

Leslie Albach & Donna Richards
Seabreeze Trolley Cafe
Tampa, Florida

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Date: February 13, 2015
Location: Seabreeze Trolley Cafe – Tampa, FL
Interviewer: Sara Wood
Transcription: Deborah Mitchum
Length: Fifty-One Minutes
Project: Tampa Devil Crabs

START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:09*]

Sara Wood: Okay, so it is Friday, February 13, and this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I'm sitting here at Seabreeze Restaurant, and I'm with Mrs. Donna Richards and – Leslie, what's your last name?

[00:00:19]

Leslie Albach: [*Whispering*] Leslie Albach.

[00:00:20]

SW: [*Whispering*] What is it?

[00:00:20]

LA: Leslie Albach.

[00:00:]

SW: Albach, okay, and Ms. Leslie Albach, and we're sitting here, and Leslie is rolling, crab, Devil Crabs, and we're on [the corner of]–?

[00:00:34]

LA: North Boulevard and Palm.

[00:00:36]

SW: North Boulevard and Palm. Okay, so I always have people say hello and introduce themselves for the tape, so, Donna, would you start by saying hi and telling me who you are and where we are?

[00:00:46]

Donna Richards: Hi, I'm Donna Richards, and we're at Seabreeze Restaurant on North Boulevard in Tampa, Florida.

[00:00:53]

SW: And for the record will you tell me your birth date?

[00:00:55]

DR: It's November 10, 1967.

[00:00:58]

SW: Leslie, do you want to introduce yourself?

[00:01:00]

LA: Sure. My name is Leslie Albach. I'm here at Seabreeze Devil Crabs, rolling Devil Crab.

[00:01:05]

SW: And your birth date for the record?

[00:01:07]

LA: Is 10-20-66.

[00:01:09]

SW: And can you tell me what you're doing right now?

[00:01:11]

LA: Rolling Devil Crabs. *[Laughs]*

[00:01:13]

SW: And how many will you have when you're done?

[00:01:15]

LA: Hopefully about five dozen in this pan. [*Sound of crab rolling*]

[00:01:29]

SW: So, Donna, would you mind—? Would you start by telling me where you grew up and what it was like where you grew up?

[00:01:37]

DR: Actually I was born in Arcadia, Florida, and we moved to Tampa when I was very small – I don't even think I was a year old yet when we moved to Tampa – and we moved out to South Tampa area when I was three years old, and that's where I have lived my whole life, and just a few blocks down the road is also—. My husband lived there and that's where he lived his whole life, so we both were brought up in the same exact area and we both have lived there our whole entire life. I've always been interested in food, pretty much my first job consisted of food and all the way through, and then when I met my husband of course, you know, his family was all about food because they were in the seafood industry, so I fit in really well with them and it just become my passion as much as theirs. So, I've just been doing it ever since and I love it. I love the sea life. I love rolling these devil crabs. It's an interesting life for sure.

[00:02:37]

SW: And I just wanted to ask you a couple questions about your family. What are your parents' names?

[00:02:42]

DR: My parents' names is Rose and James.

[00:02:44]

SW: And what's your maiden name?

[00:02:45]

DR: Randall.

[00:02:47]

SW: And what kind—? Were they involved in the seafood industry at all?

[00:02:52]

DR: No, not at all, not at all. My dad, actually he was in the military, he was in the Army, and my mom was pretty much a stay-at-home mom, so no; neither one of them was ever really involved in the sea, but something—. But all my life I've always loved the sea. I liked—. It was just something that's always been a part of me, so I just fit right in. Of course when I found Danny that was it. We were a match made in heaven. I never minded going out on the boat or anything that he wanted to do, so it just made it right for us.

[00:03:22]

SW: How did you and Danny meet? You said you grew up down the street from each other?

[00:03:25]

DR: Yeah, [*Laughs*] actually we grew up down the street from each other. We did. We've known each other pretty much all of our whole entire life, and when we were young of course he used to make fun of me and call me names. [*Laughs*] And then one summer I grew up and he decided he didn't want to call me names anymore and said he wanted to kiss on me then. We grew up and he, you know, our lives took us in different directions as we grew into teenagers, and Danny ended up marrying his sweetheart from high school and I went on to, you know, pursue my life and do what kids were doing back then. Then in about 1985 Danny and his wife had split up and me and him got together. So we had been sweethearts before when we were

young, you know, fourteen, fifteen, we liked each other, and then, like I said, we went our separate ways and then we ended up being together and we've been married twenty-seven years now.

[00:04:21]

SW: What was the name of the street y'all grew up on?

[00:04:24]

DR: Palm Drive, both of us, Palm Drive. We both lived on the same exact street and we lived two blocks from one another. I lived on one corner and he lived on the next corner.

[00:04:32]

SW: And so, I'm wondering, you said that you love working with food: how did you get started in terms of--? You said you've been working with food your whole life.

[00:04:43]

DR: Well, you know, just when I, you know, when I was old enough to get a job I went straight to the food industry, because of course back then that was who was willing to hire young kids, in the food industry, and I just always liked it and I stayed with the food industry pretty much all the way through until I did meet my husband. Then, you know, when we first met each other his parents had the seafood market and so I did a lot with him as far as going out on the boat and catching the fish and stuff like that, and of course if his parents needed us to come down and work on the weekends to help at the seafood market we did.

