



Andrew Gattas

The Knowledge Tree

Memphis, Tennessee

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Interviewer: Simone Delerme and Annemarie Anderson

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Begin Interview

[00:07:00]

Simone Delerme: Okay. Here we go. This is Simone Delerme and I'm recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance Summer Avenue Documentary Project. Today is May 5th, 2021, and I'm here with Andrew Gattas on Summer Avenue. Could you please introduce yourself?

Andrew Gattas: Simone, I'm Andy Gattas. I own Knowledge Tree, which is a school supply company here on Summer Avenue, but our business is the legacy of Fred P. Gattas Company, which was a business here in Memphis since the [19]50s. And so it's the same corporate entity, and we're occupying the same space that we were in back in the [19]70s, [19]80s, and [19]90s. Look at the camera or look at you?

Annemarie Anderson: Look at Simone. Yes. That's a great question.

Andrew Gattas: I should've asked that first. [Laughter]

Simone Delerme: [Laughter]

Andrew Gattas: Okay.

Simone Delerme: For the record, can you tell us when and where you were born?

Andrew Gattas: So I was born in June 11th, 1961, at St. Joseph Hospital downtown.

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St. Jude took over that hospital and that campus, and it's part of the St. Jude campus now.

Simone Delerme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah.

Simone Delerme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. From a big Catholic family, ethnic Catholic. [Laughter] The whole thing, yeah.

Simone Delerme: Can you tell me a little bit more about your business; again, when you opened?

Andrew Gattas: Sure. Okay.

Simone Delerme: This was your first business or not?

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. So my father had a business called Fred P. Gattas Company. And we were a catalog showroom business. In fact, I have some catalogs here I could show you, similar to Service Merchandise or Best Merchandise, in that kind of a format. We had, at one point, nine stores throughout the mid-South, and this was the headquartered building at the time. He started out in downtown Memphis, and then after the assassination of Martin Luther King, business in downtown deteriorated significantly, so my father leased this building and opened a store here. That was in 1970.

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And then he actually purchased the building in 1976, and my brothers and sisters and I own it to this day. And so Fred P. Gattas Company turned into Knowledge Tree, kind of morphed into it. I got into Knowledge Tree back in 1994, and this was my first business, but it was owned by Fred P. Gattas Company. And then, when we liquidated Fred P. Gattas Company, this was the

remaining asset of that organization. So Knowledge Tree is the legacy Fred P. Gattas Company, if that makes sense.

Simone Delerme: Okay. Do you know why the Summer Avenue location was selected?

Andrew Gattas: I do. A lot of reasons why people come to Summer Avenue. One, it's a lot less expensive than Poplar Avenue. I think that's a significant driver. And the east, being further east and access to the interstate and the proximity to the rest of the city. It's a good location and it's a good area.

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It's a high-traffic count. There's a lot of traffic on Summer Avenue, a lot of consumer traffic for sure.

Simone Delerme: Do you know what was here in this building beforehand?

Andrew Gattas: It was a couple of things.

Simone Delerme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: So the building was built in the mid-[19]50s and the original structure was a skating rink, and that's the building that's on the far east side of the property, as you can still see the wooden curved roof in there. It's kinda cool. And then, the second part of the building was built after that. And I don't know how long it was a skating rink, but it became a Big M Department Store, which is kinda like a Walmart/TG&Y combo thing. And it was that for a long time, and then it was a furniture store called Donald's Furniture. When my dad came in [19]70, we only rented this part of the building, and Donald's Furniture was still over there, but then, when we bought it, we took over the whole space.

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So it was several things, skating rink, variety store, furniture store beforehand. Now it's an educational supply store, plus we have other tenants here, as well.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: I don't know if you noticed. There's a furniture store and an importer. Real interesting, we used to have Fred's Dollar Store, which was another family business, Memphis-based business, and they left a few years ago and we were fortunate enough to rent it to Universal NBC. They filmed *Bluff City Law* in that space, the law series. I don't know if you're familiar with that one or not, but it was a real fun project having all the actors here.

