

MICHELLE NUGENT
Producer, New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival – New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Southern Foodways Alliance

Project: New Orleans Eats/Guardians of Tradition

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Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, July 24th and I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana on Constance Street. So if I could get you to state your name and your birth date and how you make your living?

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Michelle Nugent: My name is Michelle Nugent; I was born December 1st 1969, and I am a producer for the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

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SR: Thank you. Let's start with where you were born and where you grew up.

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MN: I was born in Denver and very shortly after that we moved to Southern California. My dad got his PhD at Cal Tech. And then we moved to Boston, where he got his—did his post-doc work, and he got a teaching job at Tulane, so we moved here the year after Betsy. **[Laughs]**

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SR: Which was?

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MN: Nineteen sixty-six, so even though I wasn't born here, I've been here for almost 40 years; so this is my home.

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SR: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

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MN: Uptown. We always lived around the University.

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SR: And what school did you attend?

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MN: I went to—well, I went to Holy Name *[Laughs]* Grammar School, and then I went to Dominican.

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SR: Okay, great. How old were you when you started cooking?

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MN: *[Sighs]* I had a couple of food epiphanies. I was actually a terribly finicky eater when I was young, and my dad did a sabbatical at Stanford when I was 15 and I spent a lot of time with one of his lab-mates, who was this amazing woman from Vietnam, who had this amazing story

and education and she was from a very wealth family in Saigon, and she helped run the blood bank there. And I respected her so much that I ate anything she fed me even though it was cooked completely foreign to me. Our first lunch was a Brie that was so ripe it was running off the table, a beautiful butter lettuce salad, French bread, and a glass of Chablis. *[Laughs]*

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SR: When you were 15?

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MN: Yeah, and I totally didn't get it but I loved her so much that I just sucked it up and—and got through it, and by the end of the summer was going to Vietnamese restaurants with her. And she taught me how to cook mu shu pork and—and then a couple years later I was an au pair for a family with five children and they all swam, and so it was really important that they ate properly. And they had an amazing kitchen and it—I could spend what I wanted on groceries, and I got the kids involved, and so kind of between those two things I sort of had a food revelation. And—but it never dawned on me to do it for a living until I met Susan.

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SR: Oh okay...well I want to go there but where—where was your au pair experience?

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MN: Here in town. It—it was for Dr. Thomas Whitecloud, who is no longer with us—a very important orthopedic surgeon who traveled a lot delivering papers and stuff, and his wife would

go with him. They also spent a lot of time—he was a Native American—they spent a lot of time going off and buying all sorts of amazing Indian relics. So they had this amazing family of children that needed taking care of, and I guess I met them through—I had millions of jobs. **[Laughs]** I would have four jobs at a time when I was young, and I met them through Thomas Mann, the jeweler who I worked for.

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SR: Oh okay. Yeah, swimmers need to eat a lot. What—when you were growing up, since your parents weren't from here, did you eat New Orleans cooking or—?

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MN: No, I really didn't and—and I actually left out the other third major food revelation, which was my—for a very long time—although now it, the situation, is completely different. It took my mother a long time to fall in love with New Orleans, but—so we were strictly meat and potatoes and she worked a lot and my father worked a lot, so I did very rudimentary cooking. You know, Hamburger Helper and tuna casserole and things like that. **[Laughs]** Or, we would make a big pot of something and eat it all week. So I was never presented with much too challenging, and when we went to seafood restaurants or the Chinese restaurant, I just wouldn't eat that; I'd, you know, eat the kids' menu. But when I was 16, I befriended Arthel Neville. She was on the junior fashion board with me at D.H. Holmes, and we would go spend time at her father's house. So Art actually taught me about New Orleans food; that was where I really learned about red beans and gumbo and all that kind of stuff.

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SR: Oh well that's a good introduction.

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MN: And I learned to cook it and eat it there, so—and then, you know, once I figured it out it was like, *oh okay; now I get it.* [**Laughs**] And I always worked downtown. I started working downtown when I was 15, so I discovered Buster Holmes pretty early on, and it was still really cheap and he was around, and just kind of slowly figured it out on my own.

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SR: And can you tell, for the record, who Susan is and how you met her?

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MN: Susan Spicer is my mentor and a relatively well-known chef here in town, and I would dare say across the country, if not even more than that. And I did production work for many years; that's mostly what I did, working for bands or clubs or whatever, and ended up working on a series of television specials, and got invited to go work in New York for \$6.00 an hour and was treated very poorly and realized you know, this is really maybe not what I want to do. And I didn't have much college. So I took a break and I was working in this little bakery Uptown that specialized in cheesecake, and the owners were friends of mine and one of the owners dated Susan. So she saw me one day—I was always—I was supposed to be the counter-girl, but I was always in the kitchen bugging Len to teach me what he was doing, and she looked at me one day and she said *you have way too much energy. Are you at all interested in cooking?* And I said *I*

have no idea. And she had just started at the Bistro at the Maison de Ville, which is a little 38-seat restaurant in the French Quarter, and *I* think the most beautiful dining room in town. And so she brought me in and paid me a pittance and gave me the classical French cooking education that I could not have paid for. And this was right at the time when cooking school was the thing to do, but I did a old-fashioned apprenticeship, and it was an invaluable thing and it just worked. We worked well together, and I liked it and I was good at it, and it didn't bother me getting sweaty and dirty and re-icing the fish at, you know, one in the morning, and the igloo in the alley [Laughs]. And the kitchen there is about this size, which is pretty small, like a galley on a big ship, and only three—three people—four people fit in the kitchen. There would be three people on the line and the dishwasher, and I started of course doing pantry like everybody does, and ended up on the grill, and she already had a sous chef, so I worked there for about two years, and then I took off for California just to try something else.

