



Sam Graphos
Sam's Super Samwiches
Birmingham, Alabama

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Location: Mr. Graphos's realty office
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: One hour, forty-four minutes
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m with Sam Graphos for an oral history interview. Mr. Graphos helped build the Sneaky Pete’s Hot Dog franchise, which was started by his oldest brother, Pete. Sam opened the second Sneaky Pete’s in 1970, later leaving the franchise and rebranding his location as Sam’s Super Samwiches.

[Interviewer’s note: Mr. Graphos clarifies during the interview that his location was the third Sneaky Pete’s, and it opened in 1969.]

The unofficial “Mayor of 18th Street” has sold hot dogs from a suburban location for nearly five decades.

It is April 19th, 2017. We’re sitting in a conference room at Pete Graphos’ realty office because Sam’s tiny restaurant is constantly bustling. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Graphos, and give us your date of birth for the record. If you would, please, also spell both your name and the name of your restaurant.

[00:00:50]

Sam Graphos: Okay. I’m Sammy Graphos, S-a-m-m-y G-r-a-p-h-o-s. I’m the owner of Sam’s Super Samwiches, S-a-m-’-s S-u-p-e-r Samwiches, is S-a-m-w-i-c-h-e-s, and it’s at 2812 South 18th Street in Homewood.

[00:01:18]

Eric Velasco: What is your date of birth, please?

[00:01:20]

Sam Graphos: My date of birth is 11/15/41.

[00:01:24]

Eric Velasco: And I’ve got to start asking, in this area here, what is a samwich?

[00:01:29]

Sam Graphos: A samwich is at Sam’s Super Samwiches. [laughs] It is the only samwich in the world. I have hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken samwiches, ham. I have all kind of samwiches.

[00:01:45]

Eric Velasco: Now, how does it differ from a sandwich?

[00:01:48]

Sam Graphos: Just the spelling. [laughter]

[00:01:53]

Eric Velasco: So tell me about your menu. You had mentioned a little bit about it. You have a breakfast as well as a lunch menu.

[00:01:59]

Sam Graphos: Right. I have a breakfast, which is samwiches, and then I have paper plates where I fix breakfasts, eggs and bacon and ham, stuff like that. I don’t have any biscuits or anything. I use wheat bread or hamburger buns. I can toast either one.

[00:02:18]

Eric Velasco: Is that the attraction of it or—

[00:02:21]

Sam Graphos: That’s it. Well, I have a great bacon. It’s a very good bacon.

[00:02:26]

Eric Velasco: I’ve heard about this. What makes it so good? And tell us more about it.

[00:02:29]

Sam Graphos: Well, a gentleman from—I don’t know if I can mention the name of the company—Mariah Meats, they have Mariah bacon and ham, and he brought me some, and it’s just perfect for my samwiches. I love the taste, and it gets crispy. People like crispy bacon.

[00:02:48]

Eric Velasco: How do you spell Mariah?

[00:02:51]

Sam Graphos: M-a-r-i-h-a (sic), I think.

[00:02:55]

Eric Velasco: Are they from Alabama or—

[00:02:56]

Sam Graphos: No, the company is in Ohio, but I get it from the distribution center here.

[00:03:08]

Eric Velasco: And that’s how you came across it?

[00:03:09]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:03:12]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell us about the hot dogs you have on your menu.

[00:03:15]

Sam Graphos: I have hot dogs, they’re made in Michigan, and Michigan has the most strenuous—I think that’s the word I should use—ingredients for hot dogs. You can’t use parts. It’s got to be all—we use beef and pork, the hot dogs made it with and—

[00:03:37]

Eric Velasco: The choicer cuts, as opposed to scraps.

[00:03:39]

Sam Graphos: Right, right. And I’m trying right now to figure out the name, but I can’t think of it right now. That’s pretty bad [unclear].

[00:03:45]

Eric Velasco: It’ll come back to you.

[00:03:47]

Sam Graphos: It’ll come back, yeah.

[00:03:48]

Eric Velasco: And tell us about the different types of hot dogs you sell.

[00:03:52]

Sam Graphos: Well, I have one, like I say, is beef and pork, and then I have one that’s a quarter-pound hot dog, and it’s all-beef hot dog. It’s called the Super Samwich.

[00:04:03]

Eric Velasco: Now, pork hot dogs tend to be a little more popular down here. How has the beef been received?

[00:04:10]

Sam Graphos: Well, it’s a mixture of both. I don’t serve—well, people don’t like the—they like the beef, but the mixture makes a better taste.

[00:04:19]

Eric Velasco: Get that good pork fat in it?

[00:04:22]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I guess. [laughter]

[00:04:24]

Eric Velasco: What are the different styles of hot dogs you sell?

[00:04:28]

Sam Graphos: Well, the Original Hot Dog is mustard, onions, kraut, and our sauce, and then we have one with chili, and then we have one with the mustard and everything and the spice ground beef on top of that.

[00:04:42]

Eric Velasco: So you have a separate ground beef and chili. Those are two different things.

[00:04:47]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:04:48]

Eric Velasco: As well as a sauce.

[00:04:49]

Sam Graphos: Yes, sir.

[00:04:50]

Eric Velasco: And these are the kinds of things that combine to make special Birmingham dogs.

[00:04:54]

Sam Graphos: Right, that’s it, the sauce. People love our sauce.

[00:04:57]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about your sauce.

[00:04:59]

Sam Graphos: It’s a tomato-based sauce and it’s got vinegar. It’s very good. It’s spicy, not real hot, just spicy.

[00:05:08]

Eric Velasco: What kind of spices go in it?

[00:05:11]

Sam Graphos: Oh, allspice, garlic, salt, pepper, paprika, chili powder.

[00:05:19]

Eric Velasco: Allspice, that’s an unusual addition.

[00:05:22]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, it is.

[00:05:24]

Eric Velasco: It adds a little flavor to it. And then how do you do your ground beef?

[00:05:27]

Sam Graphos: Oh, we put it in—you start cooking it, and then you strain all the fat off of it, and then you add your spices and your Worcestershire sauce. You just keep smashing it. It gets kind of like a spaghetti sauce, but no tomato in it.

[00:05:50]

Eric Velasco: So it’s fairly simply seasoned.

[00:05:53]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah.

[00:05:55]

Eric Velasco: But has good flavor to it.

[00:05:56]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:05:57]

Eric Velasco: Then how about your chili?

[00:05:58]

Sam Graphos: Chili, it’s meat and the beans and all the other spices, and then got a little tomato. I use diced tomatoes in it, and it just goes on top of that mustard and the hot dog. It’s very good, spicy.

[00:06:19]

Eric Velasco: Now, is the same basic approach you’ve been doing all these years?

[00:06:25]

Sam Graphos: Fifty years, yeah, same thing.

[00:06:28]

Eric Velasco: Has the sauce changed much since it went to Sam’s?

[00:06:31]

Sam Graphos: No. My dad gave us the recipe, and that’s what we use.

[00:06:35]

Eric Velasco: Where did your dad get the recipe?

[00:06:37]

Sam Graphos: He and my uncle made it up.

[00:06:40]

Eric Velasco: This would be John Collins or—

[00:06:42]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right.

[00:06:43]

Eric Velasco: And for the listeners, who is John Collins?

[00:06:45]

Sam Graphos: John Collins is my uncle. He was married to my mother’s sister, and he opened up one in downtown Birmingham called the Lyric Hot Dog, and it’s been there about sixty-five years, I think, yeah. [Interviewer’s note: Lyric Hot Dog opened in 1957, and closed after 65 years when it lost its lease. Sam’s father, Ted, and twin brother, Jimmy, both worked at Lyric in the 1960s.]

[00:06:59]

Eric Velasco: And then your father’s name was—

[00:07:02]

Sam Graphos: Ted Graphos.

[00:07:03]

Eric Velasco: And your mother’s name?

[00:07:04]

Sam Graphos: Helen Graphos.

[00:07:05]

Eric Velasco: And I believe your mother was part of the Derzis family here in town.

[00:07:09]

Sam Graphos: Right. My dad came from Greece when he was sixteen, and then my mother was born here, and they got together and had all us kids.

[00:07:21]

Eric Velasco: How did they meet?

[00:07:23]

Sam Graphos: Well, back in the old days, a Greek married a Greek, and it was a fixed—they were from the same village in Greece. And my dad lived in Michigan, and he found out from Greece that a family in Birmingham needed one of the girls to get married, and so he came down and they fixed him up.

[00:07:46]

Eric Velasco: Word came from Greece?

[00:07:47]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[00:07:48]

Eric Velasco: Who passed on the message?

[00:07:51]

Sam Graphos: [laughs] Well, the same little town, it’s very small, and one of the aunts or uncles over there got in touch with my dad. See, my mother was one of six girls, and the older daughter had gotten married, and then it’s time for my mother to get married, because the others girls couldn’t get married till my mother got married, and so that’s how—

[00:08:16]

Eric Velasco: You had to go with the birth order?

[00:08:16]

Sam Graphos: Right. Yeah, yeah.

[00:08:18]

Eric Velasco: Who was the oldest of your aunts?

[00:08:21]

Sam Graphos: Aunt Christine Grammas, she was the oldest, and then, in fact, Miss Collins was next, I believe. There were several of them. They were all in the restaurant business.

[00:08:34]

Eric Velasco: That’s just what I was going to ask, because another one of your aunts married a Bonduris—

[00:08:38]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:08:39]

Eric Velasco: —who was connected to Bright Star, then later Jeb’s Seafood and some other restaurants.

[00:08:42]

Sam Graphos: Right, yes.

[00:08:43]

Eric Velasco: Then there was the one who married Mr. Collins. The Grammas family also is big in the restaurants.

[00:08:51]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, and then they owned the candy company called Magic City Candy, I believe it was. Yeah, then this Bonduris, his cousin, married one of my mother’s sisters, and he was in business with Mr. Collins at his restaurant.

[00:09:13]

Eric Velasco: This was John Bonduris?

[00:09:14]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:09:14]

Eric Velasco: At the Steak Grill, I believe it was?

[00:09:15]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, that was Tom Bonduris. John had the Jeb’s Seafood.

[00:09:20]

Eric Velasco: Jeb’s Seafood, okay. And then which one married your aunt?

[00:09:24]

Sam Graphos: Well, both of them married my aunts.

[00:09:24]

Eric Velasco: Both of them married. Of course. [laughter]

[00:09:28]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, both of them married aunts.

[00:09:31]

Eric Velasco: I believe your sister married a Pihakis?

[00:09:34]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, Louis Pihakis. They lived in Pensacola.

[00:09:38]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the Pihakises as it relates to Birmingham food.

[00:09:42]

Sam Graphos: Well, they really don’t have any food business in Birmingham. Well, there’s one nephew has Jim ‘N Nick’s Bar-B-Q. [Interviewer’s note: Jim Pihakis, Louis’ brother, sold insurance until his retirement. In 1985, Jim and his son, Nick, started Jim ‘N Nick’s Community Bar-B-Q, which now has stores in seven states. Nick also is a partner in the Fresh Hospitality Group, which has interests in restaurants in Birmingham and other cities. Nick Pihakis was the subject of a 2017 oral history interview by the Southern Foodways Alliance.]

[00:09:51]

Eric Velasco: Right.

[00:09:52]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, that’s about it.

[00:09:55]

Eric Velasco: Now, your brother started the Sneaky Pete’s in 1966, I believe.

[00:10:07]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:10:08]

Eric Velasco: Did you ever work at that original store? How did you get into hot dogs?

[00:10:14]

Sam Graphos: Well, I was in the grocery business, I worked in a grocery store, and then brother Pete suggested that we get together, so we got together and I went to work there. And then we opened up one downtown, and I ran that one, and then we started from there.

[00:10:33]

Eric Velasco: Where was the downtown one?