Simone Delorme: That'd be nice.

Andrew Gattas: They actually did their-- when they sit down and read through the script. I forgot what they call it. They actually did that here in our conference room. It was really cool. Yeah.

Simone Delorme: Very nice. Very nice. Okay. I want you to think back about Summer Avenue.

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How would you describe it? I don't know if you have stories you remember, or when you first came and started working with the business and whatnot?

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. So I was 11 years old when we started over here.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: So I remember riding my bike up here and working in our store and riding my bike home or whatever. So that was a different time and place. People walked and rode their bike, and it was more of a neighborhood thing. I never felt unsafe as a child. I think somewhere in the [19]80s I think the Summer Avenue area started to deteriorate in terms of crime and whatnot, and I think it took a dip. I think it's come back since, and I think it's on the way up now. So from that standpoint, that's kind of a quick snapshot at 50 years or whatever.

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But it's had its ups and downs in terms of that. I think it's really interesting and always has been interesting the international element on Summer Avenue, and the different types of merchants are everything, from manufacturing to landscapers and restaurants. The Market Basket used to be up here and where it was where everyone went to get their produce and their fresh fruit and vegetables. And it's just been so many different things for so long that you almost expect it to have an eclectic feel and an unusual personality, and it does because of that. It's just always been Summer Avenue, yeah.

Simone Delorme: Do you have a sense of what caused kind of those downturns at certain periods like the [19]80s?

Andrew Gattas: That's an interesting question. Not really.

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I think, especially in the [19]80s and maybe in the [19]90s, whenever they build a new mall other areas in town suffered. So they were always developing a new shopping center and that was the new "it." And I don't know, that seemed to contribute. You know, if they built a mall in East Memphis then it hurt the areas that weren't near that, but those came and went. There was always

and still is a migration east in Memphis. We have the white flight, and that's continuing since the late [19]60s, so that hasn't helped.

Simone Delorme: Mm-hm.

Andrew Gattas: I do think that there's a continual redevelopment efforts like the old Holiday Inn. The first Holiday Inn that was across the street was a really a deteriorated shelter and not a good place at all.

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And I don't know exactly who, but they tore it down and they redeveloped to brand new commercial properties there and it just totally changed the whole two-block area. So I think it's a lot of the redevelopment kind of changes it, if that makes sense. And the tenants have taken pride-- the ones that take pride in it I think elevates it. And I do think there's a growing sense of pride for the property owners and the tenants on Summer Avenue. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Simone Delorme: Yes. Yes.

Andrew Gattas: Okay.

Simone Delorme: Do you have any memories of what the food was like growing up?

Andrew Gattas: [Laughter]

Simone Delorme: What was it like to eat on Summer Avenue? What was here?

Andrew Gattas: Well, yeah. So I was a teenager, are my first memories, and there was a Wendy's right across the street from here which was my favorite place to eat.

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Not exactly probably what you were looking for in terms of the answer, but the first one that came to mind. So, yeah, Coletta's is probably the most memorable to me. They were literally within a rock's throw of where we're sitting right now. And right now they have a restaurant out on Appling, I think, out near Bartlett. But they were a long-time family Italian restaurant, and we ate there-- because we were working in this building, we would go there for lunch every other day. And they were just wonderful. And so, yeah, you had Italian, you had Lebanese people going to eat Italian. You had always Nagasaki, the Japanese restaurant down the street. And Bryant's; used to be a barbecue place and then he changed it to a breakfast place, but they've been there forever, ever since I can remember.

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And, yeah, it was always a good place to get food, always. Always has been.

Simone Delorme: Do you have a sense of when it became more and more international?

Andrew Gattas: Mm-hm, yeah. I don't even know that I noticed it at first.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: I don't know. Other people might have a different perspective, but it was just, like, all of a sudden you start seeing signs in Spanish that I didn't notice before. And it was, like, okay, that's odd. Why did they put that sign in Spanish? Well, because there's so many Hispanic people around here, Latino people. And I just never really thought of it. It just kind of like happened. Not that it happened overnight, it's just like the frog in the pot of water that just

keeps getting hotter. Then, all of a sudden, you realize, oh, it's changed for sure. I would say around the mid to late 2000s is when I noticed it maybe.

