



**Justin Burke**  
**Columbia, SC**

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Date: August 26, 2020  
Location: Remote interview  
Interviewer: Kelly Spivey  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
Length: One hour and thirty minutes  
Project: Southern Baking

[00:00]

**Kelly S.:** Okay. I am Kelly Spivey, and I am in Memphis, Tennessee. I am talking to Justin Burke—over Zoom—[Laughter] Who is in Columbia, South Carolina. And it's Wednesday, August 26, 2020. Could you just say your full name, for the record?

[00:00:21.18]

**Justin B.:** Yep. My name is Justin Burke. So short. [Laughter]

[00:00:25.11]

**Kelly S.:** Do you have any middle names?

[00:00:28.07]

**Justin B.:** Oh, you want all the middle names? Yeah. [Laughter] My name is Justin Thomas Stroud Burke.

[00:00:39.08]

**Kelly S.:** Got it. And when were you born?

[00:00:43.02]

**Justin B.:** I was born April 12, 1984.

[00:00:46.17]

**Kelly S.:** And where were you born?

[00:00:46.16]

**Justin B.:** I was born in Barstow, California in the desert.

[00:00:52.15]

**Kelly S.:** And what about your parents? Are they from California?

[00:00:58.11]

**Justin B.:** So, my birth father is born and raised in California, but my mother, her and her family are from Charlotte, North Carolina. She moved to California when she was in middle school. So, I had a Southern family in Southern California. It was real weird. [Laughter]

[00:01:24.17]

**Kelly S.:** And when—how old are your parents?

[00:01:28.28]

**Justin B.:** My mom is—you're making me do math right now. My mom is, I would say, fifty-three, fifty-four. Then, my dad is, like, fifty-five, probably. I don't have a relationship with my dad, so I don't know exactly, but they were both teenagers when they had me.

[00:01:53.27]

**Kelly S.:** Are they still in California?

[00:01:54.08]

**Justin B.:** My mom and step-dad and two brothers are still in California. For as far as I know, my birth father is in Iowa? Maybe? I think so. Idaho, Iowa, one of those states.

[00:02:11.16]

**Kelly S.:** Do you have any other siblings besides your step-brothers?

[00:02:17.12]

**Justin B.:** So, they're not my step-brothers, they're my half. But just those two, yeah.

[00:02:26.21]

**Kelly S.:** How old are they?

[00:02:29.08]

**Justin B.:** Jared is twenty-three, and Sky will be twenty in November.

[00:02:36.19]

**Kelly S.:** Wow.

[00:02:37.28]

**Justin B.:** Yeah, big age gap. My youngest brother and I are almost the same years apart as my mom and I.

[00:02:47.23]

**Kelly S.:** Wow.

[00:02:48.18]

**Justin B.:** It's kinda weird. Puts things in perspective, so.

[00:02:55.08]

**Kelly S.:** So, you grew up in California. What was that like? [Laughter]

[00:03:03.26]

**Justin B.:** Well, everyone—[Laughter] That was perfectly asked. It's the same feeling. No, so everyone assumes that I grew up in L.A. or Orange County, so they have this skewed idea of what my life was like. But I actually grew up in a small desert town in the Mojave Desert. It's the last heavily populated, we'll say, town before you get into Las Vegas. It's right by Death Valley and where they do Burning Man, so, super. But I don't know if it still is now, but it's one of the ten poorest towns in the entire state of California. That kind of sets the tone. It wasn't—as an adult—not really great, like looking at it now as an adult, it was kind of sad, because the town was heavily . . . tourism was a big thing, 'cause it's on Route 66. We had a lot of big companies there, and then when they closed, Barstow just declined and became really poor. Have you seen the movie *Erin Brockovich*?

[00:04:29.08]

**Kelly S.:** Yes.

[00:04:29.09]

**Justin B.:** That's my hometown. So, the movie talks about Hinkley, 'cause that's where PG&E was located, but I lived on the Hinkley-Barstow line, so.

[00:04:48.12]

**Kelly S.:** Did that affect you?

[00:04:51.27]

**Justin B.:** So . . . I say yes. I think that it affected almost everyone in Barstow and Hinkley, it's just whether or not there's proof, like scientific proof that everyone had a condition from it, because a lot of the symptoms were different for everyone. So, like my grandmother had multiple tumors on her back. My aunt has had thyroid cancer—thyroid's removed, and oddly enough, the thyroid growing back. Which they're like, "How did that happen?!" [Laughter] Yeah. When I was going through fertility with my son, there were a lot of things that were identified during that, that they're like, "Oh, that's unusual." So, it's hard to say yes, but I think quality of life, it did. So, I can confidently say, "Yes, it affected me." But it's just . . . growing up, I had no idea. I had no idea that I was poor. My family did as best they could to hide that. But you know. I didn't go to the school that I should have gone to where I lived. Like I literally lived on the other side of the tracks, but my grandmother worked in an elementary school that was better, and I was able to go

there. It was . . . it was not great. [Laughter] But I made the best of it, and I think my family did a good job raising me.

[00:06:35.16]

**Kelly S.:** Now I'm recording again. We'll pick back up like nothing happened.

[00:06:42.01]

**Justin B.:** Nothing happened. [Laughter]

[00:06:46.06]

**Kelly S.:** You were talking about your grandma having a job at an elementary school. What did she do?

[00:06:52.12]

**Justin B.:** Oh, my gosh. Okay. So, you have to understand, my mom was so young when she had me. My parents did get married, and then they divorced when I was—I mean, they split up when I was two. Divorce was final when I was three. My birth dad's parents took my mom and I in and kind of, like, cast him aside, 'cause of his choices. So, it was a really interesting dynamic to be—my mother and I living with her ex-husband's parents, but that's just how the circus of my life has been. So, she really helped out with my mom having to work, so when it was time for me to go to elementary school, she went—she was like, "Just needs to go to the elementary school where all three of my kids went to." She used to be P.T.A. president. My grandma was just that person, just classic [19]50s,

[19]60s, [19]70s housewife. She loved it. She would talk about, she just loved it.

[Laughter] So my mom was like, "Okay, but we live in not the good neighborhood, so how are we gonna get in there?" So, she went back to work, and she started as—now, bear in mind, my grandmother with my parents being so young, my grandparents were young as well. My mom's mom was in her late thirties, and my dad's mom was in her mid-forties, so for them to go back to work wasn't weird. So, she started out as a teacher's aide, the teacher's aide for my classrooms. Then she became the P.T.A. president again, and then she became the school librarian, 'cause I had to have a conversation with her. I was like, "You gotta stop being my teacher's aide. I need space. But if you want to still be here, you can be in the library, I guess." Like I told her what to do. I was a little bossy kid, apparently. But yeah, I mean, I remember the school asking her to be the vice-principal. That's just how involved she was. Then when it was time for middle school, I was like, "You need to retire. You cannot keep following me." [Laughter] It was cute.