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SR: What was the name of the bakery—the cheesecake bakery?

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MN: Billabong—the owner was Australian, and he had also gone through there when—I don't know what it's like now—but back then, when he did his apprenticeship, it's like a seven or nine-year apprenticeship—

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SR: In Australia?

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MN: Uh-hm, where you just stand in the corner and you know peel onions or whatever it is you do for you know weeks and months on end and they very slowly bring you along. And his father was a baker.

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SR: Hmm. Haven't heard of that—yeah, it's sort of a French style of learning to cook?

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MN: Uh-hm.

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SR: So you worked at Bayona for a couple years, and then where did you go in California?

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MN: Well no, I was at the Bistro first.

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SR: At the Bistro, right. That's where the kitchen—?

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MN: Right.

00:08:56

SR: Yeah, sorry.

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MN: It was actually a good experience because you spent a lot of your time putting stuff in smaller containers, so I have a really good eyeball now. **[Laughs]** I know what will fit where and I know how to make things really neat. So I went into that—into Santa Rosa, California, which is in Northern California. My father was out there and, you know, I lived off and on in California my whole life, so I have this fantasy that I will end up there and then I always end up coming home. **[Laughs]** And ended up working in a little restaurant called Matisse; it was again—that one was maybe 45 or 48 seats and the chef was a real renaissance man. We knew all the farmers, we knew all the fishermen, we went foraging for mushrooms; he knitted, he made cider, he did all this stuff and it was pretty—it was a whole different kind of thing because the farmers market movement hadn't occurred yet in New Orleans, so I was used to dealing with commodity produce and things like that. I mean the—the fish of course was always nice here, but there to, you know, get the lettuce still with the dirt on it and know the person that grew it was really an eye-opener, and I was terribly finicky when I came home for a while. **[Laughs]** So I did that for almost two years, and Susan called me and said *I'm getting ready to open a new restaurant and I'd like you to come home and be my sous chef.* So how could I say no? **[Laughs]** And I was getting a little homesick at that time; so—.

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SR: And so that's—when she opened Bayona?

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MN: Right, which I believe was 1990.

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SR: Okay.

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MN: Yeah, they're having their 16th anniversary, and so I was her first sous chef, and I was there for I don't remember—a couple three years, and then took off again. **[Laughs]**

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SR: Took off—left the city or—?

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MN: Uh-hm, took a break and ended up messing around with a friend of mine who had—who was the chef at a gourmet deli in Nashville called the Corner Market, and ended up there for a while and then moved to Suwannee, Tennessee, where I got involved in this bed and breakfast project, which ended up not working out too well. And then I came home and worked at Bacco and Gabrielle and a few restaurants, and then we opened Spice; so—.

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SR: Spice, Inc.?

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MN: Right, right, which was a fancy grocery store, bakery, cooking school, takeout joint—and I was the executive chef and taught a good many of the classes.

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SR: What—and so then at what point did you get involved with Jazz Fest?

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MN: I—well I've always gone to the festival, you know, since I was able to, I think—you know, the first time was on a school field trip and then when I was able to sneak off or talk my parents into taking me or whatever. I've always gone, and like I said I was involved with New Orleans musicians, so I got that part of the city really quick. **[Laughs]** And then in 1986 I had met Nancy Ochsenschlager, who was the fair director for many, many years, and I worked with Nancy and her assistant, who was the food director—Sally Cobb—for one year—just a short seasonal job, and I actually ended up being the volunteer coordinator. But the festival was much smaller then, you know. Our trailers were all still on the infield and it was much—there were a lot fewer people doing a lot more stuff back then. And—and then in 19—let's see—1999 I got a call from Sally Cobb, who was the food director at the time at the festival, and she was retiring, and she said *we're not really sure what we're going to do, but you should apply for my job 'cause it would be perfect for you.* And I felt like it would be perfect for me too because it—my cooking background would be very helpful, and my production experience of course would be

helpful, and my love for the festival is pretty unswerving, and so **[Laughs]** I applied for the job and they were in the process of restructuring some things. So they didn't think they had any room; they weren't quite sure what they were going to do. So I took off for the summer and went and ran a bed and breakfast in New Hampshire and came home completely not knowing what I was going to do. And the phone rang two days later, and I pretty much knew the minute I walked in the interview it was my job.

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SR: And what year was that?

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MN: That was 1999.

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SR: Ninety-nine?

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MN: Uh-hm.

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SR: Oh okay, but you started the—the—it was '86 when you were the volunteer—?

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MN: Yeah, right—right. I actually worked eight years as the volunteer coordinator.

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SR: Oh, as the volunteer coordinator.

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MN: But I worked directly with Nancy and Sally, so—.

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SR: So between '86 and '99, were you working for the festival at all or just attending?

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MN: No, just attending—to the point of when I would leave town I would walk into the job interview saying *there is one thing that's not up for discussion, and I take my vacation the last weekend in April and the first weekend in May and I go home to New Orleans.* [**Laughs**] And I got that out—out of the way right away every time. And people, you know, when you're honest like that people have to honor it, so—.

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SR: Right.

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MN: So yeah, I just attended the festival for all those years in between. And then when I was here in town cooking, I would just beg and borrow, you know, a day or two here and there to go.

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SR: Yeah, it's a busy time for restaurants.

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MN: Right, well it's pretty much consistently a record-breaker for a lot of restaurants in town, so there isn't a lot of time to go to the show if you're cooking.

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SR: Right. Can you tell me a little bit about what the food program was like—I guess even as far back as you can remember—at the Jazz Fest? What it was like to—?