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And I didn't really fully understand the impact until probably five or six years ago, when you drive down and you genuinely see every type of ethnic restaurant you could imagine. It's just wonderful to have all those options, and they're good options. And it's just fantastic, whether it's Mediterranean food or-- I love sushi. I like the Tokyo Grill down there. [Laughter] I mean, there's just great places to eat, yeah. So, yeah, I'd say five or six years ago was when I really understood the impact of it fully in terms of the cultural change in Summer Avenue. I think it had happened long before that, long before I noticed.

Simone Delorme: Has the response been positive to the change--

Andrew Gattas: I think so.

Simone Delorme: --in terms of race relations?

Andrew Gattas: I-- huh. Um . . . [Laughter]

Simone Delorme: I'm asking this-- it's a hard question.

[0:19:00]

It's hard question. But there's a history of challenging race relations, so I wasn't sure if that diversity has been embraced in terms of the international presence and all the food as a destination--

Andrew Gattas: That's a really interesting question.

Simone Delorme: --or if there's pushback.

Andrew Gattas: I don't think there's pushback.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: You know how I was saying, well, it may have been ten years before I really noticed. I think we're in that kind of phase with a lot of people in Memphis, white, middle-class people in Memphis. I don't know.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: It's a really good question. My perspective may not be accurate, but I think that people enjoy the options. They enjoy exploring different cuisines. That's kind of a cool, hipster thing to do, right? But I don't know that they're quite accepting of the change.

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We're still in a "Trumpian world" here, which I don't quite get my head fully around, but it's real. And so I don't know that acceptance-- I forget how you phrase it-- or embracing it is as full as you would think. Let me put it that way.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: And yet, you see it. If you go into Juan's restaurant up the street [Interviewer's Note: La Guadalupana], it's packed every day for lunch, and he's got everybody in there. It's a melting pot of everybody in the community from around here, and it's wonderful to see that and experience it, but I don't know that it translates outside those doors, to be honest with you, my impressions.

Simone Delerme: Okay. Mm-hm. Do you have any questions about Summer Avenue in particular you want to add before I go into family history?

Annemarie Anderson: I don't think so. I think that that was a really fascinating, complex answer that you gave there.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. I felt like an idiot, you know . . .

Annemarie Anderson: No.

Simone Delerme: No. That was really [inaudible 0:20:58.0] down.

Andrew Gattas: I didn't expect it, and I'm not-- it'd be interesting to ask other people what they think about it.

[0:21:02]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Simone Delerme: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Andrew Gattas: Okay.

Simone Delerme: Well, I'm gonna bring you back to childhood now. I want to know what you recall about your childhood. You could start by telling us about your family, maybe some stories or experiences you remember.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah, all right. So I remember as a kid our store downtown, and the move out here and the anxiety that Dr. King's assassination had on my family and our business. To be honest with you, his assassination was not like a historical event for me, it was part of my life. And I remember it like-- I was seven or eight years old when it occurred, so it was a big deal.

And there was a lot of anxiety. And so moving out here was a big risk because this would've been our second store. My dad didn't close his downtown store, he just added a store.

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And he wasn't sure how things were gonna work or what was gonna happen, or does he keep both and whatnot? So I remember it being an anxious time, the late [19]60s and early [19]70s. And there was obviously a lot of racial issues. You had integration going on and the civil rights movement, and it was a stressful time for everybody. And change is gonna do that, when you look back on it. But I was kid, and to me it was fun. We're opening a store. I got to work in the warehouse putting the shelves together. And one of the very first people that I worked with, her name is Mattie Johnson, and just a wonderful human being, one of the best people I've ever known. And Mattie-- I met her when I was ten years old and she worked for Fred P. Gattas Company, and then when I started Knowledge Tree and Fred P. Gattas Company closed, she came and worked for me. And she retired-- it'll be two years in September.