[00:09:47.06]

**Kelly S.:** What was her name?

[00:09:49.24]

**Justin B.:** Carol.

[00:09:54.26]

**Kelly S.:** Carol . . . ?

[00:09:58.18]

**Justin B.:** Oh. Carol Eleanor Burke. [Laughter] She hated her middle name.

[00:10:10.20]

**Kelly S.:** Were you guys close?

[00:10:13.19]

**Justin B.:** Super close, yeah. Like I always say, my Grandma Burke was like my mother, and my mom was like my sister. Like, that's just kind of how our relationship is. No. My Grandma Burke and I, super close, inseparable, really just like a really good person. Yeah.

[00:10:40.17]

**Kelly S.:** Is she still around?

[00:10:38.17]

**Justin B.:** No. We lost her in 2015. That was the beginning of a lot of change for me in my life. She passed away with complications of dementia, it just got really bad. We didn't realize. So, her husband, my grandfather, he passed away from emphysema in 2003. I had just moved to Boston, like literally two weeks after I moved, he died. We didn't realize . . . I didn't realize, the family didn't realize, that my grandmother was already having early signs of dementia. It wasn't until it was too late, and we educated ourselves, that we realized hiding mail and just all these different habits of hoarding and . . . we think we all

think that my grandfather's passing just escalated it, kicked it into overdrive. She survived another twelve years. But yeah, it happened quickly. Once it took over, it happened quickly. It's really funny, though, 'cause she was a sassy old lady. She did not take crap from people. She's a Midwestern girl, born and raised in Ohio, so she's a tough cookie. But hospice came in a couple days before Christmas and they were like—and she loved Christmas. That's why I love Christmas. She—ob-essed with Christmas. [Laughter] Hospice was like, "We don't think she's gonna make it past Christmas." All of us were like, "What the hell? Really?" So, we all kinda called and did our good-byes and did what we needed to do. It was really bad. Then the day after Christmas, she was like, fine and normal. She just looked at us and she was like, "That was pretty scary there for a second. I didn't think I was gonna make it. And that really would have screwed up Christmas for all of you for the rest of your life." [Laughter] I was like, "Oh, my god. Okay." She had these moments of clarity, and then, yeah. She passed away on—it's really weird. She passed away on February 13 at 11:55 p.m. But her death was declared on Valentine's Day because they declare it when they get there. She passed away at her house, exactly how she wanted it. My mom and my aunt were there. That's how it happened, but it really sucked, and it's hard. Especially in moments where she used to be my sounding board, like, "I need advice. I need someone to calm my nerves and just help me think clearly." Yeah.

[00:14:08.23]

**Kelly S.:** Yeah. Is there anything that you remember doing with her that was really important to you?

[00:14:20.01]

**Justin B.:** Sorry. You hear my dog? She's so old. I call her Grandma now. Hey, Bells. Hey, Bella. Can you lay down, sweetie? This is just how life is, huh? [Laughter] Okay. So, yeah, I mean, I was with her almost all the time. So sweet. Yeah, so, I was with her most of the time. She's the one who taught me how to cook, how to bake, how to change and reset the bed the proper way. She basically made me into a 1950s housewife. Like, I knew how to take care of a man, I knew how to be at his beck and call, I knew how to keep a house in orderly—I knew how to throw a party, host a party, how to handle the holidays. She downloaded all of the family history into me. I can tell you every antique that's in that house, where it came from. She did it in such a fun way, it was never boring. You know, cooking was always, "Oh, your Great-Grandma Daisy used to make this, and this recipe came from Germany." She would just talk about it; people in our family would come up in conversation. When we would clean—dust—she would be like, "Let's dust the antiques!" And then she would talk about where they came from and why they're so special. I mean, the joke is that everything came on a boat from Germany. And like, "What?!" I mean, "This antique glass hope chest came on a boat from Germany." I'm like, "I just think it might have come from Ohio. Let's be honest." But yeah, and I was the only grandchild until I was fourteen, thirteen, fourteen, so it's her and me. I learned it all. The same thing with my grandfather; he was not hard on me like he was with the other boys in the family, like his sons, my birth dad and uncles, because I always had that sensitive—I was always a sensitive kid. But he showed me how to use a saw and work in the workshop. He taught me how to go hunting and trapping and fishing. What I took

most from him was gardening and being outdoors and enjoying that. I just didn't really lean into the whole shooting other things. But I think he realized that when I threw myself in front of a baby coyote that was in a trap, and I begged him to let it go. That was the last time I went hunting with him. [Laughter] But that's just kind of how I was, from my very first memory, I always had this desire to make other people happy. Cared so much about the well-being of other people and other animals, except for snakes—growing up in the desert, that was the only thing I couldn't handle, were snakes. I was like, "They can go." [Laughter] Everything else is cool. But no, I just—now as an adult, and I guess now as a parent, I just look more back at my childhood and how I grew up. I realize more things about myself. I was just a very odd bird in this very small, conservative town.

[00:18:39.29]

**Kelly S.:** It sounds like they were really involved.

[00:18:44.21]

**Justin B.:** My grandparents were very, very involved. So was my aunt, my Aunt Beth. That's my birth dad's sisters. Really, it was my mom, grandma, and my Aunt Beth who raised me. It took a village.

[00:19:04.27]

**Kelly S.:** You mentioned your grandmother teaching you how to bake. Did your aunt or your mom bake?

[00:19:13.13]

**Justin B.:** Oh, my mom is a horrible cook. Terrible. I love her; girl can't cook. And she'll tell you. I mean, she can make really—okay, there's one thing she makes I love, which is lasagna noodles already cooked, and you take the kielbasa where you take it, you stuff the one end of the lasagna noodle in it and roll it up with cheese, and then jarred tomato sauce. I'm growing up as a kid, and I'm like, "Ooh, Mom's cooking. It's gonna be the kielbasa and lasagna." [Laughter] But often, we just ate at Grandma and Grandpa's house. Every night, we were there. But no, my mom can't cook; my aunt, yes. So, I would say between my grandmother and my Aunt Beth, that's where I got my cooking from. I think from my grandmother, it was more of the technical aspect of it and the process and the history of it. My love for food history and understanding where the ingredients and where it's from came from her, whereas my aunt was very much the more adventurous, "Let's try this new thing I found!" She was the rule breaker. My grandma set the tone; my aunt let me break the rules. That's definitely now how I am now. I understand it; we're gonna do it my way. [Laughter]

[00:20:48.29]

**Kelly S.:** Did they have cookbooks that they used, or were they just kind of off the top of their head?

[00:20:56.25]

**Justin B.:** So, there were cookbooks. They were not as into cookbooks that I'm in. They had the old-school “Better Home & Gardens,” “The Joy of Cooking,” all that kind of stuff. They mainly relied on family recipes. I would say there were more recipe card boxes than there were cookbooks. My grandma, when I turned eighteen and moved to Boston for college, she made a scrapbook that she had kept—like old-school scrapbooks, not the fancy ones with the plastic over it. The paper turns colors over years. Of all the recipes that she ever made for me that I liked or didn't like, she put 'em in there. There's probably over two to three hundred recipes in this book.

