



Sonya Twitty
Bessemer, Alabama

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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:01.14]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Today is February 4, 2020. I am Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance Career Servers Birmingham Project, and I am at the Bright Star Restaurant in Bessemer, Alabama, with Ms. Sonya Twitty. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:20.08]

Sonya T.: My name is Sonya Twitty and I am a bartender/server at the Bright Star Restaurant.

[00:00:27.01]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Let's start off and, could you tell us your birthdate?

[00:00:31.05]

Sonya T.: November 12, 1972.

[00:00:33.28]

Annemarie A.: Great. And where were you born?

[00:00:34.24]

Sonya T.: Birmingham, Alabama.

[00:00:36.13]

Annemarie A.: Great. So, tell me a little bit about the Birmingham of your youth. What was it like?

[00:00:41.29]

Sonya T.: Well, the area around the Bright Star was a very happening place. People, when you got up on Saturday mornin' and said that you were goin' to town, you came to Bessemer. There was Sears, all the big shops were in Bessemer, and that's where you came to do your shopping.

[00:01:01.09]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, did you grow up in Bessemer or outside of it?

[00:01:04.14]

Sonya T.: Around Bessemer.

[00:01:06.16]

Annemarie A.: Great. And so, what did your parents do for a livin'?

[00:01:10.24]

Sonya T.: My mother stayed at home and my dad worked in the coal mines.

[00:01:15.00]

Annemarie A.: Great, that's great. Well, tell me a little bit about some of the restaurants of your youth, like in Bessemer and kind of your experiences with them.

[00:01:25.01]

Sonya T.: Oh, goodness. Growin' up there was, of course, The Bright Star, which has been here forever. There's always been Bob Sykes Bar-B-Q, and fast food restaurants. And there was a great little place called the Spinning Wheel, where it was like car hop, like a early-day Sonic before Sonic was ever thought about. You know, you'd pull up and they'd come out on roller skates and had the best hot dogs that you could ever eat. In Bessemer, there was Stadium Grill, of course, where you'd go get steaks and cold beer. Great place to hang out on football. And eating around Bessemer, that was about it. You had to get out into Birmingham to really get into some of the finer dining, like John's and Joy Young's and places like that.

[00:02:15.23]

Annemarie A.: What were some of those? Can you talk about some of those places in Birmingham that you remember?

[00:02:22.09]

Sonya T.: I don't remember a whole lot of those. We didn't venture a lot into Birmingham. My dad bein' a coal miner, those just wasn't places that we went to. But there was, of course, Michael's. There was . . . goodness, . . . Michael's was probably one of the most famous ones that I heard about. Of course, we always went to—we would go to Niki's on Finley.

[00:03:03.20]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:03:05.10]

Sonya T.: That was always the staple growing up.

[00:03:06.28]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do you have any siblings?

[00:03:09.16]

Sonya T.: No.

[00:03:09.29]

Annemarie A.: Great. So, where'd you go to school growin' up?

[00:03:14.06]

Sonya T.: I graduated, actually, from Brookwood High School, class of 1990.

[00:03:23.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And when you were growin' up, what did you think you wanted to be?

[00:03:26.14]

Sonya T.: Oh, back then, I wanted to run a corporation and be a lawyer. Typical woman-takes-the-world-type thing.

[00:03:37.14]

Annemarie A.: Tell me, let's get into your career a little bit. Tell me a little bit about the first food service, the first food and beverage job that you had.

[00:03:46.10]

Sonya T.: Well, the day I turned sixteen, my dad said, "You're up. You've gotta learn to take care of yourself now." Which is the greatest thing he ever did for me. I turned sixteen; I got a job working here in Bessemer at Burger King. About halfway through my senior year, they opened a truck stop on Exit 100, it was the Petro Truck Stop. They hired me there as their cashier. I worked there all through high school; got out of school early, and I just loved meeting people. So I'd been there probably about a year and they moved me into their bookkeeper. From there, they wanted to put me, in like, different management-type roles, so I had to learn to wait tables. So, once I started waiting tables, I mean, it was over with. That's what I wanted to do, 'cause I love talking to people.

[00:04:40.10]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What was the restaurant at the truck stop called?

[00:04:42.17]

Sonya T.: It was called the Iron Skillet.

[00:04:45.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What kind of food did they serve?

[00:04:49.05]

Sonya T.: Just your typical diner fare; hamburgers. Had buffet tables. Breakfast was the big thing.