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And so she worked for me and for my family for forty-something years. And I remember-- she was, like, ten or twelve years older than me. I was maybe fourteen and she's twenty-five or whatever. She was just really nice and just a wonderful person. And all the people that worked here in our business, and the families that owned the Market Basket and others that were part of-- the Rubilios that owned the grocery store at Cloverleaf. And they lived in our neighborhood and we knew their families and grew up with them and whatnot. And that was fun. It felt like a community. And so to me it was a warm, loving, safe, fun place to be always as a child. Yeah.

Simone Delorme: Where did you go to school?

Andrew Gattas: I went to St. Louis Grade School, which is a Catholic parochial school just right around the corner from here.

Simone Delerme: Okay.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah.

Simone Delerme: Okay. What was that like, your experiences?

Andrew Gattas: Nuns beating the hell out of me.

Simone Delerme: Okay.

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Andrew Gattas: At the time, I guess I thought I deserved it. Right now they'd be put in jail, I think. I don't know. So yeah. [Laughter]

Simone Delerme: Okay. [Laughter]

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. All of us went to Catholic schools. And it wasn't so much for the racial thing. I don't think my parents thought that. It was more the Catholic thing. My mother went to church every day, prayed the rosary. I'm one of ten kids. That should tell you a lot all by itself. But we really were heavily indoctrinated in Catholicism, yeah.

Simone Delerme: Okay. How about jobs? Did you always work? You mentioned the warehouse, for instance.

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. Yeah.

Simone Delerme: What kind of jobs did you have growing up and throughout your life?

Andrew Gattas: So, yeah, I think I worked on my uncle's farm three summers down in Arkansas, which was really a great experience. I loved that. That was during my teenage years. And in college I worked for the university.

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I went to St. Louis University, and I worked for the university for the treasurer, and that was really fun. I enjoyed that. And then, after college, I became a CPA. I worked for Ernst & Whinney, which they used to call it the big eight, now it's the big four accounting firms. And so I had a little different work history before I came to work with my dad and my brothers and sisters. And then I started this business a few years after that. I guess that's it.

Simone Delorme: Okay. What were mealtimes like in your family?

Andrew Gattas: [Laughter] So my mother had a rule. Dinner was at six whether you're there or not. Most everybody showed up. So we had this huge table. I think it was probably 14-- I don't know how long it was. It was probably 14 or 15 feet long, and there was room for all of us at the table. Always was, yeah.

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And dinner was always at six. That's it.

Simone Delorme: What types of things did you eat?

Andrew Gattas: Well, we almost always had, I would say, southern food mostly, fried chicken, mashed potatoes kind of stuff. But then we would have Italian food, or she'd make-- and we never ate out. No. I should say that. I never ate at a restaurant until I was a teenager. Yeah. We as a family never went anywhere. We ate at home. I never saw that until I was a little older.

So, yeah, we ate what she cooked. And a lot of Arabic food. Every Sunday was a big Arabic meal, and my cousins would come over. My father's brothers and sisters would come and bring their families. Every Sunday was a big deal.

Simone Delorme: What kind of Arabic cuisine?

Andrew Gattas: So I don't know if you've ever heard of kibbeh? Okay.

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That still is my favorite. The rolled grape leaves and the cabbage rolls. And we had a dish called loubyeh, which was a rice and a green bean and tomato sauce dish. Yeah. Shish barak, which is kind of an Arabic version of ravioli. It's kinda got a sour cream base instead of a tomato base, but it's really good. Yeah. Those are my favorites. Tabouli, of course. We probably had tabouli every night just as a salad.

Simone Delorme: How about your spare time? What did you do in your spare time?

Andrew Gattas: As a kid?

Simone Delorme: Yeah. Yeah. And as you've grown up.

Andrew Gattas: [Laughter] I don't know. We grew up really in a hardworking family. I think that was probably the one family characteristic. My mother was from a family of farmers; my father was from an immigrant family in Clarksdale. He was one of ten children, as well.