[00:05:12]

Then in '91 [1991] when they bought the restaurant I stayed at the seafood market to help my brother-in-law back there with the bookwork and stuff because he was busy running the market and they were having--. My mother- and father-in-law bought the restaurant and they

were having a little bit of a hard time trying to keep somebody in there that could roll devil crabs, and not everybody can roll the devil crab. It does take somebody—. It takes a certain art to roll a devil crab, believe it or not, because the crab meat has to be directly in the middle of the crab and enough bread all the way around for the crab meat not to explode out of the crabs. My father-in-law called me over there and he said, “Donna, I need somebody to roll these crabs.” He said, “Will you sit down and give it a try for me?” and I said, “Yeah, Pop, I’ll sit down and I’ll give it a try for you.” The first day I rolled two hundred devil crabs, which was absolutely unheard of. They had had girls that sat in there all day long that rolled twelve crabs, and in the eight hours I rolled two hundred. It wasn’t too long and I was up to my quota that he wanted us to be at, which was five hundred crabs a day, so we had three girls that sat there seven days a week and rolled five hundred crabs apiece every day.

[00:06:17]

SW: I mean, when you first sat down to do it, I mean what was going through your head, because you have this special quality to move quickly? I mean, that’s rare.

[00:06:28]

DR: Well what was really going through my head was: I have to make my father-in-law proud [*Laughs*] because he’s going to come in here and I better have a good crab rolled for him. So that was pretty much what gave me my drive, was that I had to make sure that that crab was good for him, because he was coming back in and he was going to bust it open and he was going to critique it, so I had to make sure I knew what I was doing. But, yeah; he was pretty proud of me, I have to say. He was pretty proud of me that day, that I rolled that many, so, and then it just become instantly a passion. From that minute, from the minute that he come in and got that smile

on his face and said, "All right, you can do this," I fell in love with them and I have done them ever since. I've never stopped.

[00:07:06]

[00:07:09]

DR: No, he actually didn't show me how to roll them. The lady that was already in there rolling Devil Crabs showed me. Her name was Evelyn Zink and she had worked at the restaurant since the early '70s. She had raised all of her children at the restaurant. They had—. She had five children and all five of her children had worked at the restaurant through high school and young adults. Like I said, this was '90—. We're up to about '98 by now, and she's still there and she was rolling devil crabs. Of course she had different jobs in the restaurant but, you know, her job at that time was doing devil crabs, and she is actually the one who taught me how to put them together and to roll them, so.

[00:07:49]

SW: Do you remember what she told you about them when you first sat down, that first time, like any of her trade of doing it? Did she give you any advice that you remember?

[00:08:00]

DR: Yeah. Pretty much her advice was: don't play with them too much. You know, don't—. Once you get them into shape, put them in your pan. Don't continue to try to shape them because you're losing time. Because, like I said, back then we were really under a time, you know, we had to get these five hundred crabs out because we were selling fifteen hundred crabs a day with no problem. So it was a mandatory thing, we had to get these out, so it was: don't play with them. But my father-in-law, he gave us the best advice of all. He says, "When your mouths are busy talking your hands are not busy, so close your mouths and busy hands." *[Laughs]*

[00:08:36]

LA: He was a workhorse.

[00:08:38]

DR: Yes, he was.

[00:08:39]

SW: [*Unintelligible*]

[00:08:40]

LA: He was a workhorse.

[00:08:41]

SW: Did you work back there at the--?

[00:08:44]

LA: I didn't roll crabs but I did work at the restaurant one time for them.

[00:08:46]

DR: She was a waitress.

[00:08:48]

SW: What was it like?

[00:08:49]

LA: It was unusual. It was busy though. Yeah, I worked the dinner shift so, but it stayed pretty busy.

[00:08:58]

SW: Can you talk a little bit about the history of the restaurant, how it started, the Seabreeze started?

[00:09:06]

DR: The Seabreeze started in 1926. A gentleman by the name of Victor Licata, he opened the restaurant, and it was 1926, and along with him he had two sons, Victor and Tony, and—. I'm sorry, that's wrong. It was George and Tony, and then he had twin daughters, and I can't really remember the twin daughters' names but Helen will be able to remember that. Anyway, they were—. Actually the first devil crab rollers were the twin daughters. George—. We did not come up with the devil crab; we came up with our recipe for the devil crab, or Victor did. He come up with his recipe for the devil crab. Everybody had their own recipe for it. And then his daughters rolled them during the day, and as time went on the restaurant became a very, very busy place. Everybody knew where the Seabreeze was. Everybody loved to be there. It was the place to hang out; all the teenagers, grownups, everybody loved the Seabreeze, and there was a movie theater across the street, a drive-in, so that enticed people even more to come to the Seabreeze. They could come and get their bag of devil crabs, go to the movies and watch movies, you know, dinner and a movie. It was just great back then. They also had curbside service where the girls would come out in roller skates, take your order; it was just always grand at the Seabreeze. It was just—. It was always the place to be.

[00:10:31]

Then in '72 when they put up the new building, because there were several buildings before the last Seabreeze was there, and they put that up in February of '72 is when it opened, and the Seabreeze really, when they got the nice building, the Seabreeze really became iconic in '72. That's when it really started getting big and everybody knew where the Seabreeze was. And so many people have fell in love at the Seabreeze; it's unbelievable. We've been closed since 2003, and since 2003, twelve years, the people who still come to tell us how their parents fell in

love at Seabreeze or how they fell in love at Seabreeze, how they had their first date at the Seabreeze. The Seabreeze was an important part of a lot of people's lives, definitely.

[00:11:19]

SW: Now, when did--? So when did Helen and Robert buy it?