[00:04:56.01]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:04:56.12]

Sonya T.: Um-hm.

[00:04:56.12]

Annemarie A.: So you're talkin' about how, kind of the relationship with folks, with people who you got to interact with, kind of drew you to service. Could you talk a little bit about, maybe, some of your early experiences that were kind of important for you? That kind of drew you in even more?

[00:05:17.25]

Sonya T.: Well, working there, of course you got to meet people from all over because they were driving trucks. They were from all over the country. And I made some really good friends. Every now and then, there's a few that I still run into. But they really . . . expressed how much they enjoyed comin' in there, how much they liked talking to me, and they would look for me. And it just made me feel good. So, it just started, kept buildin' from that. Once I felt like I had gone pretty much as far there as I could— 'cause I didn't really want to go into management there after really seein' what it was all about—I heard about the job opening here at the Bright Star for a cashier. Again, I'm goin' back to the cashier thing. I came to work here, and it opened up an entire, different world than what I was used to.

[00:06:15.12]

Annemarie A.: For sure. Well, tell me a little bit about that. What year did you come to the Bright Star?

[00:06:19.13]

Sonya T.: I came to work at the Bright Star in April of 1994.

[00:06:22.17]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Tell me a little about your first impressions working here.

[00:06:28.08]

Sonya T.: I was extremely intimidated, 'cause this was—in my mind, this was such a special place. This was a very upscale place for me, 'cause I had never really been to places like this. I was so overwhelmed and just mesmerized by everything. You know, I didn't want to mess up. I wanted to make sure everything was done right.

[00:06:52.19]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about some of the folks, the men and women here who kind of either trained you or mentored you in your position as you start movin' up.

[00:07:04.24]

Sonya T.: Well, the first one I have to mention is Jimmy Koikos. He's one of the owners of the restaurant. For whatever reason, he seemed to like me when I came to work here, and I was very scared because when they hired me as a cashier, I was replacing a lady who was retiring who had been here for over forty years, and they really thought of her as family and they didn't want her to go. Then, all of a sudden, this twenty-one-year-old girl comes in who doesn't know anybody or anything. [Coughs] I guess, after a little while, he liked what I was doin' and he just started warmin' up to me. He taught me a lot. He taught me how to talk people; he taught me, "Smile. Do this, do that." And how to interact with people and how to be a showperson. How to sell the Bright Star. How to laugh and joke and remember peoples' names, 'cause he was so great at that. He took a twenty-one-year-old scared kid, really, and turned her into the person she is today. You know? Unfortunately, he's no longer with us, and I will forever miss him.

[00:08:17.03]

Annemarie A.: I bet. I'm sorry for your loss.

[00:08:18.19]

Sonya T.: He played a big part in . . . and then, of course, his brother Nicky, who was very supportive. The lady that I replaced, Miss Carrie, was like a second mother to him, almost, from what I was told in the very beginning. I just didn't think he liked me very much. But it all worked out, and he was very nurturing. Nicky was very kind-hearted and really took time and showed me how he wanted things done. Of course, there was their sister, Helen, who at the time would come in and work on Fridays and Sundays with me. Her and I would talk, and she just had a way of making you feel comfortable. So, those three were the biggest influences when I first came here, and of course, after I had been here for a while, I got interested in wantin' to serve, so Brenda Salser—who's the head waitress—she's the one who really, I had waitressed before at the truck stop and had been trained what I thought was pretty well, but this was a totally different dining experience. This was white tablecloth, this was service, this was wine, this was beer, this was entrees; not rushing people. It was totally different. So, she was the—is the—head server here, and she kinda took me under her wing and showed me, "This is how you time it. This is what you do." That's why I'm the server that I am, 'cause she took the time to teach me the things that she knew.

[00:09:58.02]

Annemarie A.: For sure. It seems like, just from bein' here and bein' around you guys and all the things that I've read and listened to about the Bright Star is, it is a very special place, but it also seems like you had some big shoes to fill. But it seems like you totally did that. Could you tell me a little bit about, I guess, the relationship that you have with your other co-workers? So, other bartenders and waiters and waitresses? Bussers and kinda how it works, the ecosystem of front of house here?