[00:10:35]

Sam Graphos: It was on 21st Street [North], next to the old John’s Restaurant, right next door. Then I moved to Homewood.

[00:10:43]

Eric Velasco: So you opened a third one in Homewood or—

[00:10:48]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. The store I have now was originally a Sneaky Pete’s.

[00:10:54]

Eric Velasco: Correct. And that was the third Sneaky Pete’s store?

[00:10:56]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah, yeah. And then my brother Jimmy, he got one and opened it up on the south side, on Sixth Avenue South, and then we opened up—we started a franchise, and we

had a corporate office and we all worked from there. Everybody was in charge of something different.

[00:11:16]

Eric Velasco: That was one of the things that was kind of groundbreaking, in a sense, about Sneaky Pete’s. All the old-line hot dog shops were downtown where all the workers were.

[00:11:26]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah.

[00:11:27]

Eric Velasco: And Sneaky Pete’s was really the beginning of the migration toward the suburbs.

[00:11:32]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, you’re right. We were the first to leave downtown, yeah.

[00:11:36]

Eric Velasco: Why Homewood, where you chose your spot?

[00:11:39]

Sam Graphos: Well, the people that owned the building came to us and said, “We think a hot dog stand would go good in Homewood.” And it’s not very big; it’s only 10 feet wide. It was a barbershop, and then they put me in there and I’ve been there ever since. In fact, I’ve been there

so long that every once in a while, the 10 feet gets to 8 feet and then it gets to 7 feet. Then I have my rebirth and it goes back to 10 feet.

[00:12:14]

Eric Velasco: The walls close in on you, then they expand again?

[00:12:16]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:12:17]

Eric Velasco: Does it happen with the rain, expand and contract, or—

[00:12:20]

Sam Graphos: No. [laughs]

[00:12:21]

Eric Velasco: Now, Homewood is a suburb of Birmingham. It’s a city, but it’s a suburban city.

Describe where you are in Homewood.

[00:12:34]

Sam Graphos: All right. It’s the main street that comes from downtown Birmingham over the mountain [Red Mountain], and it’s the main street that comes through downtown Homewood, and there’s, I guess, thirty merchants on that street there. Homewood’s a great, great

neighborhood, great place to live, great town. I live in Homewood, and the school system is one of the best in the state. I’ve got the same customers. I’ve got customers that came in with their parents when they were two years old, and now they’re bringing their kids and their grandkids, so I’ve seen about three generations of people, same people.

[00:13:23]

Eric Velasco: Do you recognize them when they come in, or do they have to say, “Oh, I used to come in here”?

[00:13:28]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I recognize them and I know what most of them eat because they always eat the same thing. Like if I’m with my wife somewhere and somebody will, “Hey, Sam, how you doing?”

I say, “Fine.”

Then my wife will say, after we get through talking, she’ll say, “Who was that?”

I’ll say, “I don’t know. It’s two hot dogs, no onions.” That’s all I know, you know. It’s fun. I don’t know. I just enjoy people. I enjoy working.

[00:13:56]

Eric Velasco: What about that particular business do you find so enjoyable?

[00:14:01]

Sam Graphos: Well, it’s just the people and the gratification. I love it when somebody says they liked it. In fact, not long ago I was on—Andrew Zimmern *Delicious Foods* came in and did a segment, and I was on TV with that, and people from all over the country would call and want to know if I could send them hot dogs, but I don’t do that because I don’t have the means. My sauce doesn’t have any preservatives or anything in it, so it won’t last that long. But it’s fun.

[00:14:39]

Eric Velasco: Now, there was someone who was ordering from you fairly regularly.

[00:14:43]

Sam Graphos: A man from Los Angeles. He grew up in Homewood. He went out there to make a lot of money, and he’d send me a pack with—well, they’d have it sent with ice, hot ice, cold—

[00:14:58]

Eric Velasco: Dry ice.

[00:14:59]

Sam Graphos: Dry ice, yeah. And I’d load them up, and I’d also send him a lot of potato chips because he liked Golden Flake potato chips. I don’t know how much it cost. The UPS guy would come pick it up, and next day delivery. Then he’d call me up the next day and say, “We got the hot dogs. We’re eating them now.” They ate them right out of the box. [Interviewer’s note: The company that would become Golden Flake was founded in Birmingham in 1923.]

[00:15:21]

Eric Velasco: Did he get in touch with you and just say, “I miss it”? How did this start?

[00:15:26]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, that’s how it was. He came home to visit his parents and told me he was going to get me to deliver him some, so I would. He does it about twice a year.

[00:15:39]

Eric Velasco: How did he make his money?

[00:15:42]

Sam Graphos: He went out there and he started buying used hospital equipment and beds, and refurbishing everything and then reselling it, and he made a lot of money, still does, yeah.

[00:15:57]

Eric Velasco: So what goes into his care package? What would you send him?

[00:16:01]

Sam Graphos: Just the hot dogs, all the way. He wanted them cooked all the way, and I’d wrap them up separate in foil, and the potato chips. That was it.

[00:16:09]

Eric Velasco: So they were already prepared.

[00:16:11]

Sam Graphos: Prepared, yeah. He wants them prepared, yeah, and they would stay hot with the—

[00:16:15]

Eric Velasco: The world’s longest to-go order. [laughs]

[00:16:19]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, that’s it. That’s it. I think the shipping cost more than the sandwiches did.

[00:16:26]

Eric Velasco: Is he still doing that?

[00:16:27]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, every once in a while I’ll get—

[00:16:29]

Eric Velasco: When did it start?

[00:16:30]

Sam Graphos: It started about ten or twelve years ago, yeah. He’s a great guy.

[00:16:39]

Eric Velasco: Does he ever come in anymore?

[00:16:42]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. Every time he comes to Birmingham, he rents a limousine. From the airport he comes to the hot dog stand and gets hot dogs.

[00:16:51]

Eric Velasco: First stop, Sammy’s, aye?

[00:16:52]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I’ve met three of his wives. He kind of can’t keep one very long, I don’t think.

[00:17:00]

Eric Velasco: Did any of them like your hot dogs?

[00:17:01]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, they all ate them.

[00:17:04]

Eric Velasco: Oh, okay. So that wasn’t the deciding factor in those marriages.

[00:17:05]

Sam Graphos: No, no, it wasn’t, no. [laughter]

[00:17:16]

Eric Velasco: Now, at the beginning, you’re Sneaky Pete’s, well, also at the one downtown, did you run that one by yourself?

[00:17:21]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I ran that, and then, yeah, I ran both of them by myself. But Pete, Jimmy, they’d come by, help and make sure everything’s going right. It was good times back then.

[00:17:41]

Eric Velasco: Early on, Jimmy was still working at the Lyric, too, right?

[00:17:44]

Sam Graphos: Right, he worked at Lyric. Then when he came with us, he got the place on—he ran the one on south side, yeah. He’s in the business longer than all of us. [Interviewer’s note: Ted Graphos started working at the Lyric months after it opened in 1957, according to Andrew Collins, who took over the Lyric from his father in the early 1970s and ran it until it closed at the end of 2013. Jimmy started working at the Lyric soon after his dad, Collins said in his 2017 oral history interview with the Southern Foodways Alliance.]

[00:17:54]

Eric Velasco: You said you were working in a grocery before you went with Sneaky Pete’s. What grocery, and what were you doing?

[00:18:02]

Sam Graphos: It was Food Town grocers on Green Springs Highway. That’s in the southern part of the city. I was assistant manager there. Then while I was there, the Vietnam War was going on, and my brother Jimmy got a notice from the draft board to go take his physical, so I thought maybe I might be getting mine pretty soon. So a friend of mine was going into the Coast Guard Reserves, and they were only taking two people a month out of Jefferson County. He was going to leave two days later. He went down, and the guy he was supposed to go with backed out, so he called me up, I went and took a physical and I was gone in two days. That’s how I got my military duty done.

[00:18:59]

Eric Velasco: And to back up a little bit, the draft was based on your date of birth, am I correct?

[00:19:04]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:19:05]

Eric Velasco: So there was a reason why you suspected you might be hearing from them as well.

[00:19:08]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:19:09]

Eric Velasco: What is that reason?

[00:19:10]

Sam Graphos: Well, I didn’t mind the war, I mean I didn’t mind going—I didn’t want to go in the Army, so I was lucky I got in the Coast Guard.

[00:19:20]

Eric Velasco: But there’s a reason why if your brother Jimmy got a draft notice, that you might be hearing from them too. What is that reason, since it was based on the date of birth?

[00:19:31]

Sam Graphos: Well, I guess I just figured—

[00:19:34]

Eric Velasco: You’re twins, right?

[00:19:34]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right. Oh, yeah, we were twins, yeah.

[00:19:34]

Eric Velasco: So you had a fairly good reason to believe that Uncle Sam was going to come calling your way too.

[00:19:43]

Sam Graphos: I sure did, yeah.

[00:19:45]

Eric Velasco: So both of you were in the Coast Guard Reserve, was it?

[00:19:50]

Sam Graphos: No, I was with a friend of mine.

[00:19:51]

Eric Velasco: I see.

[00:19:52]

Sam Graphos: He got rejected. He didn’t pass his physical. He had a rash, some kind of rash on his arms, and they wouldn’t take him.

[00:20:01]

Eric Velasco: I know he was disappointed.

[00:20:04]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yes, he was very, very disappointed.

[00:20:08]

Eric Velasco: So what did you do in the Coast Guard?

[00:20:12]

Sam Graphos: I was dangerous cargo man. That means I would go and get the manifestos where they would put everything on the ship, and we’d make sure they didn’t have explosives next to gas, stuff like that, and we would inspect warehouses on the piers, go on boats and check them, but I didn’t do much of anything. [laughs]

[00:20:44]

Eric Velasco: Where were you based?

[00:20:46]

Sam Graphos: I was supposed to be on a ship leaving Mobile Bay, and we were going out on a weather patrol ship and we were going out to the Atlantic Ocean. Anchors went up in Mobile Bay, we went out about two miles, and I got sick, seasick, and we went on around, and five days later, they had to leave me off in the Bahamas because I had lost twenty pounds and I was in the

fetal position. So they flew me to the States, I went to St. Louis, and there they sent me to New Orleans, and in New Orleans I had to get in front of a group of doctors and they were going to decide whether to let me out or keep me. So I asked him if they let me out would I be eligible for the draft, they said yes, so I told them that I really loved the Coast Guard, and so they gave me shore duty and I was stationed in New Orleans at a base there. I was a cook. I helped in the officers’ quarters cooking food.

[00:21:59]

Eric Velasco: Had you had much experience at that point cooking?

[00:22:02]

Sam Graphos: Just came natural. Just came natural, yeah.

[00:22:07]

Eric Velasco: Because at that point your father had run, what, a couple of restaurants?

[00:22:11]

Sam Graphos: He had one; Farmers Cafe. It was right next to the old farmers’ market in downtown Birmingham.

[00:22:19]

Eric Velasco: Where in downtown Birmingham?

[00:22:22]

Sam Graphos: Twenty-fourth Street and Seventh Avenue, I believe it was.

[00:22:28]

Eric Velasco: North?

[00:22:29]

Sam Graphos: North, yeah.

[00:22:30]

Eric Velasco: Did you help out around there much?

[00:22:35]

Sam Graphos: We helped out, and then on Sunday mornings he’d wake us up early. We’d have to go down and mop the floors, and he would throw change under some of the tables, and whoever found the change kept it, and that was our pay for the day. But we had to be through by 9:00, because we had to be at church at 10:00.

[00:22:55]

Eric Velasco: What church is this?

[00:22:57]

Sam Graphos: The Greek Orthodox Church downtown, south side.

[00:23:00]

Eric Velasco: And the name of it is?

[00:23:02]

Sam Graphos: The Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Holy Trinity-Holy Cross.

[00:23:06]

Eric Velasco: Y’all are regulars there.