[00:11:29]

DR: They bought the restaurant in February of 1992. We went over in December of '91, is when Helen and Robert actually went over and started taking over their role and getting the restaurant, and it was a very big challenge. It was a big challenge for everybody in the family. George and Lucy, they had another offer on the table for the restaurant. Somebody wanted to buy it. But they said that they didn't really want us to be in the back, and we had five shrimp boats and a seafood market and it's not like we could just go away when you've got five shrimp boats. You have to have a place to put them. So we went to Yankeetown Seafood and we were looking up there. We were thinking about buying Yankeetown Seafood because again we had to have a home for our boats. You know, that was an important part of our lives. But when George and Lucy was going to sell to these other people they said they didn't want us to stay, so George and Lucy called a family meeting and we all went to Helen and Robert's house, and George said that he would like for Helen and Robert to buy the restaurant and that way we could stay, that he knew it was in good hands with his family, and that we had a big family and that altogether that we could do it and that he knew we could do it.

[00:12:43]

So my mother- and father-in-law decided that they were going to go ahead and buy the restaurant. It was a very big adjustment for them because they went from working, you know, 9:00 to 5:00 to working from 7:00 in the morning till 12:00 at night, a lot more employees with a

lot more problems. A lot of people, they disliked us because we bought the restaurant. They didn't like that we had maybe took it from the Licatas, and in reality the Licatas asked us to buy it. So it was kind of hard, you know, a lot of people were kind of angry that we had bought the restaurant because for so long they thought we were going to change. We never changed anything. What George and Lucy taught us is how my mother- and father-in-law ran it for the next thirteen years. They never changed anything. The only thing they did change was to make the place more beautiful, to fix things that had needed to be fixed for years, to fix the outside. So they were very successful for the thirteen years that they had the restaurant.

[00:13:44]

SW: I'm wondering, Donna, if you wouldn't mind talk-. You know, you mentioned going out on the boat with Danny. Can you talk a little bit about what that life is like, for people who don't do it, to work on the water in that capacity?

[00:13:58]

DR: Fishing is a hard life. It takes a very special breed of person to be a fisherman. They have to have a free spirit. They have to be self-motivated. They have to find-. They find who they are on the water when they get up and go to work every day. It's a hard life. Today we might catch three hundred pounds of fish; tomorrow we might not catch any. The way I've always looked at it is that we get today what God gave us, that that's what He meant for us to have and that we should take it and be happy with it and to move on.

[00:14:33]

But we've-. It's a hard life. *[Laughs]* It's definitely a hard life. A lot of people are against commercial fishermen. They feel that we rape and ravish the waters and that we take more than what we need, which in all reality it's not true. Commercial fishermen, we feed our community.

We never take more than what we can sell. Why would you do that? Then we're caught with rotten fish. So no; we never take more fish than what we can sell, and when we do sell it, it goes back into our communities. We don't sell it overseas. It goes back into our communities and it feeds, you know, hundreds and hundreds of people. So therefore, you know, commercial fishermen are actually good. They're not a bad thing because they're not going to over-catch because they have to make sure that, you know, tomorrow that there's someplace else to sell fish that they haven't overstocked them.

[00:15:26]

But it's definitely a hard life because a lot of people are against you, a lot of laws. It restricts you from fishing the way that you're used to, the way that you know how to. There's very few commercial fishermen in the state of Florida since '95, since the net ban, than what there used to be, and our area right here, where my husband fishes at, we've got seven commercial fishermen in our whole entire – in our area that we fish in. Back in '95 there was thirty. Today there's seven, and today there's seven and they're all old. *[Laughs]* You know what I mean? There's–. Now we have a son, he's continuing on in the commercial industry, and nephews that we are bringing in that's coming into the commercial industry, but the other fishermen that are here, a lot of them didn't have children or their children, they're interested elsewhere, not back into the commercial fishing. So commercial fishing isn't what it used to be. It's not. Not as many people want to get into it anymore.

[00:16:28]

SW: And Donna, just for the record, will you tell me the names of–? You know, obviously Danny, your husband, but can you tell me the names of your family members who go out there, some of the older men and then the younger ones as well?

[00:16:42]

DR: Well there's my husband, Danny. Danny is our commercial fisherman of our family. He has always made his living from the water. When he was a very young man, you know, in his family they had jobs. They had a seafood market and they had boats and they had three sons, and they—. You know, they needed their help, and Danny was summoned to be the crabber and the fisher. Danny started crabbing and fishing when he was twelve years old and he has been doing it his whole entire life. He is a true commercial fisherman. He lives, eats, and breathes it. That's what he is.

[00:17:17]

And then we have our son, his name is Eric, and I really, in my life, really didn't want Eric to be a commercial fisherman, only because it is a hard life, and I really wanted him to go in a different direction. But he is his father's son and he is just like him, so he went into the commercial fishing industry with my son – with my husband, excuse me – and he loves it. A couple years ago [*Laughs*] they talked my beautiful daughter into getting a boat and for her to pursuing the commercial fishing industry, so she has a boat also. So really my husband and my children are all commercial fishermen. They all have a boat, they all have licenses; they make their living. Now my daughter, she doesn't make all her living from the water. Hers is more—. She goes to make extra money but my son and my husband, they are fulltime commercial fishermen. But we've had—. You know, and my husband's brothers, they've took their turn being commercial fishermen but never to the extent of my husband.

[00:18:19]

SW: That's Sydney, your daughter? Is Sydney the one—?

[00:18:23]

DR: Yeah. Oh, I'm sorry, and my—. Sydney is my daughter. Sydney Richards is her name, and my son is Eric Richards. So in our—. You know, my whole entire family are commercial fishermen, and I took my turn at it, but now it's my turn, you know, I get to stay home [Laughs] and do devil crabs and cook and they go and go fishing now, so.