[00:10:30.22]

Sonya T.: Well, the way it works at the Bright Star is, we're one big family. We may fuss and cuss and get mad at each other, but when the shift's over, we're standing outside huggin', we're best friends. We know what—we spend so much time together, because we always had a joke that we spend more time with the people at work than we do with the people at home. We all get very close, and we get involved in each others' lives, and we're like family; you mess with one, you mess with the other. The bussers, the back of the house, the front of the house, we're just a family. We help each other. When a new server comes along, it's just like being in a family, and you introduce the new person. Of course there's gonna be tension and there's gonna be this, but they see that person start to falter, we're the first ones to step in and say, "Hey, this is what—let me help you." You know, 'cause we want to see everybody succeed. If all the people in our group, if one of us doesn't succeed, we all fail. So, we just make sure we take care of one another. We go to birthday parties for one another; we've had baby showers through the years. We've watched each others' kids grow up. My oldest son was six months old when I came to work here, and he used to crawl around on the floor at night when we were cleanin' up. He grew up—my

two oldest boys grew up in this restaurant. They grew up with these servers. They grew up with Jimmy and Nicky, and they have memories that—and all of our kids are that way. All of our kids have grown up together. They've all known each other; they've went to Halloween carnivals together, they've . . . you know. We're just a family.

[00:12:26.12]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit—so, I obviously know what the Bright Star is and you do, but maybe somebody who's listenin' to this doesn't know exactly what this restaurant is. Could you describe the restaurant for us?

[00:12:39.25]

Sonya T.: You know, I don't know that there's really words to describe it. It's something that you have to actually experience. But to describe it, I would say that Bright Star is one of those places, when you walk in the door, you can say, "I've come home." Because you're gonna get a friendly face. You're gonna get a cheerful hello. Then, you're gonna get some of the best food you've ever had.

[00:13:03.28]

Annemarie A.: Can you tell us about that food?

[00:13:06.14]

Sonya T.: Oh. [Sighs]

[00:13:06.14]

Annemarie A.: [Laughter]

[00:13:07.09]

Sonya T.: Well, bein' here all these years, I've tried everything on the menu. Our Greek-style tenderloin is amazing; it's the only steak I've ever had in my life that you can cut with a fork. Greek-style snapper. I was so amazed, years ago, when I would see the fish truck come in from Panama City, and there'd be these big, beautiful red snappers. Looked like they just came out of the ocean. And later on, I found out that they had just come out of the ocean. It's just the most amazing taste. And you can tell that our cooks take pride, and they put love into what they're doing. 'Cause that food comes out, and you can taste the love. You can taste the passion. It's not just somethin' that was thrown on a grill, thrown on a plate, and sent out to somebody. It was sent out with a purpose.

[00:13:56.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about, you mentioned this earlier, the act of sales within your job. First of all, could you talk a little bit about your . . . well, first of all, maybe it's better to do this: could you describe a regular day for you workin' here at Bright Star?

[00:14:20.28]

Sonya T.: I come in for the morning shift, and that starts about 10:30. For the lunch shift. Of course, you're gettin' your station set up, ready to go. I normally work in the bar. I have

people who just come in and sit down; I know what they want. I don't even have to ask. A lotta times, I can order for them. But customers start comin' in. You're greeting them. That's the first thing you want to do, is greet 'em with a smile. You want to get 'em something to drink, get 'em comfortable, even if it does take a minute to get their order. You want to tell 'em about their specials. But most of all, you want them to enjoy their experience. You want to be able to read that table and say, "Hey, I can cut up with these people; I can laugh with these people," to, "These people are havin' a serious discussion. I need to get their order and go to somethin' else." It's all about reading the tables, and you go through that and you get busy at lunch. Once lunch is over with, you've got a little bit of down time, usually at least thirty minutes. And then the dinner rush starts. Dinner customers come in, it's the same way, It's just a little slower pace. You put on a real—at that point, you are a salesperson. It's my job, when they come into that bar, to make sure that they pick a beverage that they enjoy. If they're not sure, I'll taste 'em on everything in there until they find something they want. It's all part of being a salesperson. You know, at the end of the night, you clean up and get ready for the next day. You come back the next mornin' and you start all over again.

[00:16:03.12]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:16:04.23]

Sonya T.: I mean, that's really about all you can say about it. [Laughter] I mean, you just come in and wait on your tables, talk to your customers, do what you're taught to do. Make 'em. . . . you want to make them feel like they're the most important person in this restaurant.

[00:16:22.25]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense.