[00:23:10]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah.

[00:23:10]

Eric Velasco: Very active in the church.

[00:23:11]

Sam Graphos: Yes, our families, our grandparents help form the church, and we’re very active.

Pete was on the board, has been on the board before. I never made the board. [Interviewer’s note: Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church was officially established in 1906 and opened in 1907. Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church opened in north Birmingham in 1933. The two churches merged in 1953, forming Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral.]

[00:23:24]

Eric Velasco: Which grandparents were involved in helping establish it? [Interviewer’s note: This is Holy Trinity.]

[00:23:28]

Sam Graphos: My mother’s parents. My daddy’s parents were in Greece. In fact, we still have cousins in Greece, and I’m going in a couple weeks. My wife and I are going for our fiftieth wedding anniversary. We’re going back to Greece.

[00:23:44]

Eric Velasco: Where in Greece is your family from?

[00:23:47]

Sam Graphos: A place called Sykia. It’s up in the mountains. I’ve forgot what it’s near, but it’s up in the mountains.

[00:23:53]

Eric Velasco: Near Poulithra?

[00:23:54]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I believe so.

[00:23:55]

Eric Velasco: Or am I butchering that name? But it’s in that general area where a lot of the people from Birmingham—

[00:24:00]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah, right, yeah.

Eric Velasco: —are from originally. And then the grandfather, I believe that was Sam Derzis who was involved in helping— ?

[00:24:10]

Sam Graphos: Right. That was my—

[00:24:11]

Eric Velasco: Your maternal grandfather.

[00:24:13]

Sam Graphos: Right, right.

[00:24:15]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the church and the role it played in your lives growing up.

[00:24:21]

Sam Graphos: Well, the church, that was our social life because Greeks always stood together, but we always—kids, that’s where I played was we’d have to go to Greek School after English school three days a week. We’d have to get on the bus and go to Greek School and learn Greek.

[00:24:42]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about Greek School.

[00:24:45]

Sam Graphos: It was a ball. [laughter] Every other year they’d have to get a new teacher, and I never got out of the fifth grade, I think, because every time we’d get a new teacher, I wasn’t very good, and they’d put me down to the fourth grade again.

[00:24:59]

Eric Velasco: So you progressed in Greek School on grade-by-grade levels?

[00:25:03]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah. And then they had Greek plays. You’d be in a Greek play. March 25th, they had a big one, because that’s Greek Independence Day. Back in the 1800s, we got Turkey, the war with Turkey. Greeks don’t like the Turks very well. [Interviewer’s note: Greece’s war for independence after centuries of Ottoman occupation began on March 25, 1821.]

[00:25:25]

Eric Velasco: As a matter of fact, don’t you have some kin back there who were from this village that resisted the Turks during the occupation?

[00:25:38]

Sam Graphos: Yes, we have a place called Monemvasia, and they built a big fort right on the water, and that’s where we kept them out, they said. I’m not sure.

[00:25:52]

Eric Velasco: And I heard that members of your family were bad in their days. Not bad in a bad sense, but bad, the Turks didn’t want to mess with them. [laughter] “I’d rather trade with them than fight them” kind of attitude.

[00:26:06]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[00:26:07]

Eric Velasco: Now, where did you grow up in Birmingham?

[00:26:13]

Sam Graphos: We grew up in Norwood, which it was a lot of Greeks. We lived on Norwood Circle, and there was twenty Greek families on that circle. We were all the same age, and to this day we’re all still real close, our kids are close, and it’s one of those things where you don’t spread out. We all keep together, enjoy each other. Church is a big part of our life, yeah.

[00:26:48]

Eric Velasco: Then it was an unusual neighborhood for Birmingham and really for the South, when you get down to it, for the times, because there were a bunch of other ethnic groups living there, as well as your typical white Anglo-Saxons.

[00:27:03]

Sam Graphos: A lot of Italians and Greeks, and back then, we weren’t allowed to—over the mountain is where most of the rich people moved, over the mountain, and I don’t know any Greeks they would let move in, into the neighborhoods. So back then it was like segregated. [In Birmingham, “over the mountain” refers to the suburban municipalities south of Birmingham, separated by Red Mountain. Among them, the largest concentration of wealth is in Mountain Brook, where both the Birmingham and Mountain Brook country clubs are located.]

[00:27:30]

Eric Velasco: And even though there were a fair number of financially successful Greeks and Greek families in the city—

[00:27:36]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, yeah.

[00:27:39]

Eric Velasco: —going back to the very beginning of the city.

[00:27:42]

Sam Graphos: Well, like today, there’s a couple of fancy or high-class white country clubs. If you’re Greek, if you have a Greek name, they won’t let you in.

[00:27:59]

Eric Velasco: To this day?

[00:27:59]

Sam Graphos: To this day, yeah. We’re not blueblood, you know.

[00:28:03]

Eric Velasco: And that would apply as well to the Jews and other similar—not Northern European stock.

[00:28:07]

Sam Graphos: Right. Jewish people had to start their own country club, yeah. But the Greeks didn’t have that kind of money. We couldn’t start our own country club. [laughs]

[00:28:20]

Eric Velasco: Now, you play, right? Play golf?

[00:28:22]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I play golf, yeah.

[00:28:23]

Eric Velasco: Where do you play?

[00:28:24]

Sam Graphos: I play at Highland Golf Course. It’s downtown Homewood—I mean Birmingham. I play the public courses, and then, in fact, two weeks ago I went to the Masters. The Coca-Cola company invited me to go. The CFO came in the store on a Thursday, and he said, “Would you like to go to the Masters?”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “Be at the airport tomorrow morning at 7:00 o’clock.”

I said, “Okay.”

So I go to the airport, get on this little private jet, and they fly you over there, and they wine and dine you, then they bring you back that night. In fact, I was on the plane with the lady’s husband, her daddy started Coca-Cola, Crawford Johnson, and she was on the plane. She called me to come up, sit next to her, so I sat next to her, and we were talking about my business and how long I’d been with Coke. Well, I really hadn’t been with Coke that long because I was with Pepsi for years, and Coca-Cola came in and asked me what it would take to get Coca-Cola, and I told them, “I don’t know.”

And he said, “Would you like to go to the Masters?”

I said, “Yes, sir.” And they flew me to the Masters, and this is the second time they’ve taken me. Anyway, so she was—I mean, the woman, you’d never know she had a lot of money.

She was very personable. She asked me a lot of questions. I thanked her for inviting me to go, and she says, “We enjoy that. You’re the reason, people like you are the reason we have this jet plane, the country clubs and everything. Small people made this company.” And it made me feel good. So, yeah.

[00:30:21]

Eric Velasco: When did you make the switch from Pepsi to Coke?

[00:30:23]

Sam Graphos: Five years ago. It was five years.

[00:30:28]

Eric Velasco: It seems that Birmingham has been kind of a Pepsi town anyway. Wasn’t there a bottling plant here?

[00:30:34]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, still is, and Mr. Lee, who started that, he had a lot of influence on Birmingham, and everybody was with Pepsi. But now Coke has made it big time.

[Interviewer’s note: Birmingham-based Buffalo Rock Company, which started making its flagship ginger ale in 1901, is one of Pepsi Cola’s largest privately-held, family-owned bottlers. Under the leadership of James C. Lee Jr., Buffalo Rock bought the local Pepsi bottling plant in 1951, soon adding Dr. Pepper to the portfolio.]

[00:30:51]

Eric Velasco: I understand Mr. Lee did a lot to really build those relationships and build that sense of loyalty.

[00:30:56]

Sam Graphos: Right. When we first went in Sneaky Pete’s, we were the first people in town that had Pepsi fountain. Back then, fountain drinks weren’t around, and we were the first ones to put the fountains in. We were loyal to them for a long time, but then I wanted to go to the Masters, so— [laughs]

[00:31:24]

Eric Velasco: What day did you go to this year?

[00:31:26]

Sam Graphos: I went on Friday this year. The year before—I mean three years before I went, they took me on a Wednesday for a practice round, then I went for the actual tournament Friday, and I really enjoyed the practice round more because you can talk to the players, you can take your cameras, but this time we went, you couldn’t take a phone or no cameras, you can’t talk to them. But I enjoyed the other time better.

[00:31:59]

Eric Velasco: I guess Friday’s an exciting day, though, because you have the full field, but everybody’s scrambling to play the weekend.

[00:32:04]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, then they make the cuts, yeah, yeah. And we got back to the house where everybody had to leave their phones, and it was like ants going to honey. I didn’t take my phone because I knew you couldn’t, but they were going to those phones and popping, getting all the emails. But it was nice not to have a phone for about seven hours, you know, nobody worrying about anything.

[00:32:28]

Eric Velasco: That’s a good feeling, an old feeling again.

[00:32:31]

Sam Graphos: Old times, yeah.

[00:32:35]

Eric Velasco: Now, I hear that you had a great family tradition, going back to the Norwood days, of cooking lambs.

[00:32:44]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:32:45]

Eric Velasco: Tell me a little bit about that and how it got started.

[00:32:47]

Sam Graphos: Well, it’s just our parents did it, my dad did it, my uncles. You just get a whole lamb. I remember my dad used to get a lamb about a month before Easter and would have it in the backyard and he’d feed it grass, so kind of get it so you clean it out, and then the day before Easter, he’d say, “Come on, boys.” And we’d get that lamb and take it down in the basement. He’d hang it upside down and cut that throat and clean the lamb, and we could eat lamb for Easter.

[00:33:21]

Eric Velasco: How old were you when you started doing this?

[00:33:23]

Sam Graphos: Oh, we were young. I mean, it’s always been—we’ve always done it. This year was—

[00:33:29]

Eric Velasco: School age or younger, do you think?

[00:33:31]

Sam Graphos: School age, probably.

[00:33:32]

Eric Velasco: So what was going through your head while you were watching Dad dispatch this lamb in the basement?

[00:33:36]

Sam Graphos: Nothing. I just couldn’t wait to eat the lamb. [laughs]

[00:33:39]

Eric Velasco: Nothing to it, eh?

[00:33:41]

Sam Graphos: No.

[00:33:42]

Eric Velasco: Would you tell your friends at school?

[00:33:43]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. They’d come. We’d always—they’d come watch us cook it. They had a pit, and we’d sit there and we’d turn that thing. We still do that. I bought one that had a motor on it, but it wasn’t fun, so we use a hand crank to get it going. We turn the hand till you get a Bloody Mary, and when you got through with the Bloody Mary, somebody else would come and you’d go get another Bloody Mary.

[00:34:13]

Eric Velasco: And you have a rule as it relates to this exercise, don’t you?

[00:34:18]

Sam Graphos: I don’t know what kind of rule.

[00:34:21]

Eric Velasco: Turn twenty minutes or you don’t eat?

[00:34:22]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. Yeah, Bloody Mary, same thing, yeah. By the time you finish cooking it, you’re not hungry because you pick at the skin and the good parts are gone.

[00:34:38]

Eric Velasco: I know all the Greeks in the neighborhood would come by when the lamb was going. Would any of the other neighbors come by too?

[00:34:46]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, but there were more than one Greek cooking a lamb on Easter. Everybody out there would cook lamb. It was a lot like—we went and watched that movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and it was our lives perfectly. That’s how we live, the same thing.

[00:35:06]

Eric Velasco: Did you keep the lamb in the front yard or the back?

[00:35:08]

Sam Graphos: We always in the back yard. We didn’t cook it in the front yard, yeah. But I don’t know where he got that Windex thing from. We don’t do Windex.

[00:35:18]

Eric Velasco: You don’t do the Windex thing? [laughs]

[00:35:19]

Sam Graphos: No, no. [Interviewer’s note: In the 2002 movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, patriarch Gus Portokalos, played by Michael Constantine, has an obsession with Windex as a cure-all for everything “from psoriasis to poison ivy.” Another obsession is summarized in this quote from the character Portokalos: “Give me a word, any word, and I show you that the root of that word is Greek.”]