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And so work was always a big deal. So I worked a lot, and even as a teenager I worked and saved enough money to get to college with my scholarship and whatnot. So we did that as a

family. That was kind of a thing. But mostly just get in trouble if I had free time. So I'll just leave it at that. [Laughter] Yeah.

Simone Delerme: Were there certain holidays aside from that special Sunday dinner that you would have, or traditions that were important, too, in your family?

Andrew Gattas: Yeah. Not really. Christmas was always-- we were in retail where Christmas was the season, so Thanksgiving Day was really like get rest because you're gonna work. And then Christmas Day, which everybody is so exhausted. You were just glad to have a day off.

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So, yeah, I don't know. I always liked-- January 1st was one of my favorite days because of the football. I love football, college football in particular. And so I guess that's a southern thing or-- I don't know, but I grew up loving it and I still do. So anyway . . .

Simone Delerme: How about your children? Can you tell us a little bit about your children?

Andrew Gattas: Sure. Yeah. So my oldest, he graduated from Tennessee and he went to Columbia for graduate school, and now he lives in Atlanta and he works for a consulting firm there. He met a great girl. They're engaged and I'm so excited for that. Then, my youngest, he went to Duke and graduated in [20]18, and he's living in Washington, D.C. right now. So, yeah, I'm proud of both of them. I love them. I was just talking to my youngest son right before you got here, and I miss them and love them both.

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Yeah.

Simone Delorme: Did they ever consider getting into the family business?

Andrew Gattas: It's funny. I never pushed it. I don't know. I feel like it was one of my career mistakes was leaving public accounting and coming to work in the family business, because I took a pay cut and really reduced my future options. But it was part of our family. I mean, that's a whole different gig. And I'm not gonna say I regret it, but I didn't want to put them in that situation, and knowing both of them have great potential in my mind. And if they're interested it's open, but I'm not pushing it. My oldest son has just recently become really interested in what we do, which is fine. I'm talking to him and sharing with him about it, but I don't know that he's going to join. But it's fun to share, it really is. Both of them are bright, and I would like it, but I'm not going push it.

Simone Delorme: Do you have any additional questions you want to ask?

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Annemarie Anderson: I do want to ask, so could you state your parents' names, and then tell me why and how your dad got started in retail.

Andrew Gattas: Okay. So my father was Fred P. Gattas, Fred Patrick Gattas. He was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1914. So my grandparents came over from Lebanon and they actually left there one of his sisters. So they couldn't bring everybody, or the baby was too young. I can't remember. And so he grew up one of ten and in Clarksdale, and not wealthy at all. My grandfather had a convenience store, grocery store, small operation. And then, he graduated high school, Clarksdale High, and became a peddler.

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So he was literally selling off the back of a truck Persian rugs, towels, mostly soft goods. And so he got acquainted with some of the wholesalers here in Memphis because that's where he would come to get his merchandise to sell. And so he began selling other things like tobacco and candy and that kind of thing. And he bought into a partnership with W.B. Dunagan, and I don't know exactly what year that was-- it was probably in the early [19]50s-- to manufacture and distribute candy. So that was at 574 South Main, a building that's still downtown. I'm kind of giving you his history, then I'll give you my mother's history, if that makes any sense. So he did that for a period. And as part of the selling to the peddlers or the jobbers, then he would give incentives. So if you bought so many dozen candy bars then you could get this toaster.

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If you bought so many packs of gum, you could maybe get this necklace for your wife or whatever. So there were premiums. Then he started selling those premiums of toasters and jewelry and whatnot. And then he got into the business of just selling that. And so that's how Fred P. Gattas Company was born. And then he opened a store doing just that, and then this store. And then we had up to nine stores at one point. My mother was born in a town-- well, it's not even a town-- Crumrod, Arkansas, which is about 40 miles south of Helena, and coincidentally, it's almost right across the Mississippi River from Clarksdale. And so she grew up on a farm, suffered through two floods, the 1927 and 1937 flood. She was born in 1920. And just a real spiritual, giving woman. Just an unbelievable lady. And so she graduated from high school, she came to Memphis, went to college at a place called Siena College which doesn't exist anymore.