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MN: Well some of what I know is what I know from studying or talking to people and some is through observance, and the very first show which was held in Congo Square, I believe the first vendors were Buster Holmes doing red beans and someone was selling the Brocato's cookies; the Brocato's themselves weren't there. And Vaucresson's sausage was there; Mr. Sonny was there. And they kind of continued that way for a little way; they gradually added more and more stuff, and by the time it got to the Fair Grounds there were maybe 20 or so vendors in circus—red and white circus striped tents, kind of all back-to-back. And it was the same kind of thing; they always used the Louisiana vendors and tried to stick to our indigenous foods. So there was

churches doing—not Church’s chicken but local churches—the Second True Love Baptist Church doing fried chicken, and they just kind of grew and grew and by the time—when I was there in ’86, it was still very much like that. And then by the time—

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SR: Under the circus tents?

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MN: Uh-hm and I think always a little more high-tech than other festivals but still pretty—I don’t want to say rudimentary, but now the operation is very high-tech. And we had normally 66 vendors with almost 77 booths, and it’s mandated in our charter that the Department of Health be onsite during hours of operation, which is very unusual for a festival. So now we have—

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SR: You mandate that—not them?

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MN: The festival, yeah correct. And the operation hasn’t—I haven’t changed the operation a whole, whole lot from what I inherited, because it works and so we now have food—I’m not counting this last year much because it was a one-off: we just did what we could to have the show because of how the storm affected people. But normally we have food in five areas, and we have seven or eight refrigerator trucks that we bring onsite for the vendors to store all their food. We have field kitchens with hot running water; every booth has at least 6,000 watts electricity, a

lot of them have running water in their booths, and it—it's not a festival—a food operation—like I've seen anywhere else. **[Laughs]** And on show days I have a staff of almost 25 people.

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SR: Who figured that all out? **[Laughs]**

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MN: **[Laughs]** I—it all sort of came in pieces and parts, and I think at one point there was the— the festival was growing. They had many good years, and so there was an urgency to kind of keep up with that, so as they started adding booths they started to have to figure out that people can't bring stuff cooked in their, you know, in their cars anymore. It's more convenient to cook it onsite, and if you're going to cook it onsite, well—what do you need to do that? And you know, the Board of Health requires hand sinks if you're frying, and we want people to be able to wash their dishes, which is why we have hot running water. So Sally Cobb, who is the food director, Nancy, who of course has been there for years, and then we have our site director, Tag Richardson, who has been with the festival almost since day one, was certainly instrumental in figuring out a lot of that stuff. He—he oversees the building and the festival, and the look and the design elements. and the steel structures with the tarps that we have were his devising. Every year we make a little more improvements as we go.

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SR: I mean it's fascinating to me: I didn't realize there was hot running water in the booths. At—at what point—how far ahead of the festival do you have to start building it?

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MN: Because of various and sundry, we now build the festival in 15 to 18 days. It used to take a month, but I'll just say it's gotten compressed for various reasons. **[Laughs]** And we also are affected by racing as well; if—if there's a meet that year, then we have to wait until they finish.

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SR: Because it's on a—the grounds where there's horse-racing, just say for the record?

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MN: Correct, yes. It's at the Fair Grounds racecourse, and this year of course there—there was no racing, so it was a little easier, but what we do is we get special permission to go in during racing and build some infrastructure on the infield, but they have to do that very carefully you know. And when the horses are running they have to stop what they're doing and, you know, sit down on the ground and be very quiet. And then it takes about another week to 10 days for them to move the horses after racing, so it's a juggling act. But we're very fortunate in the fact that most of the people that work the show come back every year no matter what. They arrange their lives so that they can come back, and what people do has become fairly specialized now. So there's one guy that builds all the steel structures for the food booths and the craft booths, and then there's a guy that manages all the steel for all the stages, and then you know there's a head carpenter, and there's a guy that does just the stairs and—and those people return every year, so the learning curve is small. So they know what—we have it down to a science; they know what to do. **[Laughs]** It's really amazing.

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SR: It is amazing. I mean it's even—even I feel like I've been sort of tuned into how intricate it is, but there's things you just don't notice—or you don't—you have no clue what went into making it happen. Well, can you—can you talk about what the sort of vision is for the food selection, or the objective and how you decide what food is going to be there and what kind of foods wouldn't be there?

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MN: The overall philosophy—because like I said I inherited some of this stuff and I'm working towards some personal goals—but the overall philosophy is that the vendors be from Louisiana, which I strongly agree with. And we want to represent as broadly as we can all the different kinds of cuisines that we have here, so we have Creole, we have Cajun, and that. And we also have the ethnic vendors: you know, the Vietnamese community is represented and the different Latin American communities are represented, and—and—and we also don't rule out what can be considered *nouveau cuisine*, so we have a crawfish enchilada, which is actually on someone's menu in their restaurant and it sells like crazy. So you know they—sometimes we'll get into a long philosophical discussion: *well what does a crawfish enchilada have to do with anything?* But you can't negate the fact that there's always going to be new food, so it's a balance of both. And then we have very traditional things: red beans and rice; we have both kinds of jambalaya represented—we have the red tomatoey one, and then we have the dry kind of brown one. And I'm working getting back up to three gumbos; this year we just had two.

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SR: Which one wasn't there?

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MN: The seafood gumbo from Ferdinand Johnson wasn't there. We—I guess it's unavoidable to—I guess we have to talk about the storm a little bit.

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SR: Yeah.

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MN: I had 10 vendors that just weren't able to get it together, which out of 66 is actually stunning. It took me about a month to find everybody, and they all came [*Laughs*] for the most part, and I spoke with the producers early on and asked that we not replace the vendors that weren't returning this year and to hold their spot for next year. So I'm hoping that everyone will return, so some of the things we did this year were—were one-offs. Wayne Baquet, who couldn't return this year because he was getting his restaurant open—

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SR: And he does the fried chicken?