[00:35:21]

Eric Velasco: Now, was there an obsession with the roots of words, though? You know, That comes from the root in the Greek word,” blah, blah, blah.

[00:35:28]

Sam Graphos: No. [laughter]

[00:35:31]

Eric Velasco: But, I mean, that was one of the things about growing up, your generation, it was very important to be an assimilated American, and yet maintaining the culture was extremely important.

[00:35:45]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I’m seventy-five years old and my son’s forty-six, and it’s the same way with him. Easter, he helps us cook the lamb. One of these days, he’ll do it and invite me, but it ain’t happened yet.

[00:36:05]

Eric Velasco: He’ll probably hold on as long as he can.

[00:36:08]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, he will. He will.

[00:36:10]

Eric Velasco: Now, when did this family tradition revive? I understand your brother Jimmy got it going again.

[00:36:18]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, he did. He had a place on the Logan Martin Lake up in Pell City, and we’d go up there, and every Easter we’d roast a lamb. Then all the people would come by, drive by, and they see us out there and say, “What are you roasting?”

We’d say, “Lamb.”

So then Fourth of July we’d go up there and start, and they’d come by, “You cooking lamb?”

We said, “No, we got pork today. We got a pig.” It became kind of a joke with—we’d always have our friends, and my brother Pete and Jimmy, we’d all have a big group of people come, yeah.

[00:37:02]

Eric Velasco: Now, you had mentioned that certain parts of the over-the-mountain suburbs, Mountain Brook and all that, it was hard to find acceptance, clubs, things like that.

[00:37:18]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[00:37:19]

Eric Velasco: Now, some of y’all are living over here, and many times you’re putting a big old lamb on a spit and roasting it in the backyard by the pool. What kind of reactions have you been getting in rich suburbs?

[00:37:34]

Sam Graphos: No, it’s changed. The feelings have changed a lot, and there’s not any segregation there at all. They’ve accepted us, or we’ve accepted them, maybe. [laughter]

[00:37:49]

Eric Velasco: But even then, I mean, even just like whole hog roasting is unheard of out here in the suburbs, much less a whole lamb, something as exotic as a whole lamb. Would anybody say anything, or angle for invitations?

[00:38:04]

Sam Graphos: Oh, they’d all come over and eat, and that’s the same way on Thanksgiving. We have a roast turkey, but we have a Greek dressing of nuts and ground beef and raisins, and you put it in the inside the turkey and it’s really, really good. And then everybody, after Thanksgiving, all our friends, “Can we have what’s left over?” you know, and we always give them some. But it’s really good. And anytime we’re cooking, barbecuing outside or cooking something, a neighbor will come over. We’re pretty good cooks. We know how to season and we just enjoy cooking. We enjoy pleasing people.

[00:39:06]

Eric Velasco: That’s a big part of it, it seems, pleasing people.

[00:39:09]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah.

[00:39:12]

Eric Velasco: Now, you guys have a little fun along the way, too, while you’re roasting these lambs. I heard about an incident involving a pool and a platter.

[00:39:23]

Sam Graphos: Well, my nephew Pete, his wife doesn’t like us to—well, we had a lamb and we had the head, and so I put the lamb [head] on this tray with lettuce and stuff around it, put it in the pool, and she came out and saw that and freaked out. Then the next year—

[00:39:49]

Eric Velasco: And she woke up to that, right?

[00:39:49]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, we woke her up. Then the next year, I got the head, we weren’t going to use it, so I went to a restroom or her bathroom and I put the head in the toilet and put the lid down. And about an hour later, you heard her screaming and hollering, so from then on we haven’t been able to go to her house and cook lamb.

[00:40:14]

Eric Velasco: You’re barred from her house.

[00:40:15]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, we can go over there, but not to cook lamb, yeah.

[00:40:20]

Eric Velasco: She’d had enough at that point.

[00:40:22]

Sam Graphos: That was it, yeah.

[00:40:24]

Eric Velasco: I would imagine the severed lamb’s head in the toilet would probably do it.

[00:40:27]

Sam Graphos: That probably did it. Yeah, it did.

[00:40:30]

Eric Velasco: Do you guys like playing pranks?

[00:40:33]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, well, we’ve always had fun together, Jimmy and I especially, you know, being twins. And when he died, I was with him and Pete was there, and I kind of got after him for dying, because I didn’t want him to leave me here with Pete alone. [laughs and lowers his voice slightly] Because Pete can be kind of bossy sometimes. [back to normal voice] But when he died, it was rougher on me when he died than it was when my mother and daddy died, because we were just born together. [Interviewer’s note: Jimmy Graphos died on March 16, 2016.]

[00:41:12]

Eric Velasco: He was a part of you, literally.

[00:41:13]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, he really was. And it’s been hard, but I’m getting over it. Another drink and I’ll be fine. [laughs] He and I used to go and drink a little bit and have fun together.

[00:41:25]

Eric Velasco: What did he like to drink?

[00:41:27]

Sam Graphos: He was a beer man. He drank a lot of beer. I drank a little beer, but I drank a little Scotch, too, yeah.

[00:41:37]

Eric Velasco: Now, he played on that church softball team. He was a pitcher for decades.

[00:41:41]

Sam Graphos: He played till he was an old man. He was in his late fifties, I think, when he quit. He got hit in the face with a ball and knocked out his teeth, so he thought it was time to quit.

[00:41:54]

Eric Velasco: That would convince me, too, I would think.

[00:42:00]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[00:42:01]

Eric Velasco: Did you play any sports growing up?

[00:42:02]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, we played football and a lot of basketball. Neither one of us played center, since we were only about 5’4”, but we had a great time. We played basketball and football all the time in our neighborhood with all the boys, yeah.

[00:42:20]

Eric Velasco: You had a great setup in that neighborhood for being a kid, it seemed like.

[00:42:24]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. There’s a boulevard, this wide boulevard, and that’s where we had our football “field” and our basketball “courts,” but they were just ground. It wasn’t a real floor; ground is all. Like basketball, you hit a rock and go the other way. We had a great—all the guys, we still, the boys from Norwood, we used to go to the Birmingham Barons baseball game, and to this day they have a game at Rickwood Field, which is the oldest baseball field in the United States, and we go out there and take a tent, and all the guys from Norwood meet there and eat. I take hot dogs and we eat hot dogs.

[00:43:17]

Eric Velasco: Who makes the hot dogs?

[00:43:19]

Sam Graphos: I do. I make them at the store and take them out there already made, eat them up.

[00:43:24]

Eric Velasco: That sounds like fun. Tailgating at the baseball game.

[00:43:28]

Sam Graphos: Baseball game, yeah.

[00:43:30]

Eric Velasco: Now, I understand they’re not going to be able to do the Rickwood Classic this year because of some repairs to the stadium.

[00:43:36]

Sam Graphos: Right, so they’re going to have it at the new field, I believe. I’m not sure. But it’s tradition for a long time. I’ve got a shirt from every one of them, yeah. [Interviewer’s note: The first Rickwood Classic was in 1996.]

[00:43:47]

Eric Velasco: Tell listeners about it. It’s an annual baseball game.

[00:43:51]

Sam Graphos: Annual baseball game, Birmingham Barons, and they dress up in their old uniforms, and the visiting team wears old uniforms, and they have a guy there, same guy that’s been singing for years, in the seventh inning stretch, “Peanuts, popcorn, and Coca-Cola.” It’s a lot of fun.

[00:44:16]

Eric Velasco: And the dog that I guess—at least your brother nicknamed “The Rickwood.”

[00:44:22]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, well, they have—somebody comes in the store and they want a hot dog with just mustard, that’s The Rickwood. Back in the old days when you’d go to the ballgame, that’s all you got was mustard on them, so we named ours just mustard a Rickwood, yeah.

[00:44:41]

Eric Velasco: Now, Birmingham has gone through a lot of changes and struggles with black and white relations. You were coming of age and in young adulthood, young businessman in the era of first the Civil Rights Movement and then desegregation. How did it affect your life?

[00:45:08]

Sam Graphos: Well, I remember we had a—my mother and daddy worked, so we had this black lady who would take care of us, and she would fix our food, but the lady would not eat with us. She had her own plate and own glass. And we’d say, “Come on, have a seat with us, Maggie.”

And she said, “No.” I guess she was trained or grew up thinking you can’t eat with white people.

And then my dad’s restaurant, they didn’t serve black people, but they had black people were the cooks. Now, why you couldn’t feed them, I never figured that out. But then in school, we didn’t go to school with any blacks, and, in fact, the only time I really ever socialized with blacks was when I went into the Coast Guard, and they didn’t have very many of them. The Coast Guard is called the “Jewish Navy” because all the Jewish boys would join the Coast Guard so they wouldn’t have to go to the draft.

But now it’s changed. We have black friends that come. I think the over—what’s the word I’m looking for? It’s really not bad, half—it’s 100 percent better than it was when I was growing up, and there’s really not that much segregation, and people don’t think that way, you know, like they used to.

[00:46:52]

Eric Velasco: Seems like the segregation now is more money.

[00:46:54]

Sam Graphos: Probably.

[00:46:56]

Eric Velasco: I call it instead of white flight, I call it green flight.

[00:46:58]

Sam Graphos: That’s it, yeah, right.

[00:47:00]

Eric Velasco: Because as far as Birmingham’s concerned, the best schools are not in the city of Birmingham; they’re in the communities outside. That’s why a lot of them exist in the first place. [Interviewer’s note: Jefferson County, where Birmingham is the county seat, has some three-dozen municipalities and a dozen school systems, with a thirteenth in the works.]

[00:47:13]

Sam Graphos: Right. Well, they have one school now in Birmingham called Ramsay, and then our old school, Phillips, they call it Phillips Academy, and they bring in—well, like Ramsay, you have to pass a test to get in, and they’re bringing in more—I don’t know how you say it. It’s just a better education, you know, better teachers.

[00:47:39]

Eric Velasco: They call those magnet schools.

[00:47:41]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, I believe that’s what it is, yeah.

[00:47:45]

Eric Velasco: Now, did you move directly from Norwood to Homewood?

[00:47:49]

Sam Graphos: Right. I lived in Norwood till I got married, and I was twenty-six when I got married and moved to Homewood. And the fact about it is I was raised in Norwood, I’ve lived in Homewood, and I’m going to be buried in Elmwood, so I’m never getting out of the woods. I’ll always be in the woods. [Interviewer’s note: Elmwood is a cemetery.]

[00:48:20]

Eric Velasco: Is your brother interred there?

[00:48:21]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right, he is. We have a big plot, about sixteen of us. We’re going to all be together again.

[00:48:30]

Eric Velasco: Now, is this near the Derzis plot or—

[00:48:34]

Sam Graphos: Well, it’s about—

[00:48:36]

Eric Velasco: Is everybody kind of in the family tree together?

[00:48:38]

Sam Graphos: Our church buys lots, buys sections of the cemetery, and then it got full, and then they moved to another part of the cemetery, and that’s where all the Greeks are being buried now, people from my church.

[00:48:55]

Eric Velasco: So if I were to go down to Elmwood and try to find these areas, would I inquire at the church or at the cemetery where to look?

[00:49:02]

Sam Graphos: Either place, they’ll tell you. In fact, it’s Block 26 and Block 32. [laughs]

[00:49:11]

Eric Velasco: Perfect. It’s exactly what I wanted to know. Now, how did you and your wife meet?

[00:49:22]

Sam Graphos: At Sunday School back at church. It was a church thing. In fact, I first asked her to go out at a church Valentine’s dance. That was our first date.

[00:49:35]

Eric Velasco: How old were you?

[00:49:37]

Sam Graphos: Well, they’d put me in jail now. My wife was sixteen and I was twenty.

Nowadays, I don’t know if they let a twenty-year-old guy date a sixteen-year-old girl nowadays.