[00:18:40]

SW: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like for you when you were out there doing commercial fishing?

[00:18:46]

DR: It's a stinky job. [Laughs] But it's exciting because you never know when your net goes down what's going to come up. You never know what you're going to catch. It does give you some excitement, the kind of, I guess an adrenaline rush like a gambler would feel, you know: what's going to come up in my net this time? And on good days you feel great and on bad days you don't feel real good. You know, you're hot, or you're cold, or—. You're never just right out there. It's never that easy. You're either too hot or you're too cold. And, like I said, God either gives it to you or He don't, you know.

[00:19:22]

But my children have been brought up their whole lives on the boat. My son drove his first boat before he was two years old. My children have also lived, eaten and breathed commercial fishing. When my children were little and we needed a babysitter because I had to go to work, my husband babysat. [Laughs] You know, he took them fishing with him, he took them crabbing with him, because I was kind of—. I didn't allow my children to be taken care of by other people. I wanted them to stay with us. So he was the babysitter so they've been fishing

their whole lives. You know, we woke up in the morning, it's like, "Okay, you've got to go with Dad today," and they packed a lunch and they were ready to go. So they knew that it was – they had to go catch fish and crabs or whatever it was.

[00:20:03]

SW: So at that time–. So obviously you talked about the blue crabs, but what are some of the fish that–? I'm wondering if there's a difference between what y'all caught then and what there is now. Can you talk about some of the kinds of fish?

[00:20:19]

DR: Oh, yeah, there's definitely–. Well then you definitely caught more. There was definitely – but you were allowed more net. You were allowed different kind of nets that allowed you to catch more fish at that time. But we've caught a lot of mullet and sheepshead, sand perch, flounder, some Cobia sharks, stingrays in our time, batfish and skates, which is all in the ray family. We've caught some [*Unintelligible*] snappers, just pretty much a big variety of fish, what we call bottom fish. You know, the grouper, snappers, we don't really–. We don't have the license for that. We don't really catch that kind of fish. We catch more of what's called a bottom fish.

[00:21:02]

SW: You were talking about the net ban earlier. Can you explain what that is because I'm not really aware?

[00:21:08]

DR: Okay. Before 1995 we were allowed gill nets. They were large nets, they were football fields long, and they allowed you to be able to entwine fish. They would hit the net and they would twine up in the net and that wouldn't allow them to come out. In '95 they said the

commercial fishermen were catching turtles and dolphins and all kinds of things, which was not true, in their nets, because a dolphin's not going to come near a fisherman's net because they're smart. Dolphins don't do that.

[00:21:40]

So, anyway, they had a bunch of very negative ads on TV and they banned gillnetting in 1995. When they banned gillnetting in 1995 they caused a lot of honest men to become dishonest men, just to put food on their family's table the only way they knew how to do it. It took a lot of good commercial fishermen down, it did. It was hard, especially for the older men. They didn't know how to fish any other way. They weren't strong enough. Their backs weren't strong enough to throw a cast net so they had to go on and try to find another occupation and at, you know, fifty and sixty years old, it's hard to go find another occupation. The state of Florida wasn't all that, "Oh, let's help the commercial fishermen," with us either, you know. It was kind of pretty much, "Well, y'all can be truck drivers." That's what they offered the commercial fishermen: you can be truck drivers, or do it yourself.

[00:22:37]

So, but it definitely impacted Florida, it impacted the way the fishermen fish, but the one thing that it definitely did do was that it brought the commercial fishermen a little closer together as a whole to where now they do stand together more than what they used to. Now they're not so much against each other the way they used to be. It's not such a competition anymore. The net ban really did bring the fishermen closer together, so that was a good thing that come out of it.

[00:23:07]

SW: I guess in terms of having to deal with all of these adverse, you know, the net ban and the regulations, all these things, how has your family weathered that? I mean y'all are still doing it, you've been doing it for so long; what is it like to stick with it through all that?

[00:23:27]

DR: We're definitely diehards. It's something-. Commercial fishing is my husband. He will never be anything but a commercial fisherman. He doesn't want to be. It's who he is, and so you take the good with the bad. You know, when we're bad then I go get a job if I have to, you know, and I help things along there, and, you know, we got good and bad in commercial fishing. We've definitely seen our share of the bad side but my husband gets up the next morning and he goes right back out and he tries again, and he tries again, and he tries again until eventually he comes home with that load of fish and we can pay the electric bill or put food on the table, whatever, you know, whatever it be for that minute.

[00:24:10]

SW: And Donna, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about-? You know you talked about the restaurant and how y'all got started, the history of the Seabreeze and the Richards family purchasing it. Can you tell me about what happened to the restaurant and how y'all ended up - how you guys ended up here?

[00:24:29]

DR: Okay. My mother- and father-in-law actually sold the restaurant in 2000. It was about February of 2000 they sold and in November of 2000 my father-in-law had been retired for a few months and he was pretty bored, [Laughs] which we knew he was going to be. So I had already went and got another job in the mean-. You know, in that six months we had been closed

down I had went and gotten another job, and one afternoon I was sitting at the lunch table at work and my father-in-law walked in and he says, "Donna," and I said, "Yeah?" He said, "You need to go in there and you need to tell them that you're putting in your two weeks' notice," and I was like, "What are you talking about, Pop?" because I call my father-in-law "Pop." I said, "What are you talking about, Pop?" He said, "I'm taking you back down there and I'm going to teach you how to run that restaurant. You go in there right now and tell them you're putting in your two weeks' notice."