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MN: Right. Someone else did the fried chicken this year and did a very good job. It was someone that we were familiar with doing fried chicken in other shows. The Jazz Fest is not the only show we do. So it's going to be interesting to see if we can give people their food items back and rearrange things. So the seafood gumbo that we normally have wasn't there. The pheasant-quail-andouille gumbo, which has been there for years, which is one of my personal favorites, was there. And then fireman Mike Gowland, who normally does alligator sauce piquant and shrimp etouffée for us, added a shrimp and okra gumbo that was really, really delicious. So I think we're going to keep that; it was really good. It was interesting to—to watch the process too because he cooks in his booth; some people bring things already cooked, but Mike cooked every day.

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SR: Wait, he would make his gumbo in the booth?

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MN: Yeah, he had great big iron pots and he gets busy every day. It's an amazing process, and the first day it was good but by the end of the show it was exquisite. Like I was feeding it to the older Creole people I know and they were like, *Okay, this works. Where's my mama?* So—

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SR: Is that because he kept doing things to it, or because it just sort of set?

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MN: No, but well a little bit of both. I think by the seventh day he just you know—he just kind of—and I think he talked to people and—and worked with the recipe. It was just interesting to—to watch it change. And we strive for consistency, but in that particular case I noticed that it was improving every day so that was acceptable and we—we—it's not an easy thing to do to be a food vendor at Jazz Fest. They basically don't sleep much for three weeks, and it costs a lot of money. We have a fee that we charge and it's a one-time fee. They pay their fee and that's it. And whatever they make they make—we don't get involved in, you know, what they make every day.

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SR: An annual fee?

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MN: Right. And then but they have to buy groceries; they have to buy equipment and they have to pay a staff. And on a very busy day, depending on the booth, there could be 20 people working in the booth. So it's—it's a risk and to—to go back to what we were talking about the fact that 55 people made the commitment to take that risk in this fragile time was really quite something.

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SR: Yeah. How did—I mean do you think that it had—well, I suppose for all of us it was a very spiritual thing to be at Jazz Fest this year, and maybe that played a part in why they wanted to be involved.

MN: Absolutely. The people that worked for the festival considered themselves family. The people that participate in the festival, both festival-goers and vendors, also feel like part of the family, and the vendors who were not able to participate this year—it was very, very difficult for them to not do it, and I actually had to tell at least two of them *Don't do the show*, because it—they just couldn't. I mean it was so obvious to me, and they wanted to so bad and—and one of the ladies was making herself ill, and I said *You know, I never thought that I would hear myself say this to someone but don't do it; don't do the show*. And her sister is also a food vendor, so she was able to come out and spend some time, you know. You know, she said *You know thank you; it was actually the right decision and we were able to get our business back together*. And, you know, a lot of my vendors lost everything—homes and businesses and family members and cars and just, you know, like everybody did, and so she actually thanked me for **[Laughs]** making her not do the show. But no, the vendors were determined just like we were determined. I know there was always a question in people's minds if it was an irreverent thing to throw a party, but our funerals are parties; it's part of what we do. And I know that it helped the economy; it always does. The festival is very good for the economy, and I think spiritually it was really good for people, and it was a huge growing experience for us because it—it was not easy to put the show together this year. **[Laughs]** You know, we have upwards of 45 office trailers that we use, and halfway through—you know—and it's normally a very regimented thing—how many trailers we get every day. And for a while there were no—there was one or two or three trailers—not 20 like there normally were—and then all of the sudden **[Boom]** they all showed up and everybody had to scurry around. But like I said, everybody is very talented and nobody says

I'm not doing that or that's not my job. Everybody works really closely together to make it happen.

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SR: Let me ask you, in the normal non-Katrina year, if you lose a vendor—well let me first ask about—well if you lose a vendor, what is your process in—is there a priority on replacing that particular food? Let's say Wayne Baquet decided he wasn't going to do fried chicken because he—forever, you know he's retiring. First, is there a priority in—you know, do you need to get that food back; and then, how would—how do you go about finding somebody?

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MN: We—we do identify—try to identify—if the food that we're losing is crucial to the show, and if it's something that's not so important then maybe we wouldn't because to—to be honest with you, 66 vendors is a lot and it makes for a lot of competition. So I actually would like it to be a little smaller, which is one of my long-term goals with—without firing anybody, if you will, but through attrition I would like it to be a little smaller. The vendors did very well this year having less competition—not to mention that, you know, the folks came—there were a lot of people there this year. So once we identify whether it's a food we really want, we have an application process and people turn in their application and we go through the applications, and then we have a sampling process. But I will tell you that we look very closely to see whether people have experience because there's a lot of people that can make great bread pudding, but they may be making it out of their backdoor, or in a little bitty kitchen with one or two pairs of hands, and would not be able to do the show; you know, would not have the wherewithal, the

staff, the equipment, the operating capital to do the show. So we—so it's a balance of looking for delicious food but also someone that's got the wherewithal to come up there and make a presence and not get clobbered.

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SR: And has that happened that you've figured out that—after the fact, that someone is not capable?

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MN: Uh-hm.

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SR: Yeah, I imagine that—that is challenging. Are—are there any foods that aren't represented currently—I mean, aside from your vendors who couldn't come back this year, but that aren't represented that you've—?

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MN: Well there are some things, and it's difficult to say whether we'll ever have them at the show because they're—they are what I would call lost leaders. I would love to have turtle soup, but it probably wouldn't sell very well. I'd love to have hogshead cheese or daube glace, you know, the—the lost foods that—that you don't find too much anymore. I really missed having the crawfish bisque this year at the festival, which is a very complicated dish, you know, and I live in fear that, you know, Wayne is going to come back next year and say *I can't do it anymore*.