[00:49:50]

Eric Velasco: Well, I’m sure Dad would have said okay to that one.

[00:49:52]

Sam Graphos: Well, they didn’t know how old I was because I was so small.

[00:49:57]

Eric Velasco: What’s your wife’s name and her maiden name?

[00:50:02]

Sam Graphos: Her name is Sue Diane—Betros was her maiden name, B-e-t-r-o-s. In fact, we went together five years, and one day her mother—I was over at their house one afternoon, and her mother says, “Sue, your dad and I have been thinking about it, people at church are talking about y’all, so we think it’s either time for y’all to shit or get off the pot.”

[00:50:33]

Eric Velasco: She used that phrase?

[00:50:35]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, she used that phrase. Then I had to go down to ask her daddy if I could marry her, and he was at the store. He was at his restaurant, the Phoenix restaurant, working, and he knew I was coming down there. I went down there, I didn’t say a thing. So I went the next night, and finally I asked him. He told me, gave me some good advice, he said, “You’re getting married. Marriage is not just sex.” He said, “Marriage is like a job. You have to work at it.” And that’s what I did. I’ve been working at it for fifty years now.

[00:51:11]

Eric Velasco: And about to celebrate the rewards.

[00:51:15]

Sam Graphos: Fifty years.

[00:51:18]

Eric Velasco: What are your in-laws’ names, your mother’s parents?

[00:51:21]

Sam Graphos: Cecil and Ann Betros, and they were good people, fun people, liked to have a good time.

[00:51:30]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like they liked you too.

[00:51:31]

Sam Graphos: Oh, they did. We got along fine. In fact, I got along with her mother better than she did, than my wife did. You know how mothers and daughters are.

[00:51:39]

Eric Velasco: Now, they’re Greek, I assume.

[00:51:42]

Sam Graphos: They were Greek, yeah.

[00:51:44]

Eric Velasco: Was your wife born here?

[00:51:46]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. In fact, she was born in Homewood. They were one of the first Greek families that moved over the mountain, and then when we bought our house, it was two blocks from where they lived, so she’s not getting out of the woods either. She’s still here too.

[00:52:05]

Eric Velasco: And you said your father-in-law owned Phoenix Restaurant, was it?

[00:52:09]

Sam Graphos: Phoenix Restaurant, yeah. It was in the Phoenix Building, which back then the telephone company was in that building. Now they’ve made it into condominiums. They made it into condos.

[00:52:25]

Eric Velasco: What kind of restaurant was it?

[00:52:26]

Sam Graphos: Meat-and-three. Meat-and-three place. Then at night, he sold steaks.

[00:52:32]

Eric Velasco: Were her parents born in the States?

[00:52:35]

Sam Graphos: Her mother was, but her daddy was born in Greece.

[00:52:38]

Eric Velasco: Where in Greece?

[00:52:40]

Sam Graphos: Some little island right off the coast of Athens. I can’t think of the name of it. I’m not very good with names.

[00:52:49]

Eric Velasco: So you two met at the dance and then went out for about five years. I assume you were married at the church.

[00:52:57]

Sam Graphos: Married in the church. In fact, her daddy had—we got married on a Monday, Labor Day, because he loved The Club, which is a restaurant and dancehall in Birmingham, and it’s private. You have to be a member there. And on Labor Day is their slowest day of the year, so we would have our reception up there, and we had the reception, and it was an open bar, the whole place was, and I remember his bar bill was \$5,000. Back then, that was a lot of money. Everybody had a great time.

[00:53:41]

Eric Velasco: It must have been a huge gathering, because, I mean, you are related by blood or marriage, it seems like, to half of the Greeks in Birmingham.

[00:53:48]

Sam Graphos: Everybody in the church, all the church, everybody in the church back then was invited, so it was a big event. It was. In fact, I got tired, so I called my brother Jimmy over

there, I gave him my little corsage I had on, we both had tuxedos on, and he walked around with my wife, and nobody knew it wasn’t me. We looked so much alike back then.

[00:54:20]

Eric Velasco: Are you two identical twins?

[00:54:22]

Sam Graphos: We’re identical, right, yeah. So he’d walk around and I’d go sit with my buddies. It was funny. It was funny.

[00:54:30]

Eric Velasco: Now, given his sense of humor, that could be kind of dangerous, I would think.

[00:54:35]

Sam Graphos: No, no. In fact, one time he had a date and I had a date, and we went to a drive-in. He was in a car and I was in another car. I was with my wife, my girlfriend then. So I saw him. I went out to get some popcorn, I saw him in there, so I said, “Jimmy, let me go to your car.”

He said, “Okay.” And this is the first date he had with this girl. So I got in the car, and I kind of grabbed and kind of gave her a kiss, you know. She kind of pushed away, and I said, “Come on, honey.”

And then he knocked on the window, and she looked up and saw him and she saw me, and I said, “I’m not Jimmy.” And that was one of our funny times we had together, yeah.

[00:55:26]

Eric Velasco: Now, what did your future wife, your girlfriend at the time, think about all that?

[00:55:29]

Sam Graphos: Oh, no, she’s just as crazy as we are. She’s funny. She likes to have a good time. It was funny.

[00:55:35]

Eric Velasco: So she fit right in with Jimmy and them.

[00:55:39]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. She’s a sport, yeah.

[00:55:42]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell us about your children, please.

[00:55:46]

Sam Graphos: I have two children. I have a son and a daughter. My son’s name is Ted Graphos, and my daughter’s name is Suzanne Graphos Schoel. She married David Schoel, and they have—

[00:56:00]

Eric Velasco: S-h-o-a-l?

[00:56:01]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I’m not sure. [Interviewer’s note: It is spelled Schoel.]

Anyway, he’s a great guy. My daughter, when she was a senior in college, she was decorating for Homecoming. She sat down and then she couldn’t get back up, and so they took her to the hospital. They called us. We were in Birmingham. She was in Tuscaloosa. We ride down there, and the doctor told us that she had M.S., multiple sclerosis, and he told us to come back to Birmingham and get another doctor’s opinion. We weren’t sure. So she couldn’t walk for several months, and she did have M.S., so my wife and I, but mostly my wife, is really big in the M.S. Society. We raise a lot of money for M.S. And then she got her doctorate, she’s a speech therapist, and then—

[00:57:06]

Eric Velasco: Is that something she had to overcome with the M.S.?

[00:57:10]

Sam Graphos: Well, no, she just kept going to school, but she used a walker. At first it was a cane, and then she got where she couldn’t use a cane, so she started using a walker, and now she uses a scooter. She got a little scooter she uses. But that was twenty-five years ago, and she’s been married for ten years. She married a very great, great man. He’s just so nice to her, does everything for her.

And then three years ago, my son, at the age of forty-four, he had a dizzy spell and kind of lost sight in his eye, so he went and they found out he has M.S., which is kind of unusual for two people in the same family to have it. It’s terrible. Anyway, his eyes got better and his balance got better, and he’s back to normal now. But he still has to—he works out, which has really helped him. He goes, works out three days a week, but—

[00:58:22]

Eric Velasco: What does he do for a living?

[00:58:24]

Sam Graphos: He’s a banker. He works for Iberia Bank. But this, it’s tough. My daughter, both of my kids and my wife are a lot stronger than I am, because I think about it and I’ll cry, you know, but you never see them cry at all. They’re just working, raising money. My wife has raised over—every year she’ll raise over \$350,000. We’ve been doing it for twenty-five years.

[00:59:01]

Eric Velasco: Is it sponsorships on the M.S. Walk or—

[00:59:03]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah, M.S. Walk. My daughter, she’ll raise some money, and my son, they raise money. It’s become a—they have the walk and we always have a team. Everybody has a team, and we usually have the biggest team. We give them t-shirts. Then on Sunday night

before the walk, we’ll open the store and everybody comes and eats free hot dogs and a little beer and have a get-together.

The CFO from Coca-Cola, he gives me some money every year because he’s a customer, and found out his brother had M.S., so he has a team. He started a team, but his team consists of he and his wife, and he’ll give \$30,000. He gets a lot of money, but he says the difference between him getting money and my wife getting money is she works, sends letters out, and goes to meetings and talks to people. He said he just calls five clients and he gets his money, yeah.

[01:00:30]

Eric Velasco: And in the meantime, your wife is helping to spread the word and educate people.

[01:00:35]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, and she went to Washington last year to talk to one of our representatives. He wasn’t very helpful, so she came back and started rumors, trying to get him out of office, for people not to vote for him next year. She’s making a campaign, yeah.

[01:01:01]

Eric Velasco: Are you involved at all in the Greek Festival every year?

[01:01:05]

Sam Graphos: I help. Well, Pete’s in charge of the cooking, and I help him in the kitchen.

[01:01:11]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the Greek Festival, please.

[01:01:13]

Sam Graphos: The Greek Festival is a once-a-year Greek food festival, and they take in—it’s a three-day event. They have Greek-style baked chicken, which Pete cooks, it’s great. And it’ll draw for the three days probably, I’m not sure, 100,000 people come. And people in our church work so hard. In fact, they’ve already started right now getting ready for September. They started cooking sweets and they’ll freeze them for the festival.

[01:01:53]

Eric Velasco: But then there’s practically nonstop cooking during the three days of the festival itself.

[01:01:59]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, you don’t stop. You cook all the time. It’s become a happening in Birmingham. People look forward to it, they line up around the whole block for three days. No telling how much we’ve cooked, but it’s nonstop.

[01:02:20]

Eric Velasco: But really it’s a symbol of just how much the Greek community in Birmingham has become an important and celebrated part of the community.

[01:02:32]

Sam Graphos: It is. The thing about it is if you want a good restaurant, you don’t go to these national firms.

[01:02:46]

Eric Velasco: The chains?

[01:02:47]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, you don’t go to the chains. Greeks are known for cooking, and they all have good food, and all of them are very into the city and helping people, yeah.

[01:03:00]

Eric Velasco: But at the same time, one of the things I’ve found very unusual is very few of these Greek-owned restaurants are billing themselves as Greek restaurants.

[01:03:10]

Sam Graphos: No, you’re right, yeah. We have several Greek businesses, meat-and-three places, vegetables, but there’s not a whole lot of Greek cooking. There’s only about three restaurants, I think, in Birmingham that has original Greek cooking.

[01:03:30]

Eric Velasco: Pappas’ [Grill] and what else?

[01:03:32]

Sam Graphos: Pappas’ and—oh, I knew you’d ask me.

[01:03:37]

Eric Velasco: Did I put you on the spot? I’m sorry. [laughter]

[01:03:40]

Sam Graphos: Golly. Place in Hoover, I can’t—

[01:03:44]

Eric Velasco: Costa’s?

[01:03:46]

Sam Graphos: That’s it, Costa’s, yeah. They’re the two that really has Greek food. [Costa’s Famous Bar-B-Que was founded in 1981 by Gus and Maria Kanellis. They opened multiple locations before selling the company in 2003 to non-Greek owners. The Hoover location closed as a barbecue restaurant and reopened under different owners with a Greek-Italian menu. It is now known as Costa’s Mediterranean Café.]

[01:03:52]

Eric Velasco: So why do you suppose that came about? I mean, nowadays, Chinese people open Chinese restaurants, or Thai people move in and they open sushi restaurants. [laughs]

[Interviewer’s note: Most restaurants in greater Birmingham that serve Thai food also have sushi bars.]

But what is that? What is it about the Greeks doing meats-and-threes and hot dogs and barbecue?

[01:04:10]

Sam Graphos: Well, we didn’t want to go work in the mines. We didn’t want to go.

[Interviewer’s note: All of the ingredients needed to make iron and steel were mined near Birmingham; jobs at the mines and steel mills attracted thousands of immigrants from Greece and other countries in the late 1800s and early 1900s.]