[00:22:00.04]

**Kelly S.:** Do you still have it?

[00:22:02.20]

**Justin B.:** Yeah, I still have it. That's been my biggest thing right now, is how do I turn this into an actual cookbook? What do I do with this? Yeah. They relied on—a lot of things were family recipes. Then, kinda when the internet took off and celebrity chefs became a thing, they would copycat recipes, was my aunt's biggest thing. It was nice, wholesome; there was no James Beard cookbook in there. If it wasn't Midwestern, Southern food, or Southwest food, they weren't making it.

[00:22:55.15]

**Kelly S.:** So, you moved to Boston to go to college. Where'd you go to college?

[00:23:02.26]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. Well, I took—oh, sweet lord. [Sighs] It's whatever. This is 2020. [Laughter]

[00:23:15.01]

**Kelly S.:** This is clearly the times we are living in.

[00:23:20.10]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. If you can't accept this, you'll have problems. [Laughter] I took a gap year between high school and college. What in—I don't know. There's nothing there. The wind? The wind. Bella? Bella. Bella. Okay. Cool. Yeah, I took a gap year between high school and college, and I used to think that I was gonna be a Broadway performer. I used to dance a lot. I went on a tour, performing arts tour, and travelled all over. I've been to all the states, and I lived in Spain and London and the Canary Islands, all in one year, from 2002 to 2003. It was rough. I did not like living out of a suitcase. And it was really hard on my body. But I achieved a goal; I knew that I wanted to perform and tour, and I did it. Check. I met my then-boyfriend, who eventually became my husband, David, in California. He was moving to Boston to go to Berklee College of Music. I was like, "Ooh. I've always wanted to live in Boston. That's the furthest town I can live in without being in a different country away from my family. This is exciting!" [Laughter] So, I sold everything. I kind of was a jerk to my family. I sold everything and had a thousand dollars in my pocket, cash. Literally the day before, I sat my mom down and my grandma and my aunt, and I was like, "So, I'm moving to Boston. My flight is tomorrow. Will you take me to the Ontario Airport?" I didn't say I was going to college 'cause I didn't know if

I was going to. I did not tell them that I was gay or I had a boyfriend and that's the reason I was moving. It was just, "I need to get out of this town; I can't do this." And, "I don't want to be repeating history of my family. We have got to get out of this town." And that point, I hated Barstow. I hated where I grew up. I hated it all. Super teenage angst. So, I did that. I eventually got into Suffolk University, but what I didn't realize was that my education at Barstow High School was not the best, and I definitely didn't have a proper education. Like, I failed to acquire the right reading level or the basic comprehension of math. I definitely am the creative mindset. Other stuff was very hard for me. I just was very honest with Suffolk. Well, first, they were like, "Can you submit your S.A.T. scores?" I was like, "What are the S.A.T.s?" [Laughter] I had no idea. Like, no one told me that that was something I had to do in high school to go to college. I had no advisor; I had no . . . it was so common at that time for the lunch lady one day to be in the cafeteria and the next day be your English teacher. Just was weird. I was envious of hearing other peoples' actual education and high school experience. Like, I'm street smart. I learned how to survive. But yeah, I went to Suffolk University. They kind of waived—I think they felt bad for me. I don't know. I have no idea why. But I somehow got in. I started out in musical theater, and I was like, "This is stupid. How is this gonna be a career?" I switched into interior design. I'm like, "Can I be more of a stereotype?" [Laughter] I'm going from theater to interior design. I liked it for a while, but I just couldn't—it wasn't challenging enough for me. So, then I eventually ended up with communication journalism with a concentration in poli sci. So, basically, I wanted to do political P.R. I wanted to be like Scandal. I wanted to fix problems. That's when I started working in politics, was during that. Yeah.

[00:28:34.01]

**Kelly S.:** I'm connecting the dots in my head. [Laughter]

[00:28:36.18]

**Justin B.:** I know. My life is crazy. A roller coaster.

[00:28:42.13]

**Kelly S.:** I wouldn't say crazy; I mean interesting for sure. So, you worked in politics in college.

[00:28:51.13]

**Justin B.:** Uh-huh.

[00:28:53.06]

**Kelly S.:** What kinds of things did you do?

[00:28:56.27]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. So, when I moved to Boston in 2003, 2004 is when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Then it went up for—they wanted to take it away, so then we had to fight for it. They wanted it up for vote. It was a lot of work. There was an organization called Mass Equality. It was a small team. I think, either the summer of [200]5 or [200]6, this is how sad it is, my memory, I applied to be an intern and

I was one of four interns for this organization. I was the political director's assistant, and—[Dog barks] Whoa. Bella. I'm gonna go put her downstairs. One second.

[00:30:11.25]

**Kelly S.:** Okay. Take your time.

[00:30:11.25]

**Justin B.:** Bella, downstairs. [Snaps] Go. Go. Go lay down. Go lay down. [Sighs] She's so old that when she barks like that, I'm like, "Whoa! That took so much energy from you." [Laughter] Mm. Okay, so, I was the political director's assistant and I had all of Western Mass was my district. So, I helped organize canvassers. Any time there was a business, I remember Macy's. [Laughter] I remember Macy's had, during Pride, in their window display, two guys and two women for Pride. They got pressure to take it down, so they took it down, so then we had to write a letter. I remember that being the coolest thing to me, like, "Oh, we have so much power." Again, small-town kid, little education, really just tryin' to get through and do good. It was just fascinating and so exhausting, because you talked to people—you know, we were meeting with senators and reps and telling them why they should protect same-sex marriage. We're talking, going out into Western Mass, which is predominantly a lot more conservative, and telling them, going door-to-door, coming out to these people every time, and telling them, "This is why you should protect my rights." It was old-school politics, grassroots. It was insane. The internship ended over the summer. It was a summer internship. That ended, and I got hired on to continue working, and I was a campaign manager. I stayed with Western Mass and got all

those folks elected into office. I think it was a year later, we secured it. Couldn't take it away. Crushed it. Then it just kind of—folks moved on to other states, and then national campaigns. I loved being part of it. I'm part of that history; that's so cool to me. Like, not a lot of people can say . . . David and I were photographed by the A.P. It was all over. It was on the *Times* and *Washington Post*. That's kinda how my family found out that I was gay. [Laughter] But it's a very special moment in my life, yeah.