[00:25:16]

So I did as he asked me to do and I got up and went and put in my two weeks' notice, and he took me back to the restaurant and, me and my husband actually, he taught us how to run it the next three years, till 2003. The only reason that we had to leave was because the owner who we sold it to had sold it to somebody else and they were ready to start developing on the property and so we were going to have to go. So, for the last three years the restaurant actually stood on the property, me and my husband ran it, and it was just part of me. It was part of my mother- and father-in-law, and I love my mother- and father-in-law dearly. They're some of the greatest people I've ever known in my life. It was a passion for my father-in-law and somehow it just-. It bred it into me. I don't know. It came right into me, and my father-in-law always believed in me. He always had that faith in me that I could do anything I ever put my mind to and that I was a hard worker and that that's what was going to take me where I needed to go.

[00:26:20]

He was pretty insistent after we closed the restaurant that I needed to continue to roll the devil crabs. You know, he had three sons but they weren't interested in rolling devil crabs. They were interested in fishing and fixing shrimp boats, not rolling devil crabs, and I had that interest

and that love for it and he knew that. So when we were completely through with the restaurant I continued to roll crabs for him because he had friends who still wanted crabs, and then it go to where it was—. We were rolling a little bit too much and so I went and I rented a kitchen, a commercial kitchen where we could do it, you know, under license and all that to where, you know, we would get in no trouble or anything like that, so I went and I did it like that. For about three years I did it that way.

[00:27:06]

Unfortunately—. My father-in-law, for the ten years that we have been gone, every day my father-in-law looked for me a restaurant and he was going to buy me a restaurant for me to run. And he found them, he found lots of them, but I would never take them because I didn't really want to take all their money, you know, to open up my own restaurant because what was to happen if I was to fail? And I kept telling my father-in-law, "Pop, I'm going to open me a place one day when I got the money to do it, so you can be proud of me." He said, "I'm going to be proud of you anyway. It doesn't matter."

[00:27:40]

So I wouldn't accept the money so we didn't open the restaurant while he was alive, unfortunately. After he passed away, we all got together and decided that we were going to do this again, or try it again, and we were going to do it with food trucks this time instead of having, you know, a big building to try it with. So we went ahead and we got food trucks and that's how we're here where we are today, so.

[00:28:02]

SW: And what year did Robert pass away? I can ask Helen too.

[00:28:09]

DR: Hold on. It was—. We're in '15. He passed away in '12, March 2, 2012.

[00:28:18]

SW: And when did y'all—? So what year did y'all start here?

[00:28:24]

DR: In 2012. He passed away March 2, 2012 and October 26 was my first day of business of 2012.

[00:28:31]

SW: And it was this building right here, is how y'all started?

[00:28:35]

DR: Yeah. When I first started it was this—. We were looking and looking and looking for a place because, I mean, I wasn't ready for a restaurant. Again, like I said, we were going more food truck oriented so I wasn't looking for a big place, just a small place that I could get inspected so that I could roll my devil crabs. I went to the fish house where I bought my crab meat at and I was telling them, you know, that I really needed to find a place because we had one food truck that was fixing to go up and they couldn't go up without me having my own place, you know, to roll the devil crabs.

[00:29:08]

The gentleman's name was Matassini, Mike Matassini, and the Matassinis was a big seafood name in Florida, in Tampa, right here in Tampa. In fact the original Matassini fish market sat right over there on the water, and I'm talking not even a quarter of a mile right there. That's where the original Matassini fish market sat. My husband sold fish to them, lots and lots of fish, all his life. So it was, you know, our families knew each other, and he said, "I have a

building.” He stood up, he took the keys out of his pocket, he handed me the keys. He said, “Don’t bother bringing the keys back.” He said, “Just come bring rent next month,” and I said, “Well, I don’t know if I want the building.” He said, “Don’t bother bringing the keys back.”

[00:29:52]

So we came, we looked at the building. It was tiny. *[Laughs]* It was the right price and it was something I could get into quick that I could hurry up and get, you know, get what I needed to get done, get the building ready to get inspected so that I could start rolling Devil Crabs, and that’s how I ended up here. Of course I’m a—. I feel that, you know, when Pop passed away, you know I always make the joke that when Pop passed away when he went to heaven him and Mr. Matassini got together and he said, “Matassini, my daughter-in-law needs a place. You know, she needs a place where she can do what she needs to do,” and he said, “Well, you send her right over to my son.” So I feel that’s how I got here, is that Matassini and my father-in-law talked it over in heaven and they brought me here, so.

[00:30:35]

SW: So what happened to—? Did they—?

[00:30:38]

DR: The Matassinis, just like everybody else, when the grocery stores started getting seafood in them it killed the seafood markets. They were buying imported shrimp for way less than what they could buy American-caught shrimp for and they just—. They flooded the markets with them and they overtook, and it was so much more convenient to go into the grocery store and pick up your shrimp or your fish than what it was to go to the grocery store and then go to the meat market and then go to the fish market. So, when grocery stores, when they started

getting the seafood in them, it really started killing the seafood markets around, and in time the big name seafood markets that were here are all gone. There's none left.

[00:31:24]

SW: How did that affect your—? Like, being commercial fishermen and, you know, I'm sure that there—. You were talking about the relationship between the Matassinis and the Richards. I mean how did that affect y'all on the water, when the supermarkets—?