It’s just hot dogs have been the Greek thing. We started the hot dog stands. You know, a lot of cities don’t have hot dog stands. Our sauce is original. I don’t know, people just gravitate to Greek cooks. [laughs]

[01:04:47]

Eric Velasco: How did you learn how to cook?

[01:04:48]

Sam Graphos: I guess it’s inherited. I don’t know. I cook at home. My wife cooks every once in a while, but I do most of the cooking. I don’t know. I can season food really well. I don’t know how I got into the—how I learned. I just learned trial and error, I guess.

[01:05:11]

Eric Velasco: What do you cook at home?

[01:05:12]

Sam Graphos: Just about everything, you know, lamb, chicken, steaks. Now, I’d rather cook a steak at home, cook it outside, grill it outside, than go to Ruth Chris. Mine’s better.

[01:05:25]

Eric Velasco: Why?

[01:05:26]

Sam Graphos: I guess it’s the way I cook them, I guess, and it’s cheaper. [laughs]

[01:05:31]

Eric Velasco: That’s for sure. How do you make your steak?

[01:05:34]

Sam Graphos: Well, I put olive oil, lemon juice, salt, pepper, garlic, and oregano, mix them and marinate it in that, a lot of lemon juice. Lemon is the fruit of the gods. Lemon adds to everything.

[01:05:51]

Eric Velasco: What does it do for food?

[01:05:53]

Sam Graphos: It gives it a snap. Lamb has to have a lot of lemon juice, lemons, fresh. We don’t use no frozen, yeah.

[01:06:10]

Eric Velasco: How do you get your lemon juice? How do you extract your juice? Do you have a little squeezer thing or—

[01:06:15]

Sam Graphos: No, hand.

[01:06:16]

Eric Velasco: Hand-turn it?

[01:06:18]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, just squeeze.

[01:06:20]

Eric Velasco: Or just squeeze it through your hands.

[01:06:21]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah.

[01:06:21]

Eric Velasco: So you must have very strong hands by now.

[01:06:23]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. [laughs] Not like they used to be. The arthritis is getting to it now.

[01:06:29]

Eric Velasco: But would most of what you cook, would it have at least some kind of Greek influence or Greek ingredient in it?

[01:06:35]

Sam Graphos: Mine?

[01:06:35]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[01:06:36]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I don’t cook Mexican or anything. I don’t have any idea how to cook Mexican food.

[01:06:45]

Eric Velasco: And you mostly ate Greek food growing up in the house, though, didn’t you?

[01:06:49]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, yeah, that’s all we did.

[01:06:51]

Eric Velasco: Where would you guys go out to eat when you were a kid?

[01:06:54]

Sam Graphos: We didn’t.

[01:06:55]

Eric Velasco: You didn’t go out to eat. You ate at home all the time.

[01:06:57]

Sam Graphos: Well, yeah. Back then, you didn’t have a lot of money. I remember my mother would cook like three or four chickens, and we’d eat chicken for two or three days, yeah.

[01:07:08]

Eric Velasco: She’d just do different variations of it?

[01:07:10]

Sam Graphos: Just leftovers.

[01:07:12]

Eric Velasco: You had leftovers.

[01:07:12]

Sam Graphos: I don’t eat leftovers to this day because I ate so many when I was a kid. That’s all we did. We ate leftovers.

[01:07:23]

Eric Velasco: But at the time you were growing up, it seemed like a fair number, if not most, of the independently—well, they were all independently owned restaurants then, were Greek-owned.

[01:07:32]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, they did. I guess they learned how to cook in Greece, and they came over here and just opened up restaurants. Like I say, they’d go to work for the steel industry and work there a few years and make some money, then open up restaurants.

[01:07:49]

Eric Velasco: Especially, I would imagine, with these hot dog stands and all, they were fairly inexpensive to open, small spaces [unclear].

[01:07:55]

Sam Graphos: Right. When I first opened the Sneaky Pete’s, they were fifteen cents, hot dogs were. And then when I opened up five years later in Homewood, they had gone up to twenty

cents, and now they’re two and a half dollars, and I made more money when they were twenty cents than I do now, yeah.

[01:08:25]

Eric Velasco: As far as your menu goes, how does it break down between the hot dogs and the other items, in terms of the sales?

[01:08:31]

Sam Graphos: Well, I make my own hamburger patties, so I sell a lot of hamburgers. I sell about—let’s see. Hamburgers are probably, at the time, 100 percent hot dogs, and then 75 percent. Like I’ll sell 100 hot dogs, I’ll sell 75 hamburgers. But hamburgers and hot dogs are my biggest things, but I have, like I say, chicken and chicken salad, turkey samwiches, ham samwiches. I have a good variety, but mostly people eat hot dogs and hamburgers.

[01:09:18]

Eric Velasco: What do you make your burgers from?

[01:09:20]

Sam Graphos: Well, the Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Homewood, they grind my meat for me every day.

[01:09:24]

Eric Velasco: Do you have a special grind for you?

[01:09:25]

Sam Graphos: Well, no, it’s just 80, 80:20 ratio.

[01:09:32]

Eric Velasco: Meat to, lean and fat?

[01:09:33]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah. And they make it for me every day, fifty pounds a day.

[01:09:42]

Eric Velasco: That fresh ground, freshly hand-patted—

[01:09:47]

Sam Graphos: People love it.

[01:09:49]

Eric Velasco: It makes a difference, though.

[01:09:50]

Sam Graphos: It makes a big difference. It really does.

[01:09:52]

Eric Velasco: Then do you griddle cook them?

[01:09:53]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, we cook them on a grill, flat grill, yeah, and my grill is not that big, and it’s all day it’s cooking. There’s something cooking all the time, yeah. It’s amazing that—if you stop and thinking about it, it’s amazing how I can cook that much with just a grill that big.

[01:10:19]

Eric Velasco: Please describe for us your interior, because I don’t think people really have a feel for it. I don’t think two people could walk shoulder-to-shoulder down the length of your restaurant.

[01:10:31]

Sam Graphos: Well, yeah. Well, like I say, it’s 10 feet wide, and it’s about—with the counter in there, it’s probably 4 feet of walking space. It’s a 60-foot building and 10 feet wide, about 600 square feet, I guess. Then behind the counter, there’s three of us that work behind the counter, and when you get by each other, you have to turn sideways to get by the next person. But we have stations, like, so we don’t get in each other’s way.

[01:11:13]

Eric Velasco: You have to work it out that way.

[01:11:15]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. My help now, I’ve been in business there almost fifty years, and I betcha I haven’t had more than—my help usually lasts ten years. I’ve had one boy who was there twenty years. But we don’t turn over very much. And then the ones that do stay a long time, they’ll decide that they want to open their own, and I’ll help them, help them get another place, you know. But we’re like a family. We really are.

[01:11:53]

Eric Velasco: Why is it they tend to stick around so long?

[01:11:56]

Sam Graphos: I’m just such a great person. [laughs]

[01:11:59]

Eric Velasco: You’re not as bossy, eh?

[01:12:01]

Sam Graphos: I’m not. They’re my bosses. I have to ask them to get off, yeah. No, but, like I say, it’s like a family.

[01:12:10]

Eric Velasco: Who’s working there now?

[01:12:11]

Sam Graphos: I have a boy, Jesse Thompson, he’s been with me since he was twelve years old. He came in my store and he asked me if he could have a job. I said, “You’re too young to work. I can’t hire you.” I said, “But you can come in.”

He said, “I live with my mother. It’s just my mother and I.” And he said, “I’ll do anything.”

I said, “Well, you come after school, and I’ll let you sweep up and wash dishes.”

He said, “Okay.” So he’s been with me. He’s thirty-one now, and I sent him through college, helped him go through college, because he didn’t have anything, and he graduated college. In fact, he got to go to England for a year to study over there.

[01:13:08]

Eric Velasco: An Oxford scholarship?

[01:13:10]

Sam Graphos: Not Oxford. No, it wasn’t a scholarship.

[01:13:12]

Eric Velasco: Just accepted.

[01:13:14]

Sam Graphos: Right. And I went over to visit him for a couple of weeks. He came back and he wanted to go to law school, so he took the test and passed it. Then he decided he didn’t want to be a lawyer, so then he was going to join the Peace Corps, got ready to go to the Peace Corps,

then decided he didn’t want to go to the Peace Corps, so he’s back working with me. He’s just a rebel, I guess, or nomad or something. I don’t know what he is.

[01:13:49]

Eric Velasco: Free spirit.

[01:13:49]

Sam Graphos: He’s a great boy. I mean, he’s a great worker. And then I have another boy in there that’s been working for me for about ten years, and he’s going to school. I don’t know, they go to school, but they don’t seem to—I had one boy that went to school, worked for me for twenty years, and he got accepted and became a CPA, and he didn’t like doing that, so he opened up his own sandwich shop. I helped him get that thing started.

[01:14:21]

Eric Velasco: Which sandwich shop is that?

[01:14:22]

Sam Graphos: Z’s. Chris Z’s. [Interviewer’s note: Chris Z’s is a sandwich shop near St. Vincent’s Hospital on University Boulevard near 29th Street South. Open for breakfast and lunch, the menu features American classics as well as a Greek omelet and a “Birmingham’s Best Hot Dogs!!!” section that includes the Special Dog, a style popularized at Birmingham’s early Greek-owned hot dog stands and continued by shops like Sneaky Pete’s and Sam’s Super Samwiches.]

[01:14:24]

Eric Velasco: So it’s Chris Zarzaur, is it?

[01:14:26]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, Chris Zarzaur.

[01:14:30]

Eric Velasco: He seems to be doing fairly well.

[01:14:33]

Sam Graphos: He does well. He does a lot of catering. He has a bigger kitchen. He does catering. But it’s a way of life. That’s all I know is work.

[01:14:48]

Eric Velasco: Well, I think that tends to draw a certain personality, too, that may not necessarily be suited to offices and cubicles.

[01:14:56]

Sam Graphos: Right. The school system invited me on Career Day to go talk to the kids, so I got up there and I told them, “Everybody’s not meant for college. A lot of people go to college and waste their parents’ money and don’t do anything, then drop out and have to get a job.” So I told them the best thing they could do if they didn’t want to go to college was to join the military or go—I’m a firm believer of trade schools. You know, plumbers, mechanics, electricians, they

make big money. They make a lot of money. So I don’t know if the teachers liked me saying that, but I told them not everybody’s ready for college or don’t need to go.

[01:15:45]

Eric Velasco: Did you go to college?

[01:15:46]

Sam Graphos: I didn’t go, no.

[01:15:47]

Eric Velasco: Didn’t go at all?

[01:15:48]

Sam Graphos: Not at all. I was too smart. [laughs] I knew more than the teachers knew, I thought. I just never was a very good student.

[01:16:09]

Eric Velasco: Tell me a little more about your brother Jimmy.

[01:16:14]

Sam Graphos: Brother Jimmy had a sense of humor and he was just a funny guy. He had many, many friends, and he loved to have a good time, he really did. Funny, funny person. He

was married for about twenty years, I guess, and they got a divorce. He never did remarry again. He had a great girlfriend.

He was working. He was like me, worked all the time, and then he decided he was going to retire and he was going to quit drinking and quit partying, so he stopped all that, and then the next thing we knew, he was always sick. He was hurting, legs were hurting, his heart was giving him little problems. So I figured out then that I wasn’t going to retire, because I didn’t want to fall apart like he did. As long as you stay busy, that’s the way I think, if you keep busy, you’re not going to get sick. But if I get sick—

[01:17:26]

Eric Velasco: I never would have guessed you are your age. You are—

[01:17:30]

Sam Graphos: Seventy-five.

[01:17:31]

Eric Velasco: —vital and young-looking for seventy-five.

[01:17:34]

Sam Graphos: Well, my doctors says, “Sam, you still working?”

“Yes, sir.”

He says, “Good, good.” He says, “How long do you work? What’s your hours?”