[00:16:23.03]

Sonya T.: Even if you've got twenty other tables, that table you're standing in front of is the most important table, and you want to make them feel that way.

[00:16:30.16]

Annemarie A.: For sure. How long did you wait tables before you started bartending?

[00:16:35.26]

Sonya T.: Ah, let's see. I started full-time bartending . . . see, I cashiered from [19]94 to [19]99. And I had some crazy notion that I wanted an office job, so I worked here part-time at night and worked in an office during the day, until two things happened: 1) my husband came up to me and he said, "Please go back to work at the Bright Star." And I said, "Well, I don't know if they want me back full-time. I don't know what I want to do." It was really ironic that that next week, Jimmy Koikos walked up to me and he said, "Come here. We need to have a conversation." I was scared to death. I said, "Yes, sir?" He said, "You need to make a decision. You're either gonna work here or work there. Which one

is it? I need you here." And he turned around and he walked off. I called my day job and turned in my notice, and I told Mr. Jimmy, I said, "Okay, you have me full time." He said, "It's about time you made up your mind. You got it outta your system?" "Yes, sir." And I've been here ever since.

[00:17:42.08]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, after you had the little day job stint, you decided to start waitressing?

[00:17:50.07]

Sonya T.: Oh, see, I cashiered from [19]94 to about . . . [19]99, and then I just started waitressing some, picking up a couple extra shifts for people who—'cause I already had waitress experience, so we were kind of short of help at the time, so I started just kinda pickin' up some extra shifts. Before you knew it, I was doin' it full-time. Our bar on that side was remodeled and built in 2001, so I probably went over there full-time in about 2002, and I've been there ever since.

[00:18:32.07]

Annemarie A.: Well, tell me a little bit about that shift. What's the kind of, like, knowledge and experience that you have to have to run a bar as opposed to being able to interact and work in the dining room?

[00:18:44.14]

Sonya T.: To work in the bar, really the only thing you need to have is a good attitude and a good personality. Everything else'll come. The first time I ever bartended here, it was a busy Saturday night. Back then, we had a waiting area set up in this other dining room, and they stuck me back there to make drinks while people were waiting. I had no idea what I was doin'. I froze. Man looked at me and he said, "I'll have a screwdriver." My mind went blank and I looked at him and I said, "Well, what's in that?" He kinda chuckled and I said, "Look, this is my first day." He just kinda chuckled. After that, I figured it out. Ninety percent of the drinks are all the same drink; maybe a different garnish or different ratios of mixers. Again, after they built the bar on that side, busy one Saturday night, the bartender called in. They threw me over there, and I've been there ever since, and I love it. It's all about havin' fun. If you love what you do, you don't work a day in your life, and I love what I do. Over there is so much fun. You get to talk to people and you laugh and cut up. You get to try new things. But most importantly, you get to watch people enjoy new things, because you'll introduce them to a new wine or you'll introduce them to a new beer and they're like, "Wow, I really like that." And that goes back to the Southern hospitality. You won't—there's nothing greater than watching somebody enjoy their food or beverage.

[00:20:19.15]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do you have any regulars or any folks who are always there?

[00:20:25.06]

Sonya T.: Oh, yes.

[00:20:26.17]

Annemarie A.: Can you tell me a little bit about 'em? You don't have to mention them by name.

[00:20:30.17]

Sonya T.: I have a couple who come in two or three times a month, and my customers text me and say, "Hey, I'm on my way. Save my table." I have about four or five that do that. I have a couple who comes in every Sunday lunch, sits at the same table. If they don't come in on a Sunday, I figure, "Okay, they must not have went to church." They don't come in the second Sunday, I'm on the phone making sure that they're okay. I have a lot of those. I have a whole family who comes about . . . once every six weeks, there's twelve to fourteen of 'em. And they'll call and say, "Hey, can we have the bar at such-and-such time? We're comin' down." I've been waiting on them, I've watched their kids grow up. I have another couple that I've been waitin' on, I watched their daughter grow up, and now, I'm watchin' their grandbaby. So, you know, yeah, there's a lot of those. We used to have a couple who ate in here every night. They sat at the same table every night and ate. Every night, they were here. Unfortunately, they passed away a few years ago, but the whole time that I worked here, I never missed a night of not seeing them. So, yeah, there's a lot of that.

[00:21:52.22]

Annemarie A.: I believe it.

[00:21:53.25]

Sonya T.: Um-hm.