[Laughs] So there are some foods at the show that we don't have because I'm not sure that it would be worth someone's while to prepare them, so—but then on the other hand I have a vendor that does frog legs, but then they have two other food items that sell better and—and they kind of have the same philosophy that we do. So while they don't make a lot of money on the frog legs, the—the people that get it, get it, you know, and I love having them there. So if I can find a way to work some of those dishes back in, I will.

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SR: That's interesting. Well one—one thing that I learned when I was talking to Nancy Ochenschlager that I hadn't known that surprised me, was that in the beginning—I don't know if it was at the first Jazz Fest, but early on there was a ya-ka-mein vendor, and that wasn't the case when I first moved here.

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MN: No.

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SR: But you got it—a vendor to start doing that again, I guess two years ago?

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MN: Uh-hm, we created a new stage two years ago called the Jazz & Heritage Stage, and it happens to be very close to one of the major food areas: Food One, which is the one that's parallel to the grandstand, and that was one of the things that I thought was missing at the show,

was street food. A lot of us that produce the show are very involved in the street culture and the second lines and the Mardi Gras Indian culture, and that's what the focus of this stage was—Mardi Gras Indians, brass bands, and SAPCs, and that became the new parade base because there's two second lines every day during the show. So I thought it would be—

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SR: SAPC?

00:36:11

MN: Social Aid and Pleasure Club [*Laughs*], which are groups of men and women—men, women, young children—that participated in the second line parades, and they all have a theme and amazing outfits that they wear, and Miss Linda Green, who is the ya-ka-mein lady—any second line you go to, you will see her selling her dish out of the back of her van. And I had met her through that, and also because one of the things that the food department does at Jazz Fest is, we have two stages of cooking demonstrations, so Miss Linda had come and done a ya-ka-mein demonstration for us. So we added—that year she did ya-ka-mein and she did huckabucks, which are—it's basically frozen Kool-Aid or frozen punch that if you know, you can go knock on the lady's door in the neighborhood and she'll sell you a huckabuck out of her backdoor for a quarter. And Linda was actually doing that, so we did that at Jazz Fest. And then we added smothered pork chops and cabbage, and cornbread, and a pork chop sandwich, which isn't really so much part of New Orleans' street culture as it is if you go to a Zydeco festival anywhere in Southwest Louisiana, one of the things you'll always find is a fried pork chop on white bread,

and it's one of my favorites. And I normally never eat that kind of thing, and I talked the pork chop vendors into doing it, and it's taken off like a rocket and people love it.

00:37:58

SR: Really?

00:37:59

MN: Yeah, so we made this little kind of soul food corner right there by the new stage; so—

00:38:04

SR: And can you explain a little bit what ya-ka-mein is, for the record?

00:38:07

MN: This is what I know. *[Laughs]* When the soldiers came back from Korea, they brought the tradition of eating noodles to their communities here in New Orleans and it got kind of incorporated into this soul food, Chinese, Korean thing. And—and in—in the sweet shops is mostly where you can find it. And it's in the African American community, is where you find it now, and it's also called Old Sober because it's a dish that people eat when they're either done partying or hung over, like they eat menudo in Mexico. And now it's a very strong beef broth with spaghetti noodles and diced pieces of beef and scallions and hard-boiled egg.

00:39:05

SR: And how did—how has that gone over at Jazz Fest?

00:39:08

MN: Um it—again, it’s one of those things; it’s—the people that get it, get it. [*Laughs*] And the people that don’t either try it and fall in love with it, or say *Oh, that was interesting*, but—. So what we did this year because the—the same gentleman that—that dropped out with the gumbo also had delicious bread pudding, so—and Linda does another show for us where she did this amazing banana foster bread pudding, so we let her do that this year and that was her money-maker, you know, which allows her to—to keep selling the ya-ka-mein. And then of course we make special arrangements for people that we really want to have there that are going to have food that might not sell as well, but we want to be represented there; so—.

00:40:08

SR: Financial arrangements, you mean?

00:40:09

MN: Yeah.

00:40:10

SR: Okay.

00:40:11

MN: [*Laughs*]

00:40:12

SR: Are there other personal goals? You had mentioned that you have personal goals, and one of them was you know maybe getting the vendor number down a little bit. Anything else that you'd want to share on that?

00:40:26

MN: No, I don't think at this time, because we're going to have to kind of re—reinvent the wheel again, you know in—I start back on September 1st and my first move will be to invite everybody back and see—see what falls in my lap because, you know, this could mean people that had new food this year that want to keep their food, and people that want to come back that want their old food back, and so it's going to be interesting to—to see what really shakes out. This is not an original idea—it's been spoken of before—but another long-term goal is, I'd love to do some sort of restaurant at the show.

00:41:18

SR: Oh like a sit-down?

00:41:18

MN: Uh-hm, yeah. I'm not really sure how it would work out, and I have in mind who I'd like to do it, but [*Laughs*] I'm not going to say it. But it's someone that doesn't have a restaurant right now.

00:41:32

SR: Exciting.

00:41:34

MN: And then on a more practical level, because of the difficulties we've had the last several years with the show, whether it's weather or—there are some structure—some improvements to the physical plant that I'd really like to make. Just simple things like new tarps for the booths and different shelving system for the refrigerator trucks and things like that; so—

00:42:07

SR: Okay. Can you—can you take me through, from the beginning, your typical day—what time—your typical festival day—what time do you start?