[00:33:36.24]

**Kelly S.:** Did you ever feel—going door-to-door to me sounds scary.

[00:33:46.14]

**Justin B.:** Terrifying.

[00:33:48.24]

**Kelly S.:** Yeah. Did you ever feel unsafe? Or just nervous about doing that?

[00:33:56.03]

**Justin B.:** Oh, yeah. Every time. Every time. I would have to pump myself up. I was leading these volunteers! I was responsible for these volunteers and these canvassers. I had to show strength and grit, but internally, I was just like, "What if? What if something happens?" I remember, I had a canvasser who had a shotgun pulled out on them. I was like, "Time to go! Not worth it. You can't change that person's mind." But it started to spark my interest in healthy confrontation, uncomfortable conversations, and this whole

idea of coexistence and conflict and how do we manage that. It lit a fire in me, something that I didn't realize I had always had. But being an anxious person, having anxiety and panic attacks, the first couple months, I'm like, "Oh, my God, what did I do?" But you have to remember, it's not just about you; it's about so many other people. This was before we had social media, so we were the face. We had to do it. We had to put ourselves in those positions. Yeah, I saw a lot of stuff; a lot of scary stuff. But also, a lot of amazing things, too.

[00:35:41.04]

**Kelly S.:** What was something amazing that you saw?

[00:35:47.23]

**Justin B.:** Mm. So . . . so there's this couple. Their son is gay. They were much older. They were devoted volunteers. They would show up with baked goods for everyone. They would come and file our—'cause we had canvass cards. We had cards that we had folks fill out to document their location and to send to their reps to show, "Your constituents are saying, 'Pass this.'" They would file them and organize them. They were just—on paper, what society says, this elderly, straight couple, you would think hate the gays. But they were like, "No. This is—" And their son was great. I would never say he was the most flamboyant, in-your-face version of gay, but they would be around drag queens and gay men and lesbians and all the different, trans and non-binary, all the versions of it, and that was their kids. They were all their kids. That always made me feel comfortable and always made me feel safe. I know all the interns that were part of my cohort all felt the

same way, too. So, I would say that. Then, I just always loved when we'd have the constitutional conventions, and we would have five times the amount of people for same-sex marriage versus those who were against it. We were the nicest and respectful, and it just showed, they're evil and they're ugly. To me, I was just like, "There are fewer, and fewer, and fewer of you. And our strengths are, we're growing." Those were pretty special, yeah.

[00:38:06.27]

**Kelly S.:** Yeah.

[00:38:08.15]

**Justin B.:** It's cool to see.

[00:38:12.04]

**Kelly S.:** So, did you graduate from Suffolk?

[00:38:16.13]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. I graduated from Suffolk. I worked about almost two years. David and I weren't going to move to a different state. In gay politics, I felt like we did our part and it was great. David, actually, ended up working for Mass Equality as their development manager. Then he moved on to work on the campaign for legalizing same-sex marriage in Maine. So, but he was able to work remotely and be there one or two days out of the week. It's New England, takes an hour to get somewhere else. [Laughter] I worked for, in

Boston, the Esplanade. It's a big park on the water. I worked for the non-profit for that. I was their program and fundraising director. So, I still was in politics, but I was more on the green space side, and recreation. So, that was fun. But got old. Then I decided—and the recession hit. I did what everyone else was. I was like, "Let's go to grad school!" So, I went to grad school, and I went to Brandeis University in Waltham.

[00:39:45.21]

**Kelly S.:** What'd you go for?

[00:39:48.29]

**Justin B.:** I have two master's. So, I have a master's in Sustainable International Development, and then my second master's is in Coexistence and Conflict. So, I wanted an international perspective of sustainable development of creating communities, improving communities, understanding how to negotiate differences, find commonalities, respect conflict. But I wanted to bring it back to a more local side. So, I wanted to take international practices and bring them to local and regional systems and states, 'cause I really feel that the states can learn so much from international practitioners and scale it to fit our needs. Like, COVID is such a perfect example. [Laughter] This is a perfect example of, "I just wish we had these international systems set in place here that create a checks and balance and the what-if analysis. If we do this, what constituents are affected by it and what neighboring states or towns? What is sustainable?" Sustainability doesn't have to necessarily be this global thing. Rarely is it talked about, local sustainability and regional sustainability and the ripple effect it can have. We always talk about top-down

on sustainability, but we really should be talking about bottom-up. Yeah, that's what I did. [Laughter] Everything that I did focused on, in grad school, it was a lot on food sustainability and nutrition. And water, funny enough; water, clean water. Full circle.

[00:42:06.28]

**Kelly S.:** What did you do after you—after you got both of those degrees?

[00:42:14.15]

**Justin B.:** So, part of Brandeis has a consortium, so I was also doing M.I.T. and Harvard classes, 'cause I was also gonna pursue a Ph.D. I was also working at, basically, a fellowship for the U.N. I really wanted to work as a peacebuilder and specialize in negotiating peace between either villages or states or countries where food was being withheld as a means of a weapon, or any type of food violation as a means of a weapon. So, I did that. I was studying a lot, like so nerdy. That was a first time that I ever realized that I was a very good student and I had the capability of learning and that I am smart, I just might do it a bit differently. But then, I also worked for Mass farmers' markets in Massachusetts, so I worked as the director of development in programming for the non-profit that oversaw all two hundred and fifty farmers' markets in the states. Yeah. **With a cap** of three.