[00:21:55.23]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. Well, tell me a little bit about . . . you kind of mentioned, and I mentioned this and then asked you a different question. [Laughter] Your idea of sales and your kind of philosophy of tryin' to present the food. Could you talk a little bit about that, how you go about kind of selling or convincing somebody to eat a certain thing? Or drink a certain thing?

[00:22:22.25]

Sonya T.: That was one of the things that Jimmy taught me, was he said, "You call yourself a server. You can call yourself a waiter. But really, you're nothin' but a salesperson. You're out there selling the Bright Star product." He said, "You have to believe in what you sell, and if you believe in what you sell, you can sell anything." And he was right, 'cause you go up to a table, and you're like, "What can I start y'all off with tonight? Would y'all care for an appetizer? Let me tell you about fried green tomatoes." Before you know it, you've sold a fried green tomato. We have specials on our thing, on our menu that change every week or so. The first thing you do is say, "Let me tell you about our special for tonight. It's prime rib with a Creole butter sauce with glazed shrimp." And before you know it, you've sold it. It's all about—and it really helps, too, to know your customer, and know what they like. But you have to have the knowledge. You have to know your menu. You have to know. I'm talkin' about the right wine or the right beer; I have people who come

in, I'll say, "What can I get you to drink?" "Well, uh . . ." That's your cue. They don't know what they want. So you say, "Okay, let's try red or white. Which do you prefer?" "Well, I think I want red." Okay, so I'll pick three different red wines, pour 'em a taste and say, "Tell me which one of those you like." And before you know it, they've tried somethin' they would have never tried before, and they've ordered a bottle of wine. It's all about believin' in the product that you sell.

[00:23:55.21]

Annemarie A.: That's great. That's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too, are you the only bartender or is there another one?

[00:24:05.02]

Sonya T.: Uh, no. We actually have four bartenders. I need a day off every now and then.

[Laughter]

[00:24:09.24]

Annemarie A.: I believe that. You guys are open seven days a week, right?

[00:24:13.23]

Sonya T.: Yes, yes.

[00:24:14.25]

Annemarie A.: You definitely do. Well, tell me a little bit about training and mentoring new folks who come in to the restaurant to work.

[00:24:24.05]

Sonya T.: New people who come in here to work, the first thing that I try to really instill in them is the history of the restaurant. 'Cause just like I said before, you have to believe in the product. People come in and think, "Oh, it's just another restaurant." Well, Bright Star's not just another restaurant. It's got a whole lotta history behind it. It's got a whole lotta love, and people who come in, they've got to embrace that. And to embrace, it they've got to know about it. So, that's one of my big things when new people come in, is I want 'em to know as much about the history, and I want 'em to try the things on the menu so that they can sell it. I really encourage open dialogue. Please ask questions. There are no stupid questions. If you don't ask, you don't know. And again, it goes back to the Southern hospitality. You want to make 'em feel comfortable to ask questions. You know? You're new here. You've gotta know these things. Let's set down and talk about what you don't know. Let's talk about what you do know. And let's see what we can do to make you a better salesperson.

[00:25:38.22]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense. You've talked about your idea of Southern hospitality a couple times. Can you kinda define that? What does Southern hospitality or hospitality in general mean to you?

[00:25:49.29]

Sonya T.: Southern hospitality means to me—let's say I walk into your kitchen or I walk into your home, I smell food. I smell love. I . . . can feel warm. When you walk in the doors of The Bright Star, you smell some amazing food. You feel the wonderful ambiance. You feel warm; you feel cared about. When you walk up to that stand, someone's gonna greet you with a smile, and that makes you feel good. That's Southern hospitality. Southern hospitality is no matter what kinda mood you're in, you can walk up to a person and make them feel good about themselves. And you enjoy watching them eat, which is the biggest Southern thing in the world. You know? Settin' at your grandmother's table, I'm sure—unfortunately, I never got to do this, 'cause none of my grandparents survived— but you remember sittin'. I hear stories all the time, and you remember sittin' down at your grandmother's table and the smells and the warmth and the conversation. That's how we want you to feel here. We want you to walk in these doors and feel like you're at home. You might have on a five hundred-dollar suit. You might have people with you that flew in with you from California. But they're gonna feel at home. They're gonna feel comfortable. They're gonna enjoy their food. And they're gonna leave here, shake your hand, hug your neck, and say, "I'll be back." That's what Southern hospitality is.