I say, “Well, I usually go to work about 4:30 in the morning, and I usually come home about 3:00.”

He said, “Every day?”

I said, “Yes, sir, except on Saturdays, I go to work early but I leave at 6:30 and I go play golf. Then I come back to work at 11:00 and work till we close.”

But age, to me, age has nothing to do with how you—how can I put it? When you’re—I don’t think about it. I think I’m fifty years old, mind, which my wife asks me when I’m going to grow up, but I don’t want to grow up. She still asks me that, “When you going to grow up?” But as long as you think young and you work, I think you’ll be fine.

[01:18:34]

Eric Velasco: Do you ever plan to retire?

[01:18:36]

Sam Graphos: They will find me on the grill, my head on the grill, and I hope whoever finds me turns me over so the other side can get cooked, too, so I can look good in the—

[01:18:48]

Eric Velasco: And afterwards, how do you want to be dressed?

[01:18:51]

Sam Graphos: I don’t want an apron on. [laughs]

[01:18:55]

Eric Velasco: But sauerkraut, chili, beef? [laughs]

[01:18:57]

Sam Graphos: Usually when you get buried, you go to the church, then you go to the cemetery, and then everybody comes back to the banquet hall and they serve fish. I don’t know why it is, but they always serve fish. It’s got something to do with the religion. So my brother Jimmy, he said when he died he wanted hot dogs. So I made a bunch of hot dogs. I asked the priest, I said, “Father, is it okay if I bring hot dogs?”

He said, “Yeah.” He said, “I don’t know the meaning of the fish, but you can bring anything you want.” So they had fish, but I took a bunch of hot dogs, and so that’s what he wanted, so that’s what he got.

[01:19:38]

Eric Velasco: I take it more hot dogs went than fish.

[01:19:40]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah.

[01:19:43]

Eric Velasco: So what do you want at yours?

[01:19:45]

Sam Graphos: Hot dogs. No, I don’t think about it. I don’t know.

[01:19:49]

Eric Velasco: That’s not an issue for you right now.

[01:19:52]

Sam Graphos: Not right now. I don’t think about that.

[01:19:55]

Eric Velasco: That’s a good approach, I think.

[01:19:57]

Sam Graphos: I know one thing, though. I’m going to have to die before my wife does.

[01:20:02]

Eric Velasco: Why’s that?

[01:20:04]

Sam Graphos: Because I can’t make it without my wife. In fact, at home a couple weeks ago I was taking a shower, and all of a sudden the water got real hot, and I hollered. She said, “Oh, I’m sorry.” She had turned on the washing machine, and our old house, it took the cold water from the shower to the washing machine. So she turned it off.

So then after I took a shower, I went in there to turn the washing machine back on, and, terrible to say, I didn’t know how to turn the washing machine on. I never have washed clothes. I’m seventy-five years old, never washed clothes. That’s pretty bad, yeah.

[01:20:47]

Eric Velasco: She probably would have a hard time around the kitchen these days since you do most of the cooking.

[01:20:51]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, yeah. But I’m not a homebody. I used to work in the yard all the time, but now I got Bruce. Bruce does my yard work. Bruce is a Mexican guy here in town. His name is not really Bruce, but his complexion and his eyes are kind of slanted, and somebody told him one time that he looked like Bruce Lee, so he went and changed his name to Bruce Lee.

[01:21:26]

Eric Velasco: Oh, my goodness.

[01:21:27]

Sam Graphos: So he’s now Bruce, yeah.

[01:21:30]

Eric Velasco: He was proud of that. [laughs]

[01:21:32]

Sam Graphos: Uh-huh.

[01:21:36]

Eric Velasco: Now, I understand your grandchildren are attending Shades Cahaba Elementary.

[01:21:43]

Sam Graphos: Well, no, they’re out now.

[01:21:44]

Eric Velasco: They’re out. I guess they are old enough now. But they did?

[01:21:47]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. My wife went to that school.

[01:21:50]

Eric Velasco: That’s where I wanted to go with this. You’ve had three generations at Shades Cahaba.

[01:21:53]

Sam Graphos: Three generations, yeah. And they had me go talk to the—they had the Secretary of Education was in Homewood to give him some kind of award for being a blue ribbon school or something, so they invited me to go up there and meet with this lady, me and

the mayor and all these councilmen and men who run the YMCA and me. I don’t know how they got me. So I told that lady, I said—everybody’s introducing themselves, got to me, I said, “Well, I’m Sam Graphos. I have a business in downtown Homewood, have a sandwich shop, and I still don’t know why they invited me.”

And that lady said, “What?”

I said, “You know, all these educated, smart people here, and they asked me to come.”

So the superintendent said, “We asked Sammy to come up here because he is what Homewood’s all about.”

So they were talking about the teachers, we have great teachers, so I just said, “Everything’s great, but I can tell when a kid comes in my store if he’s from Homewood or Vestavia or Mountain Brook. I can tell where they come from.”

And the lady said, “How?”

And I said, “Well, our kids, all of them have manners, ‘Yes, sir,’ ‘No, sir.’ The other kids, they don’t.”

And she said, “Is that school?”

I said, “No, ma’am.” I said, “It’s the parents. We have great parents here in Homewood, and they have just as much for the success of this school, as much the teachers as it is the parents.”

[01:23:35]

Eric Velasco: It is Birmingham’s Mayberry.

[01:23:37]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right, it is. It’s just a great community, yeah.

[01:23:41]

Eric Velasco: And that’s one of the things about that downtown [Homewood] area I was wanting to get into earlier. It’s got a very small-town feel.

[01:23:48]

Sam Graphos: It does.

[01:23:49]

Eric Velasco: It’s modernized, old downtown kind of area where the stores line each side of the street, very walkable, lots of people down there all the time. Now, Sam’s also has been kind of a community gathering point.

[01:24:07]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[01:24:09]

Eric Velasco: Tell us a little bit about that, not only some of your older customers, but some of your younger customers as well.

[01:24:14]

Sam Graphos: Well, my customers are—if they’re crazy, they come to Sam’s Super Samwiches. I seem to get all the wackos, and I’ve always been like what I think comes out. I have a bad internal monologue. I don’t have internal monologue.

[01:24:38]

Eric Velasco: No filter.

[01:24:38]

Sam Graphos: It just comes out what I—and a lot of people think that I’m serious when I say stuff, but I’m really joking a lot. Every once in a while, I might hurt somebody’s feelings, but most of ‘em know how I am, and they laugh and we have a good time. But then all my customers are very nice. I’ve got ‘em—my array of customers is from the garbage man to the senator. In fact, I don’t know if I should say this or not, but our new [U.S.] senator, Luther Strange, which might not be our senator for long, he’s been a customer of mine for years, really nice guy, but you know how politicians are. They get in trouble, I guess. But I get all kind of people, yeah.

[01:25:30]

Eric Velasco: And then you get a lot of young people coming in, students, school-aged children.

[01:25:36]

Sam Graphos: Right, and I’m always—on Friday mornings, the high school kids, once they get their driver’s license, start driving to school, on Friday mornings, I don’t know why, but they come to my store. They’ve been doing that for a long time. I’ll have fifty or sixty kids every Friday morning come and eat. I always tell them, specially when they have tests, it’s brain food. Whoever eats my sandwiches for breakfast, it just makes their brain work better during the day.

[01:26:13]

Eric Velasco: And it is one of the better school systems in the state, so you may be responsible.

[01:26:17]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, I probably am, yeah. But I’ve donated a lot to the schools. They seem to know my telephone number real well.

[01:26:27]

Eric Velasco: What goes through your minds on those Fridays mornings? That’s got to be a scene.

[01:26:32]

Sam Graphos: Both my help gets there early, and I have to go earlier to make sure to cook enough bacon, because everybody loves my—like I said earlier, they love the bacon. Teachers come in all the time, principal, yeah.

[01:26:52]

Eric Velasco: That’s got to kind of take you back to your youth, too, hanging out at the drive-in with all your high school buddies.

[01:26:58]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah. That’s how it is. It’s a gathering place for the kids. They have fun. Now, the boys and the girls, you know how kids are. Beautiful girls, nice-looking boys. Boys sit on one side, girls sit on the other side. They don’t talk to each other. So I told the guys one day, I said, “You boys need to start talking to those girls, because when you get old, you’re going to say, ‘Boy, why didn’t I talk to that girl?’” But that’s how it is when you’re young.

[01:27:27]

Eric Velasco: Do they take your advice?

[01:27:30]

Sam Graphos: Well, I had one group of—there was eight. There were four boys and four girls, and one of the boys had worked for me during school. And senior prom, he wanted to have the senior prom dinner at my store. So my wife and I put up a long table, couldn’t be too wide, it was long, and put chairs and tablecloths and candles, and I cooked ‘em steaks. They came in all dressed up.

[01:28:04]

Eric Velasco: Your style steaks.

[01:28:06]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, my Greek style, yeah. But it was good. It was fun. They enjoyed it.

And their parents thanked us. It was fun.

[01:28:14]

Eric Velasco: Do you do much catering otherwise?

[01:28:17]

Sam Graphos: I really don’t. Just, like I say, for the school. They have a spring festival. I give ‘em 400 hot dogs. I do some catering, but I really don’t—I probably should do more, but I just don’t care about it.

[01:28:34]

Eric Velasco: I understand you’ve done at least one wedding.

[01:28:36]

Sam Graphos: I’ve done one, and now I’m getting ready to do another wedding. The groom at this next wedding, we’ll have a big party, big reception. You know, receptions are long, and so he wants me to take hot dogs and hamburgers, and then when they cut the cake at the end, he’s not going to have a cake. He’s going to have hot dogs and hamburgers if they’re from Sam’s. Yeah, I thought that was pretty cute, pretty cute idea.

[01:29:05]

Eric Velasco: How long has that guy been a customer?

[01:29:06]

Sam Graphos: His wife’s been a customer since she was born.

[01:29:10]

Eric Velasco: So she introduced him to them?

[01:29:12]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, to the hot dog stand.

[01:29:14]

Eric Velasco: And obviously he became quite a fan.

[01:29:16]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, he comes in all the time. He thinks it’s funny. I don’t know. That’s what they want, that’s what they’re going to get.

[01:29:27]

Eric Velasco: Now, you’ve been down there on 18th Street South since 1970.

[01:29:34]

Sam Graphos: Sixty-nine.

[01:29:35]

Eric Velasco: Sixty-nine. When did you move in?

[01:29:37]

Sam Graphos: I opened January of '69.

[01:29:41]

Eric Velasco: Okay. What else was there then that's still there now that people might recognize?

[01:29:50]

Sam Graphos: There was a hobby shop, Homewood Hobby Shop was there, and Shaia's clothing store. That's about the only thing that's still there. Everything else, everything's been there a long time, but we were the first. When I got there, there was the same original ones, those three places there. Now, the Shaias, they're the ones that own the building, and that's who got me to come to Homewood. They have a fine clothing store, men's store.

[01:30:26]

Eric Velasco: So they just figured that would be a good amenity to have in the Homewood area?

[01:30:33]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. Like I say, back then there were two restaurants, meat-and-three places, and I was the first sandwich shop. Now there are several sandwich shops. People ask me, they say, “You know, you got competition coming down the street.”

And I tell this, I really think this, “They’re not my competition; I’m theirs. I’ve got mine. If I lose a customer, it’s my fault.” That’s how I look at it, yeah.

[01:31:02]

Eric Velasco: It’s nice being established in that way, and, like you said, multigenerational too.

[01:31:08]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. There’s a boy has a restaurant in Homewood now, a meat-and-three place. He’s originally from Mississippi. Johnny’s—

[01:31:28]

Eric Velasco: Yeah. Tim Hontzas.

[01:31:29]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. They’re from the same place the university is.

[01:31:34]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir, in Oxford as well, and then he’s kin to the folks over at Niki’s West.