00:42:19

MN: Normally they're no later than 6:00 on a show day; we have some vendors that get there between 5:30 and 6:00 to start cooking. There's not a whole lot of activity, but I just feel like it's important to be there. And we officially open the field at 7:00; so the first little bit is—I have a group that works with me called food monitors, and their sole purpose is to be back behind the food booths all day every day to assist the vendors with whatever they need: to check the temperatures of the food, to assist the Health Department, to troubleshoot, because it—it's physically impossible for me to be—you know, everywhere, so I have this big support staff—again, people that have been there for years and years and years. So once we get, you know—get them in the field and get them settled, at that point in the show I'm mostly there to troubleshoot, do interviews, make sure the stage is run well. Another thing that we do is we provide drinks for

3,000 working staff, so I have five people that do nothing but distribute ice chests in the morning. But if I've done all my advance work properly, show days should be not so hard, although it hasn't been that way recently. **[Laughs]** And then so the vendors start coming in and setting up and cooking, and I'll just kind of to try and stay out of the way pretty much. And then at 10 o'clock I start talking to people over the radio and finding out how things are going, and we try for a soft opening at 10:30, so normally vendors are ready to go about 10:15. nd I call dispatch and tell them that we're ready to go, and the gates open anywhere between 10:30 and 11:00 and—.

00:44:30

SR: And the music doesn't start until—

00:44:32

MN: Eleven.

00:44:32

SR: —eleven, okay.

00:44:34

MN: Eleven—the music is from eleven to seven, so those are our hours, and then depending on what's going on and which stage—if we can go a little longer we will but we're always sensitive to the fact that the security and—and the police are also trying to escort people off the field, because we have a huge cleanup operation. **[Laughs]**

00:44:59

SR: And what time does that usually wrap up?

00:45:01

MN: They've gotten it down to a science. They're usually out of there by, you know, one—two o'clock in the morning and they start at one end of the field and just go and go and go. And we have work lights that we turn on for them, and you know when you show up—well sometimes I'm still out there that late for whatever reason, and I'll look at the field and it will be like there was no show. It will be perfectly spotless, and you know there's a lot of port-a-pots to clean and a lot of trash to pick up, and so that's one of the main reasons that we—we're pushy about getting out of there: so we can get it together to do it again the next day.

00:45:40

SR: So you're sometimes there until the middle of the night?

00:45:45

MN: Uh-hm, yeah, for whatever reason—by the time the vendors clean up and—and get out of there it's usually about 9 o'clock, and then we'll go back to the compound and sit down and have a beer and talk about what happened during the day. And the monitors put together a punch list of things that need to be taken care of for the next day that we turn into the plumber, the electrician, or the carpentry crew, you know, whatever—you know, maybe a piece of plywood on a ramp needs to be fixed, or maybe someone was having an electrical problem and needed

review, you know, if they got too much equipment plugged in or whatever it is. And, you know, by the time all that's done and you've run wild it's midnight or one o'clock, and then you go home and sleep fast and do it all over again. **[Laughs]**

00:46:41

SR: And so in—in the profile that Brett Anderson wrote about you in the *Times Picayune*, he mentioned your tool belt.

00:46:49

MN: Uh-hm.

00:46:49

SR: What—what's on your tool belt?

00:46:52

MN: **[Laughs]** Two cell phones, a Walkie-Talkie, a Leatherman, another little serrated knife, and my keys.

00:47:06

SR: And what—why do you have two cell phones?

00:47:09

MN: One is my personal cell phone and one is the show phone, and I guess I could, you know, transfer my messages from one to the other but it's just as easy to carry two. **[Laughs]**

00:47:19

SR: Especially if you have a tool belt.

00:47:22

MN: Right. **[Laughs]**

00:47:24

SR: How—it's interesting to me to think about how everything—well I think for the festival-goer, you know, the music and the food and the craft area—they're all separate. But talking to you, it sounds like everything is very much like it's a symbiotic relationship between everything.

00:47:45

MN: Absolutely—absolutely. Well that—the people that do crafts and the people that do the construction, the food people—we're all in what's called the Fair Department. We're—until Nancy retired, she was our boss, and so we all—we do—all work very closely together, and now music is separate as far as the people that book the music and do all of that, but—but then they've—they work with us on some level because we have to, you know, build what they need; so—. But we don't—there isn't a lot of separation in our mind; it's just the show. **[Laughs]**

00:48:41

SR: Right, it's one big show?

00:48:44

MN: Yeah.

00:48:44

SR: Hmm. You know, I just—it just crossed my mind—something that I had this year was the calas. Is that a new item?

00:48:54

MN: Yes, that was new this year. Again, one of those things that—that I thought would—would maybe not sell so well, but I was really pleased to have it be part of the show because it's another one of our lost foodways. A calas is a rice fritter, and traditionally it was served—it's rice and eggs and milk, and there was a little bit of sugar in the batter, and then it was served dusted with powdered sugar. But as we were talking earlier the—a nouveau twist on it is to serve the savory calas, and this particular one, the recipe was developed by Frank Brigtsen, who is one of my personal chef heroes here in town. I had the privilege of working off and on with Frank and doing—we did hunger relief together for many years. And this particular version was made with andouille sausage and had a green onion mayonnaise, so that was killer. *[Laughs]* And then they did oyster artichoke soup, which of course was delicious; so—.

00:50:07

SR: Who did that?

00:50:08

MN: It's kind of a long story. That particular booth is a fundraiser for the Fair Grounds racecourse museum, and the Krantzes, which used to own the racetrack, which don't anymore, kept that booth and it's a fundraiser for—for the museum, which is a fascinating little museum in the grandstand. And they are—well now they have opened a new restaurant called the Calas Bistro, and they were collaborating with Frank, and the chef at the Fair Grounds used to run their booth for them, but the infrastructure at the Fair Grounds was very fragile, so it—Vicki decided to take over the booth herself; so—.