[00:27:23.27]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Thank you for that definition. Another question I had . . . goodness gracious. I had somethin' in my mind and then I was listenin' so intently that I just totally forgot. [Laughter] I always do that. Well, no, here, I do have a question for you. This is somethin' goin' back to talkin' about bein' able to raise your family and have this as a

viable career while also having your children here. Could you talk a little bit about what's it like to be a woman and have this job? That's been one of the interesting things about some of the restaurants that we've been to in Birmingham: a lot of the folks who are working front of house are women, and they're mothers and wives, and they're doing this work and they're supporting their family with it. I was wonderin' like how, I guess, what are your experiences?

[00:28:21.09]

Sonya T.: Well, first off, let me say: if you're gonna be a woman in the restaurant industry, no matter which—front of the house, back of the house, management, whatever—you've gotta be strong-willed and you've gotta have a great support, family support, spouse support. You just gotta have a tremendous support system. It is very hard. I'm raisin' four boys working here, my husband and I. By working here, the people that I've met, the friends that I've made, the opportunities that Jimmy, Nicky, and the Koikos family gave me, I've been able to do things that other people couldn't do. It's hard. Your kids get sick, but they still need you here. That's where you have to have a strong support staff, and you have to have a spouse that really understands your passion and your commitment. It's no secret: the restaurant industry has the highest divorce rate, and that's why. Because whether your child is sick or you're sick or your spouse is sick or your parents are sick, there's still people comin' through that door. You've got to be there. You . . . when you have the passion for the business and you have restaurant business in your veins, you'll find a way to make it work. Havin' that support staff is really great, but you can't do it in this business without it. That's another thing, gettin' back to family, this restaurant; we've

all watched each others' kids. Sick, not sick, just 'cause we needed to work a shift and we didn't have—we've babysat every kid in here, no matter how old they were. But it's not easy. It's not easy bein' a female in this job. A lot of the times because you have more emotions than a man. Ninety percent of the time, your superiors are men, and they're chewin' your butt out and you want to stand there and cry, and I have many times. And they tend to take that as a weakness, but you're really doin' it just to keep from killin' 'em. It's hard in every aspect for a woman, 'cause you're still tryin' to be home to cook, kids still have to go to school. You still have to wash clothes. There's things that, as mothers and wives, that we have to do—don't always have the time for it. Having a great, understanding spouse, which I've been very fortunate, who can wash clothes and make sure the kids get to soccer practice and all that kind of stuff, is very important.

[00:31:38.13]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense.

[00:31:39.15]

Sonya T.: Um-hm.

[00:31:42.08]

Annemarie A.: That's great. How have you . . . I guess, what's the relationship of other women within the restaurant? Here, specifically—well, you've already kind of talked about that. You guys keep each others' kids and—

[00:31:54.08]

Sonya T.: We do. But durin' the day, durin' a shift, we might not like each other. We might want to throw things at one another, and we have. We've talked about each other and we've talked ugly to each other. But when we walk out that door, we're sittin' out on the sidewalk laughin' and jokin' and we're the best of friends. That's . . . you don't find that in a lot of places, but you do here.

[00:32:21.26]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too, about . . . I'm also curious about the way that— you've been doin' this for a long time, but here's another question that I remembered to ask you, but—[Laughter] When did you realize that this is what you wanted to do? That this was the career that you wanted to have?

[00:32:48.23]

Sonya T.: I probably had been working here . . . two weeks when I realized this was where I wanted to work. This is where I needed to be, as far as that type of work, restaurant-industry work. The first day I went to work at Burger King, I loved being around the food. I loved being around customers. Every person should have to work fast food in their lifetime, trust me. Every sixteen-year-old kid needs to work at a fast food restaurant for a minimum of six months. It'll change their life. They'll either love it or they'll hate it, but . . . just being around food has always been a comfort for me. When I'm upset, I like to cook. So, food's always just been a comfort for me. So, whenever I can be around food, be around people serving food, it's just a comfort thing. Once I started waiting

tables here at the Bright Star, got to know so many more people, it just felt like home. It felt like what I needed to be doing.

[00:34:06.12]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense. I was wonderin' too, this is interesting, that the role of technology and the way that it has kind of shifted or changed certain things within the restaurant industry, I was wonderin' how that's personally impacted you throughout your career, specifically in regards to, like, payment.