[00:43:37.14]

**Kelly S.:** Why were you interested in food?

[00:43:41.11]

**Justin B.:** So, I think it just stems from where I grew up. I grew up in the desert. It was also, literally, a food desert. We didn't have—I mean, we had grocery stores, but our closest farmer's market was probably forty-five to ninety minutes away. Yes, and that's the thing about people thinking I'm from California. I didn't understand what fresh fruits and vegetables were. I didn't have this luxury of all this citrus and these things that people think we had. I grew up in the desert. Ninety-two percent of the population of my hometown are Latin. It's . . . I grew up eating Mexican food and that was my cuisine. I remember being, as a child, not really understanding, I just thought that I was—also, my aunt, she married, her husband was from Mexico and my cousins are half-Hispanic. I was like, "Oh, we all are! My last name's Garcia, too, right?" [Laughter] You just don't understand. That's how we cooked. We cooked with dried chilis and the stuff that you do when you're in the desert. So, I was always fascinated with not having access to these sorts of things. Forms of nutrition and other . . . there're ingredients that I was never exposed to or we couldn't get because it was too expensive to get to our grocery stores. Or, everything that we did get in the grocery store was just so super processed. Like, yeah. And water. That was such a huge part of it. To me, it's common sense, but some people don't realize it; to actually combat hunger, you have to clean water first, because you have to have your system be able to maintain and process the nutrients that you're putting in your body. Where, if you have contaminated water, you're sick. So. It was just like this—lights were going off in my head, and I was like, "Yes, yes, yes, yes. This is making sense and I'm getting answers." Of what I was feeling, but couldn't put terms or explanation to it.

[00:46:33.20]

**Kelly S.:** So, you did not go get a PhD?

[00:46:38.21]

**Justin B.:** I have to finish it. [Laughter]

[00:46:43.26]

**Kelly S.:** I mean, do you want to finish it?

[00:46:47.16]

**Justin B.:** Um . . . I don't know. I don't know, I don't know where I'm at in my life right now. I'm  
so in a different position. It might be something when I'm older; it might be. I don't know.

[00:47:06.04]

**Kelly S.:** So, how did you go from doing all this political work, food-related political work  
especially, to baking?

[00:47:22.08]

**Justin B.:** [Laughter] How does this all fit? So, I always wanted to go to culinary school, but I  
always got talked out of it. It was because, at that time, culinary school seemed like—I  
was always told I was better than that, which I kind of felt like that was disrespectful, but  
at that time, it was still . . . the golden age of restaurants. It just wasn't happening. We had  
it in the [19]80s and [19]90s and then it kinda changed, everything became steak and

potatoes or fine, fine dining, which isn't accessible to everyone. Then, at the same time, food media and everything just took off, but I felt I was too old for that. It was always a back-up plan. If I didn't get in to grad school, I was like, "Well, I'll go to culinary school!" And I always wanted to be a pastry chef. I always gravitated towards baking. I think it just gives meaning, it gives purpose, there's rhyme and reason, there's just structure. You don't have to have a dessert to survive; it's a luxury and it's a comfort mechanism. It's such a personal act of kindness and hospitality, you know? It's emotional triggering, there's just so much to it. Maybe that's what my PhD will be on. [Laughter] No, but seriously. I just always wanted to do it. In 2013, the end of 2013—the winter—my then-husband and I, David, decided that now we would start having kids. So, we needed to raise money for surrogacy because it's expensive. We were both working in political non-profits, so—and living in a brownstone in Boston in the South End, it was not cheap. So, we started an online bakery. Well, David suggested I do this, 'cause I always liked baking. An online bakery to encourage people to buy my baked goods, and that revenue we would save into what we called the baby fund. It was the Baby Fund Bake Sale. It took off, and then just the universe, stars, planets, it all lined up, because where we lived, we lived above Barbara Lynch's South End restaurants, B&G Oyster and the Butcher Shop and Stir. Just so happened, the friends that we made went off to go on *Top Chef* and one won one season, the other one did pretty well, top seven. They knew that I liked baking, and just started kind of pouring their info and knowledge and skills into me. Then one day, Stephanie was doing a pop-up. Stephanie was the one who was on the New Orleans season. She was doing donut pop-ups. She was like, "Hey, you should do your poparts and just earn some extra cash." Somehow, the two of us together and the

combination of poparts and donuts, it turned into this cult following. For a year, we ended up doing popups and food media was writing about us. All of a sudden, I was being called a pastry chef. I was waking up at 4 in the morning to have popups be done, be ready for 7 am, but then still working my Mass Farmers Market job. We went on national tour; we started from California and came back to the East Coast. It was just like boom, boom, boom. I had to make a decision: is this what my new life is? I had a really crummy day at work and so I quit, and I walked into a restaurant and picked up a front of house gig. I was their host. [Laughter] I said, "I want to learn restaurant. I want to learn it all." The rest is history. Just kind of literally took off.

[00:52:08.08]

**Kelly S.:** When you started doing the Baby Bake Sale, were you baking at home?

[00:52:14.01]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. In my teeny-tiny brownstone kitchen.

[00:52:22.04]

**Kelly S.:** How long did you stay baking at home?

[00:52:27.16]

**Justin B.:** Two years. Yeah, two years. It was insane. For the popups, we were at different restaurants, so we could use their space. But anything bake sale-related, it was all through my home kitchen. Yeah. There were moments when my husband was not super thrilled. I

was like, "Sorry I've taken over the dining room table and part of the living room and part of our bedroom." [Laughter] "It's for a baby!"

[00:53:04.24]

**Kelly S.:** And did that end up funding your surrogacy?

[00:53:07.13]

**Justin B.:** Well, not all of it. That's a lot of cookies to sell. [Laughter] We raised quite a bit. I mean, a decent amount. But this all started to fall into line when my grandmother passed away. About two or three weeks later, David's grandmother passed away, and then a month later, David's dad passed away. So, then we had to put that on pause. The whole baby thing was put on pause. Stephanie and I wrapped up the popups. I was doing a different popup series; I was doing a dessert tasting popup, like, once, twice a month. We just had to shut it down and we moved to North Carolina, 'cause that's where David's parents were at the time. That's how we ended up back in the South. Well, how I ended up in the South and . . . oddly enough, where my mom was from, which like blew her mind.

[00:54:21.23]

**Kelly S.:** When you were doing the popups, did you ever consider having a brick and mortar space?

[00:54:25.16]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. So, Stephanie and I definitely considered that. Everyone wanted that from us, but it was . . . I think we burnt ourselves out. It just didn't . . . yeah, we burnt ourselves out. The risk was too high. It's Boston, so rent was really, really expensive. For just doing donuts and pop-tarts, breakfast goods, you really have to be able to turn a profit. It's a lot of work to be able to produce that much stuff to turn a profit. So. It just didn't make sense to us, and we were both kind of going in different directions in our careers.

