



Donna Mason
Joe's Drive-In Chicken

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Interviewer: Sara Wood
Transcription: Dana Bialek
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Project: Kentucky Chili Bun

[00:00:00.00]

Start of Interview

[00:00:29.23]

Donna Mason: My name is Donna Mason. We're at Joe's Drive-In Chicken in Isom, Kentucky

Sara Wood: And for the record can you tell me your birthday?

DM: April 16, 1977.

SW: I wanted you to start by telling me a little bit about who Joe Peck is and how this place started.

[00:01:03.12]

DM: Joe Peck was my grandfather. And this is actually our fiftieth anniversary year. It was established in 1966. He started the business, and it's been here - still going strong fifty years later.

SW: Can you tell me a little bit about your grandfather. What was he like?

DM: He passed early in my life. I don't remember a whole lot about him. But he had several different jobs. He was also a police officer in Whitesburg, Kentucky, for some time, and a business owner. So he ventured out in different avenues of his career. But he started the actual first Joe's Chicken— was in Whitesburg— now where Long John Silver's is at. That was actually the first business. And I'm not really sure how we ventured to Isom, but he moved down to Isom years after that. And we've been here ever since.

SW: So did he grow up in Whitesburg?

[00:02:09.26]

DM: I think so. I don't know a lot about his history.

SW: How about your grandmother?

DM: She actually worked in the cafeteria at the schools. So she was a lunch lady.

SW: Awesome. And what's her name?

DM: Blanche. My mom actually started helping her dad when she was twelve years old at the restaurant in Whitesburg and worked all through high school. So she worked there. And still helps me here now.

SW: And what's your mom's name?

DM: Cora. And she married my dad which was Donald, and they're Sturgil.

[00:02:48.25]

SW: I'm sure that maybe she told you some stories about working there when she was growing up. What did she tell you about it?

DM: She said that it was, you know, they were really busy, and it was a happening place in Whitesburg. Back years ago there wasn't that many restaurants, so they stayed busy, and I guess he thought they were so busy that he would just move it down here and keep going. She always laughs that she never got paid. He didn't give her a paycheck or anything. He just let her go buy...back then there were records. She always wanted a record and a new pair of pantyhose with the money that she earned. And her sister thought that was just so silly that she got a record and a pair of pantyhose every time she went to town. [00:03:38.21] But she thought she earned it because she worked hard. And also, when she was sixteen, he did buy her a new Volkswagen. I think it was yellow. So she finally got paid after all of those years of work.

SW: That's awesome. And I guess when you are a teenager you might just spend it. So getting a new car is awesome.

DM: She did spend what she got. But she did get a new car. Back then that was pretty amazing.

SW: Did she grow up in Whitesburg?

DM: Yes, she grew up in Whitesburg.

SW: And for folks who aren't familiar with Whitesburg and this area here in Letcher County, can you explain what it's like here in your experience? Or describe it for people who haven't been here.

DM: We're a small area. Isom is just outside of the outskirts of Whitesburg. It's kind of a community in its own. It's still small and we're just country people - Appalachian. The main part of the city in Whitesburg would be the bank, the courthouse, and Main Street. [00:04:44.09]
Down here in Isom we just have a bank and a grocery store and a couple of restaurants, a post office.

SW: And did you grow up in Whitesburg?

[00:04:53.06]

DM: I did.

SW: I am going to ask you about the chili buns now, just to get it out of the way. Did you all grow up with chili buns?

DM: Yes, I have always grown up eating a chili bun. I guess that is part of the southern foods here. And we serve lots of chili buns here at Joe's. We're famous for our chicken, but we sell a lot of chili buns and a lot of hot dogs.

SW: Do you know what the tie is between - I kind of wandered around - whether people make the chili or not, I feel like there is something about something about southeastern Kentucky and chili and this specific kind of chili.

DM: I think it is just a comfort food, and we are famous for our comfort foods here. And I think that is why people enjoy it. They can gather and socialize. It's probably more about that and the family and get togethers and cookouts and Sunday dinner after church and things like that more than what the food is. But good food always makes it better.