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It's where Oak Court Mall is now. And got her degree, and then she went to Washington. Well, she spent some time in a convent. Then she went to Washington to get a graduate degree in social work, and then she moved to Memphis. When she moved to Memphis, she moved into a boarding house where, coincidentally, my father's sister was living. And my father's sister is the one that introduced them. So that's how they met, and the rest is what's happened. [Laughter] So yeah.

Simone Delorme: Any others?

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Andrew Gattas: Another tidbit or interesting thing about our family history, not a positive one, but I had a brother that, in 1976, was murdered downtown Memphis. He was mugged and shot. So that really kind of put a twist on our whole family experience, especially my teenage years. It was difficult.

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So you asked me what I did when I had time off. If I had time off, I was probably getting in trouble. [Laughter] It took me a while to get straightened out of that. Yeah. But, yeah, that's just part of the whole experience. It's part of the real world.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, is there anything else you want to add that we haven't talked about about Summer Avenue or about your life or . . . ?

Andrew Gattas: I'd like to put a plug in for my dad and St. Jude Hospital, if I could. So when Danny Thomas decided to look for cities to start his hospital, he talked to, I think it was Archbishop Stritch or Cardinal Stritch or-- I can't remember-- up in Chicago and he told him that

there was a man in Memphis-- because he was considering Memphis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. And he said, "There's a man in Memphis, his name is Ed Berry, and he knows Memphis. And if you want to find an Arabic community in Memphis, he's the guy.

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He's a prominent lawyer in Memphis. He'll know everything." Yeah. So Danny Thomas calls Ed Berry. Ed Berry goes, "Oh, well, yeah, Fred Gattas is Lebanese. He's a businessman here." So those three were the first three board members of St. Jude Hospital, and they're the reason why St. Jude is here in Memphis. My father sat on that board the entire time, from before there was a hospital until the time he died. And also was chairman of the board for years. He was actually the guy who moved ALSAC to Memphis, because it was up in Peoria, and took off from his job for six months to be chair during that period and while they hired someone to do it. And Danny Thomas was a fixture at our house. He came to our home. He was part of it. I didn't see Marlo as much as I'd like, because I just really had a crush on her.

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But they were just a wonderful family and wonderful people. And it was wonderful to have that experience to get to know them. And, yeah, they were celebrities so you kinda had that star-power thing, but they were genuinely-- and when I say "they," I'm talking about Rose Marie, his wife, and Tony and Terre and Marlo, too. They're just really good people. And it was neat to have that growing up, that commitment to something outside of yourself, that belief in the value of life and how we can give to children, and how important that is for a community to value the children. And I've embraced that in my life. I think if I had to add something or throw something in, I think it'd be that.

Annemarie Anderson: I have a follow-up question about that.

Andrew Gattas: Mm-hm.

Annemarie Anderson: Did that impact your decision to start a business about educating children?

Andrew Gattas: Mm-hm.

Simone Delerme: How did that impact it?

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Andrew Gattas: I think there's a lot to unwind with that question. Who doesn't love children? Who doesn't understand the need of children in poverty that are beginning at a state of inequity? And I was raised that we all have a responsibility to do what we can. We can't fix all the problems, but we can do something about the small corner that we're in. And we have a responsibility to do that. And being in this business enables me that option. And so I'm on several boards and I participate in a lot of initiatives that work toward that end. And I'm proud of that work. And it's fun and I think it's important. And I don't think it'll ever end. I don't think there's a goal line to get over.

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But, yeah, I think I've embraced those values, and I think it's had a huge impact on my life.

Simone Delerme: That's fantastic. Yeah, that's wonderful.

Andrew Gattas: It may be a little more personal than you wanted to go, but . . .

Simone Delerme: No, that's perfect.

Andrew Gattas: All right.

Simone Delerme: That's perfect.

Annemarie Anderson: Great.

Simone Delerme: Great. Thank you. Well, we are good to go.

[End of Interview]