[00:31:38]

DR: When the supermarkets come up, of course it drove our prices down to nothing, because, you know, people weren't buying because they couldn't sell. So, you know, it hurt a lot of commercial fishermen also in that way. The commercial fishermen will never get the price they used to get for their seafood anymore. They fight over markets, you know, who they can sell their fish to. I mean I've seen them get down out in the parking lot and physically want to fistfight each other over who's going to sell their catch that day to that seafood market because there's not that many left these days. So, and even though we only have seven commercial fishermen left, you know, when you only got five markets and seven commercial fishermen and everybody needs to make money, you know, it does get kind of hairy sometimes, so.

[*Mobile phone rings*]

[00:32:28]

SW: [*Laughs*] It's okay. Is that your—? Do you need to get that? Is that [*Unintelligible*]? That's awesome!

[00:32:38]

LA: It's Chad, isn't it?

[00:32:38]

SW: I miss that [song.]

[00:32:39]

LA: [*Unintelligible*] Chad's.

[00:32:41]

SW: Is that just Chad's song? [*Laughs*]

[00:32:42]

DR: Yeah, that's just Chad's song, because he loves to dance.

[00:32:45]

SW: He said that he's really into line dancing.

[00:32:47]

DR: Big time, yeah. That's a funny story. I would have never thought that our children would be dancers, the boys. You know, I mean because we have very manly men in our family and, you know, the dancing is not something that they do. But they, I don't know, just one day my son decided he was going to go dancing and got into this line dancing and before you knew it there was--.

[00:33:13]

LA: Everybody was doing it.

[00:33:14]

DR: Yeah, there was ten boys, every Thursday night, going to the Dallas Bull doing their line dancing. Everywhere we would go: to the beach they was line dancing, to the restaurant, they were line dancing; if there was music on they were line dancing. So that was pretty cool. It's pretty cool to watch boys dance, you know, because, you know, girls are doing it, you know,

girls like to dance, but when boys do it, and when they're good at it – and they're good at it. I mean that was what was so really just–

[00:33:40]

LA: Amazing.

[00:33:40]

DR: –amazing about the whole thing is that the boys are–. They're good dancers.

[00:33:44]

LA: They weren't shy.

[00:33:45]

DR: Not shy.

[00:33:46]

SW: That's so rare, and I mean that's a quality–.

[00:33:48]

LA: It is rare.

[00:33:48]

SW: It's a nice quality to have in a gentleman, you know?

[00:33:51]

DR: Yeah.

[00:33:52]

LA: Yeah, because even my husband don't dance.

[00:33:53]

SW: He doesn't?

[00:33:53]

LA: He'll slow dance but [*Laughs*] [*Unintelligible*].

[00:33:57]

DR: Mine dances like Pee-wee Herman. [*Laughs*] Yeah, he dances. He loves it. He's just not real good at it. [*Laughs*]

[00:34:04]

SW: As long as you feel the rhythm and [*Unintelligible*].

[00:34:05]

DR: That's right. That's right.

[00:34:07]

SW: Well, Donna, do you have time for just a couple more questions?

[00:34:10]

DR: Yes.

[00:34:10]

SW: Would that be all right?

[00:34:11]

DR: Yeah.

[00:34:12]

SW: I wanted to ask you about—. You know you said earlier – I thought it was really interesting – you said—. You were very specific and you said—. You were talking about Mr. Licata's recipe for devil crabs, that it was his version of the devil crab, and, you know, going around, talking to people about the devil crab, a couple people have talked about how competitive it is and how people are like, "We have the real one. No, we have the real one." But the point of it is really that this tradition has continued and it's a Tampa thing for so long. So I'm

just wondering if you could talk about why do you think the devil crab has lasted this long? I mean we're talking something that's almost a hundred – over a hundred – years old.

[00:34:50]

DR: Well, they're delicious, for one thing, but I think because that we do have a variety of devil crabs. You know, I won't say that I have the best devil crab in Tampa but I'm up there with the top three. You know what I mean? I am. I'm up there with the top three. I don't think any of us, any of the top three here in Tampa that are the top devil crab rollers, could really say they're the top, because everybody has a wide variety of taste. I don't really feel that devil crab – that I have any competition in rolling devil crabs. [*Door opens; background noise increases*] I feel that–. We've been rolling devil crabs since 1926. When you sell fifteen hundred devil crabs a day–.

[00:35:33]

SW: I'm going to stop it for a second. [*Background noise continues*] I'll just pause it for a second.

[00:35:38]

DR: Okay.

[*Break in recording at 00:35:39*]

[*Transcript resumes at 00:36:35*]

SW: I love the labels on those boxes. Those are really pretty.

[00:36:39]

DR: Yeah, the mermaid. She's got a story that goes along with her too.

[00:36:44]

SW: I'll have to ask you about that. [*Pause*] We were talking about—. I asked you about why the devil crab—.

[00:37:00]

DR: Okay. We have so many different varieties here in Tampa. We do have—. You know, everybody makes, or wants to make, their own devil crab, and it's not an easy process. That's why most people [*Laughs*] go and buy their devil crabs because it's not an easy process to make. But, you know, I don't really feel that I have a whole lot of competition on my devil crabs. You know, we've sold so many and done it for so long that our name is out there, that I don't feel competition from them. I feel that they're good for me because today you might not have the taste for my crab; today you might have the taste for their crab, and thank God for variety, you know, so that we can all have what we want at that time. So, yeah.

[00:37:44]

SW: I just—. So she bought the crab—. She bought them uncooked, but do you do both here?

