. I had always been, but it never really was a thing in Memphis. But while teaching at L'Ecole, I really became interested in food activism and local farms. So, while I was there, I would take students to farms on Saturdays and we would plant and harvest and do all that kind of stuff. So, I was already kind of into it by the time I got to Caritas. So, when Mac Edwards took over and then he hired me as the chef, it became very important to both of us to support local farms. So, I put the call out, and when I put the call out that means I got on Facebook and I said, "Hey, any local farms that want to sell to a nonprofit restaurant that feeds the homeless, bring it on." So, I met a lot of interesting people. Dave from Claybrook Farms, my tomato farmer Richard Simmons; he has Old World Farms. We

have-- there's just too many farms to mention, but it's a big deal. Right now, my wife and I are partnering with a local farm, because as you know or maybe you don't, I don't know, because of the big meat plants closing out West, people have been trying to buy local-- local meat. And, one of the problems with that is that there's only two processors within a 100-mile radius of Memphis. And all the meat producers have the animals, but they can't get it processed. So, there's been a bottleneck. So, my wife and I are involved with a farm, Lightfoot Farm in Millington, and they are working towards getting a third processing facility to alleviate that bottleneck.

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AA: That's awesome.

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SM: Yeah; so right now, we're helping them raise money but it's-- really what it's going to be is a community processing facility for all the local producers that can't get into the other ones. And, it's going to be a retail outlet. We're going to hire butchers that are out of work to come do the butchery. We're going to have a value-added component to that where we're doing charcuterie and sausages and stuff like that. The name of the game right now is to think outside the box. I've noticed a lot of restaurants that have the ability to think outside the box are the ones that are still open. So, we're trying to--we're trying to approach that food security situation the same way by thinking outside the box.

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AA: That's great. That is so great. And I-- I'm wondering as well, I think you guys have really jumped in and you're working in ways-- you and your wife, and then you know your relationship with other folks in the food world in Memphis. Y'all are really working together to try to make a difference for not just like restaurants, but also it seems like farms and like people who are involved in animal husbandry as well.

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SM: Yes.

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AA: But I was wondering; people have talked a lot about like normalcy, and I say that with like quotes, and what like-- what a new normal is and was there ever a normal that's kind of like this kind of question? But I was wondering about your ideas about that specifically; how has this pandemic changed your perspective as a chef or impacted your perspective as a chef and what you've learned from it?

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SM: Food safety is not a joke, and you know I taught Serve Safe at L'Ecole Culinaire, so I was aware of it. But you know it's something that everybody takes seriously now. Everybody has hand sanitizer. You know masks are required. It's-- for me it's kind of-- for me to be honest with you, it's kind of created a necessary jolt to the system. There was a lot of complacency with sanitation, a lot of complacency with rules and regulations; not that COVID is a good thing. I-- I wish it never happened, but to find some bright lights, some silver linings in the situation, it's

really caused everybody in the industry to (a) think outside the box, and (b) really concern themselves deep down with the human condition and taking care of people. I think a lot of people in the hospitality industry-- and I understand why it happens, but there's a complacency that sets in. You just kind of-- I've been doing this myself for thirty seven years and you just kind of get complacent. You know, this is how I cook. This is how I run a kitchen. And, you just kind of go like that. This has caused everybody to kind of rethink hospitality and to realize that hospitality is about taking care of people. It's not about a paycheck. It's not about getting on the cover of *Food Arts* magazine. It's actually about taking care of people. So, I choose to see this as a really horrible situation that we can emerge from and in a better way than we were before it happened, so--.

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AA: That's great.

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SM: That's kind of-- that's what I think about what's going on right now. Now, we're right in the middle of it, and I'll tell you. I've been traveling around the South. We've been going to restaurants in Nashville and Asheville and Charleston. And there's--there's a worry and there's a depression. Everybody is concerned; everybody is worried that their restaurant is not going to be there. Some people have lost their restaurants. So, by no means am I saying that this is a positive situation. But I think on balance, at the end of this thing, if everybody realizes why we cook, then we will be able to survive and we'll be able to flourish.

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AA: That's really beautiful. I'm wondering, too; this is kind of a follow-up question, but it goes back to your time working at Caritas, but how did working at Caritas change your perspective about food, if it did?

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SM: Um, well-- sure; yeah. I mean before Caritas, cooking farm-to-table, and of course every chef that hears this is going to say yeah, farm-to-table, I get it. Food is made on a farm and it's put on a table. I've heard a lot of chefs kind of pooh-pooh the idea. But I've always believed in it. But, before Caritas, for me it was more of a theoretical idea. It was one that I wanted to imbue in my students and send them out into the world knowing local farmers, knowing that those products are available, and knowing that most of the time those products taste better. Putting it into practice myself, I was always the guy prior to that in my chef career, the guy that would just get on the phone and order some meat from Buckhead Beef and they would bring it in shrink wrap, and I would cook it. And I had no connection to the food. Caritas changed all that. Caritas for me, I met the people and I made a point of meeting the people that were growing the food. I figured if I was going to preach this stuff at culinary school then if I ever had another restaurant kitchen to run, I better put it into practice, or I was going to be a hypocrite. So, I--I made a point of becoming as farm-to-table local as I could. And it turned out to be probably one of the best career decisions I ever made because I formed lifelong relationships and deep relationships with people that I would have never met. And you know, people like Dave from Claybrook Farms. He's thinking outside the box; he owns a Black Angus farm. And he was panicky about not being able to get his animals processed, but he's partnering with me and my wife on this