[00:55:14.18]

**Kelly S.:** So, when you moved to North Carolina with David, did you have an idea of what you wanted to do?

[00:55:21.05]

**Justin B.:** I was taking a break from popups. I was so tired of working in other peoples' kitchens, so I was gonna work in a restaurant. Like, if I want to open up my own bakery or restaurant, I have to work full-time to one restaurant. I have to. I have to learn that experience and I have to learn more about the business. You know, it was weird for me because I started this career immediately in the limelight. People knew who I was. But I was learning. It is not sustainable; I do not recommend it. I tell folks, "Take your time. Learn. Observe." Because when you're put in front of everyone so publicly, like, I was so green. I would have pop-tarts and desserts that just didn't come out right, and I didn't understand why because I never experienced it. I had to figure it out on the fly. Google was my best friend. I was like, "What do I do?" [Laughter] The mistakes that I were making were common mistakes for anyone starting out, but because I was in the

spotlight, my mistakes were just watched. If I messed up, I got called out on it. I was called a fraud for a really long time. People who were really into the industry in Boston for a long time, other pastry chefs, didn't realize why I was getting the attention. Looking back at it, I'm like, "Oh, I'm a hundred percent sure there was some form of privilege that was involved." The exterior of me, I look safe and normal, but I'm not. [Laughter] But I also think, too, the whole idea of me raising money to have a kid was just a story that people latched onto and related to. It wasn't that I was representing just gay dads. It was anyone trying to have a child to build a family and the complications through it and fertility, I.V.F., the cost of it, adoption, surrogacy. Miscarriages. There was just all these things that I somehow started representing for folks, 'cause a lot of my guests were people who were trying to have kids or who had complications having kids. It just kind of became a thing that I talked about with folks. I loved it. It was nice to be able to hear other peoples' stories and share it. I didn't really care what I was making. I didn't care if I was becoming "popular" and "famous." I was bringing people together to talk about things that aren't talked about in the public, and I learned so much. I learned so much, and they learned. But yeah, I needed a break. It's a lot of mental exercise to be on and . . . wasn't prepared. I was not prepared for that. But I knew what I was getting myself into. Stephanie had just come off of *Top Chef*. I knew what was going to happen. I just watched what happened with Kristen, who won the year before. I knew what was happening, and that did not feel the reason why I wanted to do it. Like, I could care less; love me or hate me. That's been my entire life. But I knew I wanted to work in restaurants. We didn't think we would live in Charlotte, necessarily. We thought we would live in Raleigh. So, I actually got a job out in Raleigh immediately, and I used to

drive every day back and forth from Charlotte to Raleigh for work until that got a little uncomfortable. Horrible experience at that restaurant, and so I left. So, we ended up staying in Charlotte.

[00:59:44.13]

**Kelly S.:** Is that how you ended up working for Joe and Katie?

[00:59:47.08]

**Justin B.:** Yeah. Dave and I started—we didn't know if we wanted to live in the city. We were kind of considering taking this as an opportunity to live the suburb life. [Laughter] Always up for a challenge! So, we explored the towns outside of it, mainly the Lake Norman area because David's mom lived on the lake. Just at the very top of it, so she was more in the Hickory area, like **Taba**, Hickory, Mooresville area. So, we started exploring. Davidson came up as one of the opportunities to explore. So, on a Saturday—either end of July or beginning of August, we went to the farmer's market. It was cute. A cute little town, college town. It was like the Gilmore Girls. There was cobblestone. We just felt like we were back in Boston. "This is so charming." We were walking back to the car and we saw Kindred. It had just opened, like, a couple of months before. I was like, "Oh! What a cute little restaurant." It looked like something we would have seen in the city. Let's have lunch here. We had lunch. It was us and another couple. It was amazing. Like, "Damn, this food is good. This is really good." [Laughter] At lunch, there were only two desserts; cookies and birthday cook. I was like, "Okay, okay. This is cool." So, we got home and I sent an email to Katie introducing myself and saying, "I really would love to

ask you questions, how was opening a restaurant in a small town? I definitely love Davidson and can see myself opening a bakery here. I don't know if that's anytime soon or if I want to learn more about the industry and running the business side of it, but would love to chat." She invited me to come down and get a drink, and we would chat at the bar. Literally two days later, they won Bon Appetit's Hot 10. I was like, "Welp! Talk to you later." [Laughter] No way. I was like, "I am not doing this again." So, they'd just, like that, became popular, super busy. Of course her and I would stay at loose touch, and that's fine. Then, randomly in October of that year, they posted on social media they're looking for an assistant manager for front of house. I had wanted to work in the kitchen. I wanted to work in the pastry department, 'cause the job I had in Raleigh was in the kitchen. I was like, "You know what? I think I'm gonna apply for this job." I asked David what he thought. He said, "You should just it. Just get your foot in the door. Just do what you do best." So, I applied and immediately Katie was like, "Come on in for an interview!" She was like, "Oh, my god. I'm so happy to have seen you apply. I just remember the e-mail that you first sent." We had a great interview. She was having a baby. She was pregnant again with her third child. So, they hired me as the assistant front of house manager, and it was just me and Blake, the G.M. Katie went off and had their son. I was handed partial responsibility for this very popular, just racking up the awards, restaurant, and I had no idea what I was doing. But we did it. Then I eventually became the service manager, with Katie learned how to dial in our steps of service and our take on hospitality. Two years later—in those two years, I started doing more events and taking on wine, helping Blake with beverage. I kept pushing to learn expo, because sometimes the front of the house managers are on expo. I was like, "I want to learn expo!"

Teach me. Show me." Then an opportunity came where they decided to open up a second restaurant, and they were like, "Hey, Justin, do you want to be the pastry chef for both restaurants? The corporate pastry chef?" I was like, "Okay, yeah! Let's do this! Okay!" [Laughter] So, I did. For another two years. They allowed me blend both my front of house and back of house. So, I was senior management, leadership. I helped with front of house and back of house. I dealt with a lot of conflict resolution and, just . . . yeah. It's great. A whirlwind experience, because the second restaurant, Hello, Sailor became really popular and started racking up awards. You're **just in the attention**, and especially when your name is attached to restaurants like that and your desserts are so different from one another, you have an identity at both restaurants. And you have the name of these two restaurants behind you. It was insane. All of a sudden, they're like calling me one of the best Southern bakers. I'm like, "What?!" It was confusing. They have a P.R. firm, so we had to, to control and manage all of that. It would be e-mails like, "You have this interview. You have this appearance. They want this recipe. Can you do this?" It was insane.

[01:06:23.24]

**Kelly S.:** What went into your menus? What did you . . . what were you thinking when you created different desserts? Or what kind of desserts did you want to use?