[01:31:41]

Sam Graphos: Yep, *the* meat-and-three place.

[01:31:45]

Eric Velasco: Probably the only restaurant family in town you’re not related to one way or another. [laughs]

[01:31:49]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, just about. Yeah, you’re right there.

[01:31:53]

Eric Velasco: Now, walk us through how you make your hot dogs from you cook ‘em on a griddle.

[01:32:05]

Sam Graphos: Cook ‘em on the grill.

[01:32:06]

Eric Velasco: Grill, sorry.

[01:32:07]

Sam Graphos: Keep ‘em on the grill, and then we have what I call a steamer, where I have all my bread in, because you have to have a hot steamy bun to have a good samwich.

[01:32:18]

Eric Velasco: What makes the difference on that?

[01:32:20]

Sam Graphos: Well, a soft bun—if you get a hot dog bun out of a package, it’s kind of crispy and harder, and I love a samwich with a softer bread. It’s just my favorite. That’s everybody likes that. Then I put the mustard and the onion and the kraut and the sauce, real fast. Time wasted—cash register doesn’t ring up if you’re slow.

[01:32:50]

Eric Velasco: How fast can you make a Special?

[01:32:52]

Sam Graphos: Oh, I can make one quick. They don’t take long.

[01:32:55]

Eric Velasco: You ever timed yourself?

[01:32:56]

Sam Graphos: No, I never have, but my little helper, the boy that’s been there since he was twelve, he makes ‘em faster than I do.

[01:33:04]

Eric Velasco: On a busy day, how many hot dogs do you go through?

[01:33:07]

Sam Graphos: Two hundred fifty.

[01:33:12]

Eric Velasco: And then probably about 150 or so burgers?

[01:33:15]

Sam Graphos: Two hundred burgers, yeah.

[01:33:18]

Eric Velasco: That’s a nice little turnover there.

[01:33:20]

Sam Graphos: It’s pretty good, yeah.

[01:33:23]

Eric Velasco: Not many places to sit down and eat in your establishment.

[01:33:25]

Sam Graphos: I only have stools, no chairs. It’s counters, counter service.

[01:33:31]

Eric Velasco: How many stools?

[01:33:32]

Sam Graphos: They come in and they get in a line and they get their sandwich and go sit down. There’s not but fourteen stools, but then I have two tables outside. People go out there. But I’d say 75 percent of my business is carryout.

[01:33:53]

Eric Velasco: And they’re carrying it out where? Back to an office or—

[01:33:58]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, they take ‘em back to work with ‘em or eat in their cars. I have two entrances, a front entrance and a back entrance. Most of my business comes in the back entrance because we have a big parking lot in the back, and that’s where most of the customers come from.

[01:34:12]

Eric Velasco: To create a visual, it’s street-side parking on the front side of your restaurant, and that’s on the main 18th Street drag.

[01:34:19]

Sam Graphos: And it’s hard to find parking.

[01:34:21]

Eric Velasco: But you’ve got a nice big lot behind you.

[01:34:23]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right.

[01:34:24]

Eric Velasco: Which is very unusual for Homewood.

[01:34:26]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. Oh, yeah. The Shaias own all those buildings, and they bought like the whole block. Part of it they left for the buildings. The other part’s all parking, yeah.

[01:34:39]

Eric Velasco: That was pretty wise of them.

[01:34:41]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I’ve always tried to buy my place from them, but they always say, “We don’t sell; we buy.” So that’s it.

[01:34:53]

Eric Velasco: Interesting. But then again, I guess if something breaks down, you’re probably glad you’re not the owner of that.

[01:34:58]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. Nothing’s ever happened. All they do is put a roof on there every few years.

[01:35:05]

Eric Velasco: Have you had to replace any of your—like your grill or anything like that?

[01:35:08]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. I just bought—I’d say five years ago my grill went out, so I had to buy a new grill. It just wore out. It was just so old, and I couldn’t fix it anymore. But like the steamer and all, that’s been there since I’ve been there. I did get a new stove in the back because the Health Department didn’t like the stove. I bought it from Army Surplus Store when I opened up fifty years ago, but I didn’t have a hood in back of the—it’s a small place, so I couldn’t have a stove back there. So everything’s cooked up front.

[01:35:56]

Eric Velasco: What time does the restaurant open?

[01:35:59]

Sam Graphos: I open at 6:30, but my first customers are the same guys. They usually come like quarter to 6:00.

[01:36:07]

Eric Velasco: On their way in to work or something?

[01:36:09]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, right. And then I close at 4:00. I used to close at 6:00, but when daylight savings time comes, I close at 4:00 and then go do something, have plenty of time to do something. And I get kind of mad—not mad. Everybody’s off work and having a good time, and I just been there all day, so I decided to close early, yeah.

[01:36:35]

Eric Velasco: And it’s kind of weird during the winter, leaving work in the pitch dark—

[01:36:39]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, 4:00 and go home, and then you go home at—

[01:36:42]

Eric Velasco: —but it’s dark at 4:30. [laughs]

[01:36:42]

Sam Graphos: —4:00, yeah. Yeah. It’s not any fun, yeah.

[01:36:46]

Eric Velasco: But you said you come in much earlier. What are you doing when you come in earlier?

[01:36:50]

Sam Graphos: Just prep up, get things ready for the day. It all depends. Like if I have a special order or something, I have to go in and cook a little early.

[01:37:00]

Eric Velasco: But you’re cooking your chili and your beef and things like that in the morning before you open?

[01:37:05]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah, yeah. And the sauce, I put it on and it cooks all night long.

[01:37:14]

Eric Velasco: Because that’s one of the secrets to it, is that slow cooking, isn’t it?

[01:37:20]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[01:37:21]

Eric Velasco: What does that do for it?

[01:37:22]

Sam Graphos: Gets all the spices and ingredients in there to combine, yeah. I can tell, it just might be me, but if I get in a hurry and don’t cook it long, I can tell the difference, but I don’t know if the customers can, but I can. And nothing goes out if I don’t like it. I’m very particular.

[01:37:46]

Eric Velasco: What do you do, just start over or—

[01:37:48]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, yeah, pour it out and start over.

[01:37:53]

Eric Velasco: Because that’s one of the things that a lot of people don’t really think about when they think about these old hot dog stands here. It’s not a cheap throwaway product, is it?

[01:38:06]

Sam Graphos: No.

[01:38:07]

Eric Velasco: And part of the comparison to current situations, but it’s not like a gas station hot dog here.

[01:38:12]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, you’re right there.

[01:38:14]

Eric Velasco: You guys are using good ingredients.

[01:38:19]

Sam Graphos: First notch, everything first-class.

[01:38:22]

Eric Velasco: Making it from scratch.

[01:38:23]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[01:38:25]

Eric Velasco: Do you make your own kraut?

[01:38:26]

Sam Graphos: No, no.

[01:38:26]

Eric Velasco: So that’s the one thing really that you don’t do yourself there.

[01:38:30]

Sam Graphos: We cut our own onions. We don’t buy the prepared-type stuff. Yeah, that’s the only thing, yeah. Kraut’s the only thing that’s not made there.

[01:38:40]

Eric Velasco: Fresh daily ground beef for you.

[01:38:42]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, good ground beef.

[01:38:44]

Eric Velasco: Particular about your hot dogs and what goes into them.

[01:38:47]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. Eggs, we use a lot of eggs in the morning. I use 35 pounds of bacon every day.

[01:38:58]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[01:39:00]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, that’s a lot of bacon.

[01:39:01]

Eric Velasco: That is a lot of bacon.

[01:39:02]

Sam Graphos: Yeah.

[01:39:05]

Eric Velasco: So is there anything that goes out in the morning that doesn’t have bacon in it?

[01:39:07]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, I have sausage and I have ham, but people most like the bacon.

[01:39:13]

Eric Velasco: And then I guess it’s available during the day for burgers, too, BLTs.

[01:39:16]

Sam Graphos: Oh, yeah, bacon cheeseburgers, BLT, yeah.

[01:39:29]

Eric Velasco: You grew up here in Birmingham.

[01:39:30]

Sam Graphos: Yeah, boy.

[01:39:33]

Eric Velasco: Your Greek-born father was here practically all his life. He came to the United States when he was, what, sixteen or something?

[01:39:39]

Sam Graphos: Sixteen, yeah. Taught himself how to read, never went to school.

[01:39:42]

Eric Velasco: And you grew up in really two worlds there.

[01:39:46]

Sam Graphos: Right.

[01:39:49]

Eric Velasco: You had your basic American southern good ol’ boy. I mean, nobody could tell by talking to you that you’re of Greek heritage. [laughs]

[01:39:59]

Sam Graphos: No, no.

[01:40:00]

Eric Velasco: And yet you have this very strong identity with your culture and your homeland.

[01:40:06]

Sam Graphos: Right, yeah.

[01:40:07]

Eric Velasco: How do you view yourself now, more Greek, southern, what kind of blend?

[01:40:12]

Sam Graphos: Well, I’m an American of Greek descent, and so. There’s still a lot of Greek in me. You know what I mean? You can’t just get rid of it. I think a lot about Greek, Greek food and Greek people, but, still, you know, America is the place. United States, there’s nothing like it, yeah.

[01:40:43]

Eric Velasco: And it seems like that’s part of what makes America America, the contributions your culture brought, my family’s cultures brought, other cultures bring.

[01:40:53]

Sam Graphos: Now, our president now, I don’t agree with him about the immigrants and stuff. That’s what made our country, were immigrants. That’s what made his life. He’s only married foreign women, you know what I mean, none of them Americans. [Interviewer’s note: Two of

the three women who married President Donald Trump, including his current wife, Melania, were foreign-born. His second wife, Marla Maples, was born in the United States.]

So our country’s made with immigrants coming over here. So I don’t like his immigration policies at all. The wall, that’s silly. Let’s not get on politics, please. [laughs]

[01:41:33]

Eric Velasco: But I guess that’s part of what I’m going to here, is what does your experience and your family’s experience and those of other Greeks in Birmingham say about this current issue about immigration in America?

[01:41:53]

Sam Graphos: Well, there’s bad people everywhere. You know what I mean? Religions, the way people think. Now, I can’t understand why they have these religions and they fight all the time. I mean, I don’t think—religion is supposed to be peaceful, isn’t it, peace, church, peace?

[01:42:19]

Eric Velasco: That’s the church I grew up in, yes, sir.

[01:42:21]

Sam Graphos: And how they kill and do that stuff, I don’t understand that. I have a lot of—what do you call ‘em? What’s the religion there?

[01:42:35]

Eric Velasco: Muslim friends?

[01:42:36]

Sam Graphos: I have a lot of Muslim friends. And, you know, there’s bad in every society. If you’re Muslim, that don’t make you a killer or mean or anything.

[01:42:47]

Eric Velasco: I would imagine a fair number of your neighbors are. They’ve got that Muslim Community Center here in Homewood a few blocks from your store.

[01:42:55]

Sam Graphos: Yeah. So I don’t know. It’ll turn out, I hope. I think it will.

[01:43:09]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing? What else do people need to know about you and your family and Sam’s?

[01:43:14]

Sam Graphos: Well, let me think just a minute here. Well, I know that I’m a good person and my wife’s a good person, our family’s good people, and we hope people recognize that. And I don’t know much what else to say. I love people and I love my religion, love our country, and I love Alabama football. [laughs]

[01:43:49]

Eric Velasco: And on that note, Roll Tide.

[01:43:54]

Sam Graphos: Roll Tide.

[01:43:55]

Eric Velasco: Thank you very much.

[01:43:56]

Sam Graphos: Thank you.

[01:43:56]

Eric Velasco: We’ll do our thirty seconds of silence.

[01:43:57]

Sam Graphos: I’ve enjoyed it, thank you.

[01:43:59]

Eric Velasco: Thank you very much. I have, too, and it’s been a delight talking with you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]