[00:37:51]

DR: Yes. I sell them both ways. A lot of people come from up north; when they come to Tampa they want a Seabreeze devil crab. I box them uncooked and we freeze them, that way they can get them home safely, and they love to take their own devil crabs home and then, you know, because you can cook them and send them home with them and they're not going to taste the same as what they do when they first come out of the fryer. So, it was easier for us to do it that way, just tell them how to make them when they get them home, and then that way they can have a fresh, delicious devil crab at any time that they want it.

[00:38:25]

A lot of people come and get them for parties. You know, they're going to have a party and they're going to make devil crabs they come and they get them for that. A lot of people just prefer to make their own devil crabs at home. They just like to cook them at home. You know, they'll come get a four-pack. They'll have one today, one tomorrow, you know, when they feel like having one. They just like to have that availability at home to be able to cook their own devil crab, and it's worked out well because some people, they don't want to cook them. They don't want no part of frying anything and they are thankful that we're over there frying them for them, you know, but then there's other people who prefer to take them home and fry them themselves, just so they can have a hot, crisp devil crab. So, yeah, so we do definitely offer them both ways.

[00:39:07]

SW: And also, Donna, did y'all start cooking in here and then you got the trolley afterward? Can you tell the story about how that happened?

[00:39:15]

DR: Well, when we first came here, the only thing that we ever did in the building was roll Devil Crabs. I was in the process of making my food truck. My brother-in-law had already had his food truck made – I was in the process of making mine – so I had to get the building up and going to be able to roll his devil crabs. Because when my mother- and father-in-law sold the restaurant they gave all the rights to the devil crabs to me because that I was so interested in them, so I actually hold the trademark name for the Seabreeze devil crabs. I actually hold a trademark on that name, and I did that because of the reason that we did put the recipe in the cookbook and, you know, we want people to make them. I mean, you know, it's okay; make it. That's why we put it in the cookbook, for you to make it, but we didn't expect that you were

going to take our recipe, make it, and take it to your restaurant and sell it under our name either.

You know, we didn't think that far ahead. We just thought people were going to be making them at home and, you know, I continued—. I never stopped rolling the devil crabs so I had to kind of put a stop to people just thinking they could buy the cookbook and then advertise all over town they're selling Seabreeze devil crabs. So, I went ahead and trademarked the name so that way we could keep it in our family, you know, and everybody can still have the recipe but you just can't sell them and make money because I just didn't feel that that was right, you know, that you did that, so.

[00:40:35]

SW: And so then the trolley came—.

[00:40:40]

DR: Oh, and then—. So when my brother-in-law, he was—. He had that up so we went ahead and we did nothing but devil crabs here. The trolley was still being made. It took us a whole year to do the trolley. My husband is a commercial crabber, commercial fisherman; he said, "Hey, let's put some crab tanks out front with water in it." No crab hut in town has water anymore. Used to all the seafood houses had their crabs in water because they were allowed to be on the water. The port made sure that there's no seafood houses on the water anymore so nobody's running off the water anymore. So all the seafood houses that did survive had to move inland, you know, into populated areas, and they just—. I don't know if they don't have the knowledge how to run their crabs in water or if they just don't want the expense or just the hassle of having to do it, because it's not an easy task. It is something that takes time because we can't suck the water directly out of the bay and just charge it back in the bay. We have to have, you

know, two or three filters on our tanks at all times. We have to change the water every few weeks.

[00:41:46]

Anyway, but my husband said, "Let's start selling my crabs here. That way, you know, we might as well make the money. You got a place here to go." So we started selling the crabs. About six months after we had the building we started doing crabs. And then my trolley finally got done in November and we brought the trolley down. But we never actually cooked in here; we just did the devil crabs. We rolled the devil crabs to sell wholesale out and, you know, and sold the live blue crabs, and then the trolley came, and when the trolley came in November we opened it up and that's the only place we've ever cooked the food. So now you can come over here, you can get your live blue crabs, come get a devil crab and go home, or, you know-. When we first started off we started off very slow, and I have to say that I've seen a hundred or a hundred and fifty people here on a Saturday, so that's not bad considering that when we first come, you know, we had two people come up here once a week. To a hundred and fifty people on Saturday; that was quite a change, so, yeah.

[00:42:43]

SW: And so, Donna, now y'all sell them here, and people buy them in the boxes and they'll buy them fried. Do y'all still make them for other restaurants?

[00:42:50]

DR: Yes, we do. I have five wholesalers right now that I sell to, that they carry our devil crab, and most of them are here in Tampa. I do have one that's in Bradenton. Excuse me; I take that back. I have two that's in Bradenton and the other three are right here in Tampa; wonderful people. Of course they knew Seabreeze devil crabs all their life. That's how they become, you

know, a customer of mine to start selling my devil crabs, is because they had ate them their whole lives.

[00:43:20]

My crab, you can buy wholesale devil crabs a lot cheaper than you can buy mine, but you're not going to buy none that's more quality. I use the BOSS label brand crab meat, which is top of the line. I never use frozen crab meat. My crab meat is always fresh and never been frozen and, like I said, I do use the top of the line. I make sure that I have a good quality crab, I make sure that my bread is good and fresh, I make sure that I have the different kinds of bread that I need before we even sit down to roll the devil crab, because I—. In my heart and my mind, even though my father-in-law's not here anymore and next month he'll be gone for three years, every crab that we pick up and we roll is his, and I have to make sure that I keep that same quality that he expected of me from day one. So, that's what I—. I just continue to keep my crabs high quality. Like I said, you can go buy crab much cheaper, but you're not going to get one with BOSS label crab meat in it. That is a guarantee. *[Laughs]*

[00:44:26]

SW: Do y'all still—? Do you use—? I know that historically some people used Cuban breadcrumbs. Do you guys still use the Cuban breadcrumbs or—? I know some people have used Italian.