processing facility. Farmers like Richard Simmons from Old World Farms, who grew the most amazing and grows the most amazing heirloom vegetables you'd ever want to see, I mean this stuff should be on the cover of *Food & Wine* magazine. But nobody knew who he was, and nobody would give him a chance. He would go into restaurant kitchens and tell people who he was, and they were like yeah, just leave your tomatoes at the door and I'll get to them later. And he did the same thing to me. He bursted into my kitchen one day and made me taste his tomatoes. But because he did that, I realized how amazing the produce he produces and how it's heirloom varieties. He's like the Sean Brock of Memphis you know. Not a chef of course but bringing back those old heirloom vegetables, Italian heirloom vegetables, Japanese heirloom vegetables, heirloom vegetables that have been grown around here but then disappeared; meeting all these people has enriched my life. And, it's been a beautiful thing dealing with these farmers and making these relationships. And I tell you what, you know, supporting the local economy makes me feel pretty good about the situation, too. So, it's-- it really-- I spent thirty years as a chef and one and a half years at the end of it, really understanding where food came from, and knowing the people who grew it and forming those relationships. So, Caritas for me was one of the most important experiences I've ever had in the restaurant business. And, that's why I chose to write a book about it.

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AA: That's great. That's great. Well, I have one more question for you and then I'll open it up and see if there is anything else you want to talk about. But, I was wondering, too, this is like a-- this is the big theoretical question, but what do you hope to see going forward for restaurants in Memphis, in the South, and then in the United States as a whole?

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SM: Well, I think to answer that question first of all, you have to address the obvious that even when the virus isn't *the virus*, restaurants are going to be different. We've all talked about that. Chef friends and cook friends and my wife and I. We've talked about how it's going to be different. I'd like to see, and I hope to see, and I'm encouraged by what I see that local products are going to take center stage. Community involvement is going to take center stage. I don't know how to express it; a newfound interest in the tenets of hospitality being that we exist as people in the hospitality industry-- chefs, cooks, bartenders, waiters-- to make people happy. And, for that complacency that I felt before to disappear. And, I think once we get through this rough patch it's going to be a lot better. You always hear about, you know, look at the example that happened in New Orleans after Katrina. I mean that town was devastated. I've read books on the-- what's happened, what happened during Katrina and just the scary, scary stuff. But, if you go down to New Orleans, post-Katrina, the food scene-- there was a civic pride that overtook the city. Chefs were coming there in droves and competing for the best food. So, it was an amazing-- I always tell my friends that eating in New Orleans after Katrina was so much better, and it was always a great food town. So, I'm hoping that that is what we see in the country. I don't have an answer to the question of where are all the people in the industry going to go know? And, that's what concerns me. And, that's what my wife and I would like to work towards; how can we make our dent in that situation? But I think and I hope that the situation will be better, and people will be more focused in on why they cook, they'll be more focused in on eating and supporting local and taking care of each other. That's the most important part. And, I think, and I believe in my heart that that's going to happen.

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AA: That's great. And, I have one more question related not to necessarily like this moment, this pandemic, but this moment is kind of also a reckoning in a lot of restaurants throughout the United States in regards to like #MeTooMovement that's been going on a long time, but especially as kind of connected to the you know movement that's come out of George Floyd's death. And I was wondering, what do you think about that moment as well, this moment as well, this kind of like I've heard it described as like a second pandemic?

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SM: Yeah.

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AA: This kind of like interesting moment and how it's going to impact the food and beverage industry?

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SM: Well of course, you know these videos of police beating Black people, they're just jarring and alarming. And, it's a very real situation. And on top of what's going on with COVID, it's almost too much to handle. I am encouraged that people are finally getting up and saying, "We're not going to do this anymore. We're not going to put up with this." Black, white, Asian, whatever. Everybody is kind of sick of it and they're protesting. I think a potential outcome could be being in lockstep with what happens with the restaurant industry. I think you know-- I don't know if we're ever going to get rid of racism, but bringing it out into the light and exposing

it is the first step in getting rid of it. And, I hope that the trends that I see that-- you know, I don't know what defund the police means but I know that there's an energy behind that sentiment that needs to continue--not defund the police, but let's bring this stuff out into the light and the people that are responsible for it need to be held accountable for it. How is that-- I don't exactly know how the Black Lives Matter Movement is going to affect the hospitality industry, as I don't think anybody could really know. But one thing I do know in Memphis is that chefs like Kelly English are making a point to highlight the Black chefs in town. And it's not just with Kelly English; it's with everybody. There's a movement in the restaurant industry in Memphis to highlight the cooking of the Alcenia's and Chef Bala, and just all the Black chefs in town. So, there is awareness that's being discovered. I don't know how that's going to play out, you know, but I think two-- these two pandemics I guess we'll call them, these two events, are going to lead to progress.

00:37:27

AA: That's great. Thank you. I just thought that's something that I should probably ask about, too, because that's something that's in the last month been just as big. But those are the only questions I had to ask you. Is there anything you'd like to share or anything we didn't talk about that you'd like to mention?

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SM: I just want to share that we are putting the final touches on the Caritas Cookbook. It's called *The Caritas Cookbook, A Year in the Life with Recipes*, and there are 60 recipes and it's a story of that year of meeting these farmers, of working with other local chefs, of feeding those

who can't feed themselves, and my recollections on that amazing year. So, I'd-- I'd just like to put a plug in for that. It'll be out soon. We're going to self-publish. But I think it's--it's important to get that story out. So, it's called *The Caritas Cookbook, A Year in the Life with Recipes*.

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AA: Oh, that sounds great. That's great. Well, thank you so much for talking to me, especially on your vacation. [Laughter]

00:38:33

SM: Oh, you're quite welcome.

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AA: Okay; I'm going to stop recording right now and it's going to take a minute to download.

[End of Interview]