00:50:52

SR: Oh okay. So I'm—I guess in—in that instance, and also maybe a little bit with the ya-ka-mein, it seems like if you get something in there that's not that well-known, it can actually maybe help revive it or propagate it if—if someone is willing to take the financial plunge.

00:51:18

MN: Sure.

00:51:19

SR: I mean I've—I've thought more and more, you know, the longer that I've lived here, that what happens in the food area at Jazz Fest isn't just a reflection of what happens in Louisiana the rest of the year, but can also—that is like a real part of it; it's not just a reflection...like it can actually help it grow.

00:51:48

MN: Oh yeah, I believe that. We also perpetuate that notion on our stages: not only do we have people doing cooking demonstrations, but we'll have panel discussions, we'll have talks about it. My father was an educator, and it turned out that the thing I liked best at Spice Inc., at the grocery store, was teaching. And I think it's very sad that the last couple generations really don't—they don't cook at home; they don't eat at home; they don't hang out with their grandmothers, and there's very little of that left I think. And it's important not to lose that. So whatever opportunity we can to educate we—we take it; plus, you know, we—we want to embrace our culture because it's so special.

00:52:45

SR: Yeah. Maybe you can tell a little bit for the record what—what the demonstration area is and—and what happens there during the festival.

00:52:54

MN: In the grandstand, and then out on the—the apron in front of the grandstand, we have two small stages that are sponsored by a local spice company called Zatarain's. And inside we focus more on restaurant chefs, and like I said we do panel discussions as well, and it's a 50-minute cooking demonstration, and once again we try to focus on Louisiana food. It's not always that way, depending on the chef. And then outside we have what's called the Cajun Cabin, which is more rustic and it's more pot cooking, and so we'll have goat stew or [*Laughs*] something a little

more, you know—from Southern Louisiana—and how it got there. And it's fun; it's one of my favorite things, and we have a great time programming it.

00:53:53

SR: And it's a cool place for people to go to?

00:53:57

MN: Yeah.

00:53:57

SR: Cool—temperature wise?

00:53:59

MN: Yes, the grandstand is air-conditioned and there is some shade at the Cajun Cabin, but yeah, it's a break from the hustle and the bustle of the festival. There's a couple stages that—that at the show that are like that: the Music Heritage Stage is like that too, which is one of my favorites, which is kind of an oral history stage, which also can have performance on it. So while I understand that the festival is not the little small festival that we grew up with, it's still possible to go and have a quiet, spiritual experience there. And you don't ever have to go to the big stage if you don't want to, you know. You can eat something delicious and go to the folklife area and talk to some lovely lady from, you know, Southwest Louisiana who makes baskets for a living, and you know you can—you can connect with that part of our culture and not have to get in the throng if you don't want to.

00:54:58

SR: It's true. So I—I imagine that the rest of your year, which isn't you know—aside from the two weekends of Jazz Fest, is spent just figuring out how to make all of this happen? Like you said you were going to contact the vendors on September—starting September 1st—but that's when you start planning, huh?

00:55:21

MN: Uh-hm, so that—that will take some time. You know, the letters will go out and then people—you'll have to give them a couple weeks to ponder about what they do and, you know, it's tough to ask people to make a commitment in September, but I have to know so that I can plan. And then—although this year we did it in eight days—we have a contract—contracting process where we actually sit down with everybody for—for an hour to three, depending on who they are, and go through all the—the minutia of what—what they're going to serve, what the portion size is, how much it's going to cost, what are they going to serve it in; you know, there's—you know, how much electricity do they need, what propane use do they—you know, just—how much room do they need in a refrigerator truck? There's all these details that have to be worked out, so I try to get the contract schedule done by December, and—and the reason we have this kind of protracted thing is because if I find out that people aren't returning, then I need some time to look for new vendors and that—that's the thing that takes the most time. And then January and February, we sit down. And—and normally it's three to four weeks; this contract process this year we did in eight days—that was pretty interesting. **[Laughs]**

00:56:44

SR: How did you—?

00:56:44

MN: We just did it. **[Laughs]** We just did it. We—we did—we did not reinvent the wheel this year. Like I said, there were people that picked up other food items, but it was very—the decisions were very conscious. I knew exactly who should do the fried chicken, you know, since—since Wayne couldn't do it; or I knew who should do a bread pudding, you know. It was very—there was no sampling involved. It was a very—because I know my vendors well now after seven years, so and you know, nobody complained, nobody carped; everybody was all good with whatever decisions were made, and for the most part I think we hit it pretty close. And so they understood, you know, your contract has got to be 45 minutes, and you got people in front of you and people in back of you, and we went from eight to eight and—and we just did it.

[Laughs]

00:57:49

SR: And was that a—was that in January and February of this—?

00:57:54

MN: No, it was—no; I think it was March. It was—it took us a long time to actually make the final—I mean we—we always knew in our hearts we were going to have a show, but the actual *Okay let's go* came very, very, very late this year.

00:58:10

SR: I was going to ask you that. Well, at what point did you know that there was going to be a show?

00:58:14

MN: I don't want to misspeak; I would say it probably wasn't until January.

00:58:24

SR: But you were already sort of trying to make this happen?

00:58:28

MN: Yeah. I mean, the music department made—did the same thing, you know. We just put as many of our ducks in a row as we could and just put everybody on hold, and—and they had to do the same thing. They booked the music in a miraculously short amount of time because once we decided we were having a show, then we had to get—you know, we had to get a PR campaign together and put a program book together and do—do all this stuff; so—.