[00:34:30.12]

Sonya T.: That's really kind of funny 'cause you brought that up, 'cause when I came to work here, I was the youngest person who worked here. Everything was done manually. There was not a computer in this buildin', or anybody that knew how to turn one on. At that time, at my prior job, I had been working on a computer. I had a little bit of knowledge. I wasn't super, super smart, but I taught myself and I knew some stuff. So, they started talkin' about upgrading and getting a computer system, a P.O.S. system. I was like, "Okay, okay." So, I was fortunate and got to help them a little bit with that. The people here were not happy with the computer. I mean, they were all older. But they grasped it and they embraced it, really. Once they got the hang of it, they really embraced the technology, and it was like, "Well, you know, this is so much better. This is so much easier." They really embraced it and really made it work. As time went along, we . . . I taught myself more, and we upgraded our computer systems and I figured out how to do

menus, and I figured out how to do a lot of different things on the computer. So, I'm kind of like the I.T. person here, too.

[00:36:00.10]

Annemarie A.: So, you do a whole bunch of different things.

[00:36:03.09]

Sonya T.: I do, actually, and I enjoy all of 'em. [Laughter] I just, if I had to pick one, I don't know that I could, from cashiering, bartending, serving, managing, I.T., menu design. I just like doing it all.

[00:36:18.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Did you do some management here as well?

[00:36:21.07]

Sonya T.: I do, I do. I've been the bar manager since . . . probably 2002 when I went over there full-time. But the last five or six years, Jimmy and Nicky have entrusted me and a couple others to take care of the restaurant when they couldn't be here. After Jimmy's unfortunate passing, I now have regular management shifts two or three days a week, which I really enjoy.

[00:36:51.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, could you tell me a little bit about those responsibilities and how they differ from either working at the bar or serving at tables?

[00:37:02.28]

Sonya T.: When you're waiting tables—when you're a server—you're responsible for you and those tables that you're assigned, whether it's four tables or seven tables. That's all you're responsible for. When you move over into the bar, you are responsible for everything that's turned in out of the dining room. You have fifteen servers turnin' in drinks to you, plus you have table service. So, you're responsible for any aspect, anything that goes on in the bar and any drinks that goes out of the bar. That's pretty huge.

[00:37:40.11]

Annemarie A.: Um-hm.

[00:37:42.00]

Sonya T.: When you're a cashier, you're responsible for ensuring that your money's correct, gettin' people out in a timely manner. Your focus is that one person in front of you. When you're a manager, you have to encompass all of that, plus the bussers, plus the dishwashers and the kitchen. You have to make sure that the restaurant's opened on time, that it's clean, everybody's where they're supposed to be, everything's done. And when that first person walks in the door, you've got a smile on your face. And when that last person comes in before you lock the door, they know they're just as important as the person who came in at ten o'clock this mornin'. So, yeah, it's a lot of responsibility.

[00:38:24.04]

Annemarie A.: It for sure is. That's great, though. Well, tell me a little bit, too . . . let me see, what haven't I asked? What are . . . tell me about the most challenging and the most rewarding parts of your job.

[00:38:46.17]

Sonya T.: I think the most challenging thing that's— of being in the restaurant business, period— is ensuring that you have the tools and the resources to make all the customers who walk in your door happy. Whether it be havin' the right staff, havin' the right cooks, gettin' in the right food products, that's the most challenging thing: is making sure every customer that comes in that door is satisfied. The most rewarding thing about this job is when a customer looks at you and says, "You know what? This was the best food I've ever had." Or, "This is the best service I've ever had." "Today was my old grandmother's ninety-fifth birthday and you made it special." That's what makes it worthwhile. When that customer looks at you and you know you've made their night special, whether it's a special occasion or they just came in at the spur of the moment, you made it special for you. That made the whole day worth it.

[00:39:54.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, so if there's somebody who is thinking about making this their career, they're gonna work front of house, whether they're gonna be a bartender or a waiter or waitress, what's the best advice that you would give them?

[00:40:15.10]

Sonya T.: Find a place that you love and a place that loves you. You can work anywhere. You can work in any bar or any restaurant, but if you're not connected to it, you're not gonna love it, and it's just gonna be a job. Find a place that you're connected to, that you love, they love you; then, it's a career, then it's a life. But other than that, it's just a job.