SW: How did your grandfather come about serving fried chicken?

[00:05:58.24]

DM: My mom tells this story a lot better than I do, but there was a man come by and he wanted my grandfather to try his chicken recipe. He come by selling chicken. So, my grandfather was all in for it, so the man came in the restaurant that day - I think he brought his own fryers and chicken and breading - and he fried chicken all day. Just to see if the customers would like it. And they fell in love with it, so we are serving the same recipe now, fifty years later.

SW: And so, was your grandfather serving fried chicken up to that point?

DM: No I don't think so. He was just doing burgers, chili buns, things like that. So that was new for him.

[00:06:43.06]

SW: Do you happen to know the guys name?

DM: I wish I did.

SW: This is something I am interested in - do you know, was he from around here?

DM: He wasn't, he was just travelling through and my Mom might know where he was from but I can't remember.

SW: Do you know if he was white? Black?

DM: I don't know.

SW: Okay, I was just curious. Have you always had chili buns on the menu?

[00:07:07.04]

DM: Yeah, we've always had chili buns. And a little bit about me: I'm an RN - worked for a fifteen years as a registered nurse, and when the restaurant came back up for sale from the lady that my mom and dad had sold it to, I bought it back just to keep it going, just because it is a staple. It is a tradition here in Letcher County. But I had no idea that we sold that many chili buns or hamburgers. I thought chicken is the major thing here, but actually, we sell a lot of other things besides chicken. But of course chicken is what we're famous for.

SW: What else do you guys sell besides chicken?

DM: We have a chuck-wagon sandwich.

SW: Would you describe what that is?

[00:07:49.15]

DM: It is just a breaded patty - a deep fried breaded patty. And we put it on a bun. You can get that, you know, with all of the condiments or vegetables that you want. We have a fish sandwich, cheeseburger, hot dog, chili bun, all the sides, French fries, curly fries, potato wedges, anything deep fried, we have it.

SW: That sounds delicious. And, Donna, I have a couple more questions for you, is that okay?

DM: Yeah.

SW: So you went to school to become an RN. Will you tell me a little bit about - you wanted to bring the business back in to the family - but why was that so important to you?

[00:08:36.12]

DM: I think I actually grew up right here. And those were my earliest memories was roller skating around this restaurant, inside, playing right here in the parking lot, walking down

to the neighbor beside of the restaurant. This is where I spent my earliest childhood days. And I tear up talking about it. This place means a whole lot to me. So, I had to keep it going.

SW: And so your parents decided to sell it. Was that hard for them?

[00:09:10.13]

DM: You know, I was young, and they were working so hard and they thought they could just leave it and find something easier for them to make a living at and get to spend more time with their daughter at that age.

SW: I'm curious, because your mom grew up working for your grandfather, did it seem like natural transition to have her take it over?

[00:09:37.17]

DM: Yeah, it did. I guess she had always done that - she'd also been raised in it also, and she was used to doing that type of work, so she just carried it on. After we left here, she actually went on to school to be a nurse also. And then my dad went on to be a—he actually was a coal truck driver.

SW: And then who did they sell it to?

DM: Her name was Lucy Ayers. The last name is A-Y-E-R-S. She ran it for I'd say thirty-some years. And I give her all of the credit. She's made it last thirty-some years. That's a long time.

SW: And it's the location here in Isom?

DM: Yeah. I think she actually worked for my grandfather, starting out.

SW: Is she still around?

[00:10:24.13]

DM: She lives in Lexington now. Her daughter is there, and they have a grandbaby. And so she moved down there to be closer to her grandbaby.

SW: After thirty years was she just ready to retire?

DM: [Laughs] I think she was tired. A lot of hours on her feet, but she loved it here. And she treated this just like I do. It was special to her, too.

SW: Now Donna, do you know if she changed anything about the menu or if she just kept it rolling the way that it was.

DM: She kept it rolling. She kept it rolling. She kept the same recipe on the chicken and everything still the same.

SW: Can you talk about the first day here when you officially took it over. Like what that was like for you. Do you remember?