[01:06:32.14]

**Justin B.:** So, what I loved about working with Joe and Katie is, they saw so much more in me than I realized. They realized that my palate was actually pretty defined and I could think

of these really odd combinations of flavors and have it work. They realized that I had a very sharp eye for plating, but I just didn't know how to execute it. I was learning all this when I was at front of house. When new menu items would come up, I would look at the final product, 'cause if I ran expo, I was responsible for how it looked. Or if there were new menu items, Joe would have me and Katie and Blake taste it and I immediately think of, "Okay, how do I tell my staff how to talk about this? What drinks to pair it with?" It really helped me. But with Kindred, it's an experience of how we like to eat. There's worldly influence. It's not just Southern food. It's this combination of travel. To me, that was a challenge, because I only knew American comfort dessert. I, at that point, didn't really explore different types of cuisine in that. So, Joe and Katie pushed me out of my comfort zone. "We want tarts. We want . . ." You know. "Parisian desserts that are slightly recognizable with American ingredients. We want things refined but playful." They just pushed on me, and they're like, "Seasonality. Seasonality. Talk to the folks that come in and get stuff." I just took all of that and just started experimenting. Tarts became my thing there, especially during the summer, and then buttermilk pound cakes became a thing where I just didn't do them in the traditional pound cake pan, I did them in more of a circular pan like you would do in a cake. It was a little bit shallower and it was almost like an upside-down cake because the fruit was in there and caramelization. I just found my groove with Kindred and knew what I could and couldn't do. The ice creams that we would do, for the most part, were dairy-free because I have a dairy allergy. I wasn't obnoxious and called them dairy-free ice cream, we would just explain that if someone had an allergy, "Oh, all of our ice creams are dairy-free." I would do tahini ice cream, almond honey ice cream. We did a paw-paw ice cream. Just all these Southern

ingredients or ingredients that they were using in their savory items like hibiscus and **blueberry** and juniper, all these things that they were seeing at the savory side, I'm like, "I'm gonna pull that in." To connect it to the menu and show them the sweeter side of it using a different component. I learned that salt, acid, and olive oil are amazing things for desserts, and how fresh herbs like fennel, bronze fennel, sesame, black sesame, rye, these are all these things that I could use to dial back that tooth-achingly sweetness of desserts that I hate, that are too much sugar. I just felt in a groove. But with Hello, Sailor.

[Laughter] It was like, okay, forget all that, Justin. Go super tongue-in-cheek, campy, if you were a kid, what would you want to eat? So, it was like old-school McDonald's size fried hand pies, fried in beef fat. I brought poke cakes onto a dessert menu at a restaurant; that's insane. Dirt cups I brought back, ice box cakes were a big thing. We made our own soft serve from scratch, and I really wanted that Dairy Queen marshmallow. We just couldn't get it until one day, I was like, "Why don't I just toss in some meringue?" We did it, like, "Oh my god! We did it!" We just—strawberry pretzel pie or strawberry pretzel salad, wherever in the South you're from how we call it, we did that. That really set the tone of my identity as a baker and pastry chef, was taking these forgotten recipes, these desserts, and just bringing 'em back, and not taking dessert so seriously, and realizing that dessert doesn't have to be deconstructed and smoke and mirrors. It's just gonna be a really good piece of pie and it's gonna be a really good cake. I'm gonna fry that dessert in beef fat, and you're gonna love it. I just didn't care. I didn't feel the pressure of other pastry chefs around me to fit the mold, to be that fine dining, **Clinelle** everything. I'm like, "No. We're gonna use a No. 20 scoop and it's gonna be delicious."

[Phone rings]

[01:12:51.12]

**Kelly S.:** I am so sorry.

[01:12:53.25]

**Justin B.:** That's okay. 2020, it's cool. [Laughter]

[01:12:58.22]

**Kelly S.:** What a . . . [Laughter] I was gonna ask, when you're making all this stuff and you've kind of already been defined as a Southern pastry chef, were you seeking out things that you felt like were Southern? Or did you feel like just by virtue of where you were, it became Southern food?

[01:13:25.24]

**Justin B.:** I never—no. I never went to achieve Southern classification. I think, subconsciously, I grew up Southern because of my mom and because my Grandma Burke was from the Midwest, I also had those Midwestern influences. I ate things that other folks in California didn't eat. You know? I remember one time I was eating a sandwich at school, and they were like, "What are you eating?" I'm like, "Oh, peanut and apple butter sandwich." They're like, "What is apple butter?" I'm like, "Well, that's how my family rolls." We would travel. We would visit my family in the Midwest and in the South, so I grew up with that, I just didn't realize what that was. I think I'm fascinated by American desserts. I think that we don't do enough with exploring the history of dessert in the states

and where it's so different state by state. I'm always reading about it; I'm always trying to discover. And I would rather have food, desserts, from a church potluck versus a Michelin-star restaurant. So, I just started to learn how to bring those two together. But no, I never achieved to be—I never set out to achieve to be anything "the best," I just wanted to do it 'cause it made me happy and I'd just lost my grandmother and it was my connection. I think I was doing a lot of therapy, and I didn't realize it. Everything else that kind of happened, happened.

[01:15:54.27]

**Kelly S.:** So, how long were you at Kindred and Hello, Sailor?

[01:16:00.24]

**Justin B.:** Collectively, almost four years, 'cause Sailor opened up two years after . . . oh, two and a half years after Kindred opened, but I was there almost four years. The only reason I left was 'cause Jasper was born.

[01:16:15.27]

**Kelly S.:** That's your son.

[01:16:18.06]

**Justin B.:** That's my son, yeah.

[01:16:21.01]

**Kelly S.:** What did you do when you left? Were you a stay-at-home dad?

[01:16:29.01]

**Justin B.:** So, the idea was that I was gonna take a leave of absence and I would come back to work, but I wanted to be a stay-at-home parent. I just didn't know if I would come back, and two months in, I was like, "I can't do this. I can't work in restaurants and be the kind of parent I wanted to be." At the same time, I was exploring recipe development and freelance food writing, 'cause I was doing a lot of that on the side leading up to my departure from the restaurants. I had written for *Eater* and a few other publications, and I was really finding an identity there. I realized I had so much to say and there was so much I wanted to learn, wanted to learn with others while doing it. So, yeah, I just decided not to return and I don't think they were too pleased with it. Not that they were mad at me, but more, I just didn't give 'em the opportunity to adjust for that. But they understand family and priorities change. Then I started writing freelance and pursuing a cookbook, and also, at the same time, I should mention that during all of this, David and I were in the process of separating. So, a lot of big changes. Lots of big changes.