[00:44:36]

DR: Well, I use—.

[00:44:37]

SW: Do you have a preference?

[00:44:38]

DR: Well, we use Cuban bread in our bread mixture. Years and years ago when we hand rolled our – because we've always hand rolled our devil crabs. Years ago we had to make our own dough and we had to knead it with our hands, and it had to be done for hours to get our dough to the consistency that we needed it to be to wrap around the devil crab. My father-in-law, he was not a patient man, and that just took way too much time. He was not having that. So, he went and bought this mixer that was as big as a car [*Laughs*] and put it in the back room and he started mixing our bread in the mixer every morning before we got there, a big tub of bread so that we would have bread to last us for half the day, and it worked out beautiful. But we do many–. We do different kinds of breads. We do wheat breads and white breads and hamburger buns and hotdog buns and Cuban bread. Cuban bread is definitely something that definitely needs to go into your bread mixture. It gives it a very smooth, satiny texture to it when you have your Cuban bread in it. It definitely makes a difference.

[00:45:47]

SW: Do y'all use bread from any of the bakeries here in Tampa?

[00:45:50]

DR: Yes, yes. Our Cuban bread comes from La Segunda's over on 15th Street. Yeah, we've been doing business with them the whole time. When we had our big restaurant we did business with Mauricio's Bakery. I love Mauricio's Bakery, they're just further. La Segunda's is on my way, I've always trusted La Segunda's so, yeah, I buy all my bread from La Segunda's. And I buy all my breadcrumb from Vigo, which is right here in Tampa also, and I just use plain breadcrumb, but we buy all of our breadcrumb from Vigo. We try to buy everything that we can–

. We try to keep every possible thing we can, very close to home here, that we can, for our devil crabs.

[00:46:28]

SW: Well, you've answered so many of my questions, Donna, and I really appreciate your time, and I'm wondering—. I just have one more question and then if you want to add anything that I forgot to ask you. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about – you know, you grew up in South Tampa, you moved when you were three to South Tampa – how you've seen Tampa change in terms of as a place, like living here for so long.

[00:46:52]

DR: Oh, my goodness. It has definitely expanded, definitely grown. I get lost going to Brandon now. I would have never thought that I would have been lost going five miles down the road; so many changes. I mean since I've moved here we've had a whole complete interstate go in, a cross-town expressway. Oh, my goodness. I just—. The Ice Palace, the Thunderdome, the new Skyway Bridge.

[00:47:20]

LA: The aquarium.

[00:47:22]

DR: The aquarium, the Channelside.

[00:47:25]

LA: MOSI.

[00:47:26]

DR: MOSI, the whole-. All of Ybor City, you know, changed into something, what it is today - from what it used to not be to what it is today. So many changes, so many-. I don't know, just-.

[00:47:41]

LA: [*Unintelligible*]

[00:47:41]

DR: Yeah. A lot of good changes, a lot of them has definitely been good changes; a lot of them has not been such good changes.

[00:47:47]

LA: A lot of good investments.

[00:47:48]

DR: But, yeah; I've seen a lot. I've seen Tampa come a long way. You know, I've seen a lot of two-way roads are six-lane roads now, you know. Yeah. It's crazy how much Tampa really has grown.

[00:48:00]

SW: I have another-. I know this is going to sound like a strange question but I'm from Michigan so I never-. I wasn't raised in the South and when I came to Mississippi to start this job I'd always say, "What about Florida? Let's go to Florida," and they're like, "Well, South of the Panhandle really isn't the South anymore," and I'm wondering, do people in Tampa have a feeling about that, like do you all consider yourself-? Do you feel Southern? I'm just curious because I feel like, growing up in the Midwest, I never really knew that there were boundaries,

and then you get into the South and people are like, “That’s not the South. That’s the South,” and I’m just wondering if you – if people in Tampa have a feeling about that at all.

[00:48:40]

LA: Oh, we’re definitely from the South. [*Laughs*]

[00:48:41]

DR: We are definitely–. Yeah, we are definitely from the South, yeah, definitely; sweet tea and collard greens all the way. We are from the South, yes, ma’am. Yes. Now, maybe when you get down to Miami, Fort Lauderdale on down to the Keys, maybe they don’t consider theirself Southern, but definitely you’re–. Yeah, definitely, you’re in Southern country right here, definitely.

[00:49:03]

SW: There’s just so many interesting cultural identities and ethnicities in Tampa. I think Tampa’s a fascinating place. I mean I feel like we’re just getting started with this project, but I’m just curious how you felt about that.

[00:49:15]

DR: Yeah. There’s so many different, like you said, so many different people from different places doing different things but all coming together for the same cause. You know, it’s unreal. It’s surreal the way that Tampa has grown. But I would say definitely that we are Southern. We’re Southern. We’re proud to be Southern, yeah. Yeah, that’s for sure.

[00:49:35]

SW: Donna, is there anything else you wanted to add or something that I didn’t ask you that I should’ve?

[00:49:41]

DR: No, there's nothing that I can think of right now. No, I don't think so. I think we pretty much covered it all.

[00:49:53]

SW: Well, you've been really generous with your time, so thank you very much for doing this.

[00:49:57]

DR: Okay, and thank you too.

[00:49:59]

SW: Leslie, is there anything else you want to add before I turn the tape recorder off?

[00:50:02]

LA: No, [*Unintelligible*].

[00:50:03]

SW: Thank you.

[00:50:04]

LA: You're welcome. Thank you.

[00:50:08]

END OF INTERVIEW