[00:40:44.02]

Annemarie A.: That's great. That makes a lot of sense. I have one more, like, kind of bigger question. I was wondering too, I think there's—in the food media world and reporting on just the restaurant industry as a whole, there's a lot of talk over tipping and minimum wage for front of house employees. What do you think about the whole tipping thing? I don't know how you guys do it here at Bright Star.

[00:41:16.24]

Sonya T.: I was told many, many years ago that the word tip, it means to ensure prompt service. They're tipping you because you've given them prompt service. They tip you because you've made their night special. They're not under any obligation to leave you a penny. You're a salesperson. They're paying you for your service. If you don't go out there and give a hundred percent, don't expect a hundred percent. \$2.13 an hour, it doesn't pay our taxes. \$2.13 an hour does not afford us health benefits, retirement, or perks that an office 40-hour job a week would . . . offer. But, on the flip side of that, if you sat down at the end of the week, I will have made twice as much as that person made in 40 hours. You

have to be very knowledgeable and be able to do book work to be a server, because as long as you keep up with what you make, you claim what you're supposed to claim and . . . that's all there is to it. \$7.25 an hour or minimum wage for servers, no. Why would I want to give you service when I know I'm gonna make \$7.25 an hour? But hey, I'm makin' \$2.13 an hour. I've got to bust my butt so that you . . . tip me for what I've given you.

[00:43:16.25]

Annemarie A.: That's a really interesting perspective. Thank you. Has the point of sale system changed the way you guys are, like, tipped out at the end of the night, or do you guys get paid like . . .

[00:43:27.24]

Sonya T.: We get tipped out per shift.

[00:43:31.28]

Annemarie A.: Okay.

[00:43:33.15]

Sonya T.: The P.O.S. system has actually made it easier for us to track our credit cards. We're not havin' to, at the end of our shift anymore, go through each of our credit cards. And because credit cards have so increased through the years, I mean, if we had to do that the way we did it twenty years ago, I would be crazy. And the P.O.S. system really helps us

know what we have to claim, what we need to do. So, yes, in that respect, it has made it a lot easier. But again, at \$2.13 an hour, you're not gonna . . . we've learned a lot through the years about quarterly taxes. Any front of the house person, I'm gonna tell you, quarterly taxes are important. If not, at the end of the year, you're really gonna be a trouble.

[00:44:18.13]

Annemarie A.: I believe it, yep. That's always interesting. There's so many different perspectives that people have on tipping and the minimum wage for front of the house folks, so thanks for sharing your opinion.

[00:44:31.28]

Sonya T.: I really believe that if it went to \$7.25, you wouldn't get servers like you have now. You wouldn't get people who went the extra mile. You wouldn't get people that—you would lose a lot of the hospitality portion of it.

[00:44:49.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I asked you about your definition of hospitality and you gave it to me, but I was wonderin' about service and how it service and hospitality, to you, similar or different?

[00:45:01.15]

Sonya T.: They're similar. Service is the most important thing in a restaurant. That person can walk in the door and feel the hospitality side of it. They can feel warm; they can feel loved. They can feel comfortable; they can feel welcome. But when they sit down at table, the service that you give them, the way that you serve them, that puts their whole perspective—it can make or break their perspective of the restaurant. Can change the way they perceive the food, the whole experience, by how you serve them. Service, like I said, Jimmy always preached about service, that it was the most important part of the restaurant, that us selling the product is what kept people coming back. And the better service—it's just like ownin' a tire store. If you go in there to buy tires and the person behind the counter is grumpy, you're not gonna go back. If you walk into this restaurant and I don't give you good service, you're not gonna come back. If you go into that tire store and you meet somebody with a smile, they go the extra mile, maybe give you a discount you wouldn't normally have gotten, not only are you gonna go back, but you're gonna tell ten people. You walk into the restaurant, you set down, I give you excellent service, maybe a half a cup of gumbo 'cause I found out it was your first visit, you're gonna come back and you're gonna tell ten people. That's service.

[00:46:43.04]

Annemarie A.: For sure. That's great. Well, I don't think I have anymore questions for you, but is there anything that we haven't talked about or there's anything that you haven't said that you want to add?

[00:46:54.16]

Sonya T.: No. I think we've pretty much covered everything. [Laughter]

[00:46:59.01]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, thank you so much for talkin' with me.

[00:47:01.09]

Sonya T.: You're welcome. I appreciate you askin'.

[00:47:03.17]

Annemarie A.: Thanks.

[*End of interview*]