[00:11:09.24]

DM: Oh yeah, I was scared to death. But I have some girls here that's wonderful. They have been here a long time and they can run this place too, so. But me myself, I was scared. I had never run a business or anything to do with the restaurant. I'd always been a nurse, and this was a whole new world for me.

SW: What has surprised you about yourself since you have changed trajectories?

[00:11:39.13]

DM: I feel like I am back home. I feel at home here, so I look forward to coming to work. I don't dread it. It's fun, you know, when you are doing what you like.

SW: How many employees do you have?

DM: Anywhere from seven to ten depending on the time of year. You know, we are a lot busier in the summer. So we try to slack back in the winter.

SW: And it is purely take-out?

DM: Yeah.

SW: Has it always been that way?

DM: Yeah.

SW: That's nice. And can you describe who your customers are? Who are the customers here?

DM: We have a lot of locals or every day customers. They come once or twice a day. But we also have a lot of out-of-town people that maybe grew up here and they always stop by here no matter what on their way home or on their way back to where ever they are going just to get a last meal here until they get to come back again. [00:12:32.11] And we have a lot of people that just stop by because they have heard about the chicken. You know, they're from out of town and somebody has told them to stop by and eat at Joe's. So, just by word of mouth. And Facebook is a great advertisement also.

SW: Do you get people who recognize you from years when you were roller-skating around?

DM: Well this is a small town - a small area - so people know my family and know I grew up here. So, I 'm sure there's people that remember me from back then.

SW: Is it mostly women who run this place?

DM: Yeah.

[00:13:04.23]

SW: I think that is really interesting. It is something that we did a year of programming a couple of years ago all about women in food. And I think there is something kind of special about that.

DM: My dad actually was the chicken fryer when my mom and dad run it. And there's been some men here over the years, but mostly women.

SW: The couple other questions I have for you, Donna, In terms of the industry here in Letcher County: What has it been and how has it changed in terms of the economy?

[00:13:38.10]

DM: The economy is getting worse by the day. And that's with the coal jobs that's been lost in the area. We have lost a lot of business along with all the local businesses. The economy is so bad. You know, it's really hurt us. We are still thriving because our reputation that people can stop here and get quality food. But it's a lot slower than what it used to be. And there's not a lot of jobs here anymore and people's moving away. And people don't have a lot of extra money to spend on food. They can eat cheaper at home I am sure.

SW: In terms of thinking about how mobile people have had to become in terms of job transitions and whatnot, what do you think this place means to people to still be here after fifty years?

[00:14:32.21]

DM: I think it means a lot and we are going to try and continue to go on as long as we can, just so people...We're a familiar place. They're used to seeing us here, and it's a comfortable place. I think it is a part of this county and surrounding counties.

SW: And what is a typical day like for you here?

DM: It is very hectic, usually. We usually come in around ten and get things going. We open at eleven through the week. We are closed on Mondays. But it's pretty hectic. We have two shifts and both shifts are pretty busy. We close at about eight-thirty.

SW: That's pretty late. It's a long day.

DM: Yeah.

[00:15:15.03]

SW: Do y'all ever take a day off?

DM: We close a couple of days for Thanksgiving and then we close usually a couple of days around July fourth, and a couple days for Christmas.

SW: Do you guys get massive order around certain holidays?

DM: Yeah. Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day is a busy weekend. If we're here July fourth is a busy weekend. Mother's Day is our biggest day, believe it or not. I think they don't want their mothers to have to cook on that day, so they feed them.

SW: That's sweet. Donna, I wanted to ask you if you and your mom, do you two ever talk about, do you ever share any trade secrets from both working here?

DM: I guess we do. [00:16:07.00] She knows all the secrets, and I do to. So I guess we can share those.

SW: What does she think of you being here?

DM: She's happy. She's happy I'm back, and that also gave her a way back. She retired recently from her job, so she helps out when we need her to and I think that she enjoys it here.

SW: I don't have any other specific questions. Is there anything you think is important for people to know about Joe Peck's? Anything I should have asked but didn't?

DM: I think we covered it.

SW: Thank you for doing this. I know you guys are busy- busy.