[01:18:10.23]

**Kelly S.:** Wow. But you opened a bakery, didn't you?

[01:18:15.21]

**Justin B.:** So, yes and no. [Laughter] The bakery was already open. They were hitting financial hardship and just complete classic struggle of a new restaurant/bakery. So, I came in and

consulted with them and did kind of a contract period. I knew that, with my name attached to it, it was gonna be perceived as mine and gain a lot of attention just because it was next door to Kindred. It was two buildings or three buildings down. So, you had the small-town support for that, but I knew that there was only a short term for me there. The way it worked out, though, is I left right before the pandemic. The bakery wasn't gonna survive anyways after, whether or not I stayed. The bakery is now closed. It does not exist anymore because of the pandemic. But.

[01:19:30.05]

**Kelly S.:** How is—man. That is incredible timing. How's the pandemic affecting you as far as cooking now?

[01:19:42.26]

**Justin B.:** Well. [Laughter] It's been great and bad. So, when it first started, I tapped into this whole, "I'm self-taught!" My whole approach to recipe development is taking these more technical, odd flavor combinations and scaling it down to an approachable dialogue for home bakers to do. All of a sudden, my freelance work increased. I had publications coming to me, saying, "We need more at-home baking content." So, I was producing, producing, producing. Then I got COVID. [Laughter] And it's been two months now. I'm just now getting my sense of taste and smell back, but it's completely different. I don't taste and smell things the same way, so I'm relearning how to do this all. Still trying to write a cookbook and still trying to food write and recipe development.

[01:20:56.16]

**Kelly S.:** So it pretty fundamentally affected the way you cook.

[01:20:59.03]

**Justin B.:** Um-hm. Yeah. I'm basically starting from the basics. Like I made a, essentially, it's a pina colada bundt cake. It's so basic; pineapple, coconut, brown sugar. And to me, it was the greatest thing in the world 'cause I could actually taste it and smell the caramelized sugar. But normally, pre-COVID Justin would be like, "Let's add spices to it! What if we did this to the pineapple before we put it in there?" Yeah. It's frustrating. I had a glass of beaujolais the other day and I was like, "This is so weird! What's happening? It's bitter, it's sour, it's floral, I don't know what's happening." But it's the first time I had all these taste sensations again and it was too much for me. I feel like I am all three of my brothers—we're all of the spectrum, and so I was like, "Oh, my god! I'm sensory overload! This is too much!" It honestly could have been the worst glass of wine, but I'm like, "This is great. This is lovely." Yeah.

[01:22:20.04]

**Kelly S.:** Wow.

[01:22:21.13]

**Justin B.:** But it's weird. And it was pretty bad for me. I should have gone to the hospital, but there wasn't room.

[01:22:33.00]

**Kelly S.:** Wow. Were you in South Carolina at the time?

[01:22:37.28]

**Justin B.:** No.

[01:22:39.27]

**Kelly S.:** And there wasn't room in South Carolina?

[01:22:37.22]

**Justin B.:** My boyfriend and I just had to decide, "Do I go? Would it make it worse if I went?" I had all the symptoms plus some really weird ones. Recovery has been just a lingering fatigue, sense of fatigue, and no smell or taste. Sometimes, I still get vertigo, but not as bad anymore.

[01:23:08.00]

**Kelly S.:** Wow.

[01:23:09.21]

**Justin B.:** And I lost fifteen pounds in eight days, which was insane. It was not good.

[01:23:20.04]

**Kelly S.:** Yeah. Well, you have . . . you've done so many things.

[01:23:27.09]

**Justin B.:** [Laughter]

[01:23:29.29]

**Kelly S.:** And I mean that in the best possible way. I could probably talk to you for, like, another hour, but I'm not going to. [Laughter] I guess I just want to ask if there's anything that we didn't talk about or I didn't ask that you would want to add before we stop.

[01:23:50.06]

**Justin B.:** You know, you asked me, did I seek out to be this Southern baker? I didn't. I think it's in my blood. I didn't realize it, till this whole self-discovery of who I am. But I also think it's so important, too, to know that being gay and in the South, there's very little representation of our community. There are a few, but it took them to be celebrity chefs to talk about it and to be exposed and to share their truth. For me, I don't understand why there's not—we have New York and San Francisco, but people just don't think that we're in the South. But there's so many. Our community is so large. [Dogs bark] Perfect timing. But our community is so large. When I wrote that article for *Eater*, "Homophobia almost made me quit being a chef," so many people reached out to me, especially from the South, asking how did I get out of it, what can they do, are there resources, I need help. It's a lot of responsibility, and it's taken two years—I wrote that in 2018—it's taken two years for me to even get follow-up coverage on this. 2020, I've done more talking about it on podcasts. That is what I'm passionate about, is intersection of the queer community

and in food and in food media. Also our community of queer people of color, too. It's a beautiful community and we're just underrepresented, we're misunderstood. I'm very proud to be queer in the South, but I never thought that I would see my former career in politics and now my career in food, collide. But that's where I am.

[01:26:44.27]

**Kelly S.:** You know, on that note, I think a lot of people expect women to be pastry chefs. I wonder, how does that play into—or how has that affected you? Do people assume that if you're male and you're a pastry chef, you must be gay?

[01:27:09.18]

**Justin B.:** Yeah, well. Yeah. It's a stereotype. It's just like . . . a woman's place is in the kitchen. The home kitchen. Not the professional kitchen. I joke with my peers, who are queer and bakers, it's like, "We didn't worry about coming out as gay. We worried about coming out as a baker." 'Cause we were fulfilling the stereotype. But for me, personally, the first cookbook I write, I want to address this. I want to figure out the best way to address it. But I'm leaning into it. I own it. I think that, if you look at it, the queer community has always found their space in the abusive, heterosexual, toxic male world that we live in. We have always found a space. I think, in the restaurant industry, we found our space in pastry. I say we own it. Own it and, yes, stereotypically, that's where we are. No, the act of baking is not gay. [Laughter] But queer baking is an action. We'll make it for anyone, no matter who you are. Again, it comes back to comfort, hospitality, act of kindness. Yeah, it's cool when you think about it. When I think about it, it's cool. It gets me worked

up. It's just our narrative. We're probably making a bunch of stuff—John Birdsall said it. It's queer narrative where we were cast away by blood and we found our chosen family, but we bring recipes from our hometown to hold onto those memories. I think that's what I do in my baking. I'm just creating a new narrative and proving and showing that a queer Southern baker does exist, and there's a lot more of us. Yeah.

[01:29:55.08]

**Kelly S.:** Okay. Well, we can stop on that note.

[01:29:59.10]

**Justin B.:** Okay.

[01:30:00.27]

**Kelly S.:** Give you a break.

*[End of interview]*