00:58:53

SR: How did you get ahold of your vendors? I mean, I know that it was challenging for all of us to find friends, and some still haven't you know. If you didn't have their number on your cell phone, you might not—.

00:59:11

MN: Well I actually wasn't able to do anything much until I got home, because for the first time ever I left without the vendor contact information. I've never done that before, but we weren't going—we weren't going to evacuate; it happened at the last minute, so it just didn't happen. But I don't have most vendors' cell phones programmed in my phone, but there are a couple that I work very closely with all year long on different projects, so I started with them, and I was scheduled to come home the week of Rita. Pierre Hilzim, who is the crawfish Monica vendor, has a plant out in Jefferson Parish that pretty much didn't close completely ever during—during the storm, and it became a food relief station and the Army was there, and then it kind of became a part of the national food relief effort. And so I came home—well, I ended up being delayed a week later, but it—it really bothered me to not be here to help, especially since I have a skill that was something, you know—people were food-challenged here. And so as soon as I could get in I went and Pete had already gotten some trailers, so I lived in a FEMA trailer at the plant.

[Laughs] And once I got home and was able to get my hands on the paperwork—because I'm one of the few people that didn't flood—I just started calling people and the vendors are all friends, so people would say *Oh*—you know, every time I was able to get somebody and the— the calls took hours because everybody had to tell their story, and I wanted to know their story, and then I would say well, you know, *Have you talked to so and so*, or, *Have you heard word of anybody*, and—and so through emails and phone calls and—we were finally able to find everybody. I don't think there's—no; I talked to everybody.

01:01:40

SR: Wow.

01:01:39

MN: It took a long time; it took over a month.

01:01:43

SR: Yeah—.

01:01:46

MN: And once it got—once things settled down like in November and December, the last few folks I hadn't talked to called the office just for fun to see if it worked, and it did work. We started back November 1st; so—.

01:02:01

SR: What are your other—you've mentioned a few times the other festivals and other projects that you're involved with—some with, you know, Jazz Fest vendors. What are those?

01:02:11

MN: Well the other main show—I work really for Festival Productions, Incorporated, which the main office is in New York, and then of course the other large—the second largest office is here in New Orleans. And so FPI produces Jazz Fest and the Essence Music Festival, so that's the other big show that we do, and then we don't have any other consistent shows right now that—that FPI in New Orleans does. But from year to year there'll be different little projects that we work on. And we're getting—the office has been split into two buildings, and we're getting

ready to move into one big office, and so we expect the synergy to—to get greater and the momentum to be greater, so I know that we're actively looking for more projects to work on.

01:03:09

SR: Do you get to cook much?

01:03:11

MN: [*Laughs*] No, not so much anymore. I still do stuff with Slow Food, so I'll end up helping Poppy Tooker, the local doyenne of the Slow Food Movement—help her do stuff, and every now and then I'll do a private cooking class or a dinner party for somebody. I don't do any large catering anymore, mostly cook for love. [*Laughs*]

01:03:45

SR: Which is fine. What—did your life change a lot when Nancy retired?

01:03:51

MN: Yes and no. We knew for a full year before Nancy left that she was leaving, so we made plans as a festival as to how we were going to—to restructure ourselves. And what they ended up doing was taking the five fair directors—food, business, administration, the site director, finance—they empowered us to work together—and the Fair Operations Director as well—to work together as one and—and see if we didn't actually have to have a boss—if we could do it together. And so we—the five of us met on a very regular basis, and then we met with the associate producers on a very regular basis, and it actually was very empowering. And then we

all kind of have this little thing in our brain to ask ourselves *What would Nancy do?* because she was there for so long, **[Laughs]** and she fought very hard all the time for aesthetic things—things that she thought were very important—that we not lose our culture. And we gave a little bit of that up this year, but—but like I said, a lot of what we did was a one-off. It was just let’s get—let’s—we’re going to have a show; you know, it may not be the perfect show. So I think there’s going to be some discussion about how to bring some of the things we didn’t do this year back, you know. We didn’t have kids’ food; we didn’t—the folk area was much smaller, and things like that, and I think we want to, you know, try to expand on that again.

01:05:59

SR: I can say as a participant that it wasn’t noticeable that you—you keep saying things were a one-off but for the record, it was amazing.

01:06:10

MN: **[Laughs]** It was—it was—

01:06:11

SR: It didn’t seem like a second-best kind of operation.

01:06:14

MN: No, it didn’t—it didn’t, and it ran very well once we got it built. No, it—it didn’t. If you didn’t know, you didn’t know; you’re right and I appreciate you saying that. And I always knew it was going to be busy ‘cause we got cards and letters and emails constantly—consistently

starting, you know, in October. *Please have the show; please have the show; we're coming; we want to spend our money.* And that first Friday I—I very seldom go to the front gate. There is no reason for me to do that, but I ended up having to talk to someone for something very urgent, so I zipped up there in my golf cart and I looked out and saw all the people waiting to get in the first day of Jazz Fest, and it was stunning. That first day was the second busiest day of the show, I think.

01:07:13

SR: Really?

01:07:14

MN: Well the vendors were kind of [*Laughs*] shocked, but it was great because we made believers out of them after that. So, no, it was a terrific show and the guests were great; they—they came to have a good time, and they were not afraid to spend their money and, you know, to completely embrace the festival on every level. One of my favorite stories involves one of the ladies that has a drink booth out there, which are all run by volunteer organizations. This particular one represents the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, and she has a very active presence on the Jazz Fest chat room, and so right after the storm all the—all the thread had these people that, you know, spend all day every day on the—on the chat room were—were looking for Miss Lena. And, you know, *How'd you make out?* and *What happened?* and *What are you going to do?* And she said well, you know, I'm—you know, *My life is a mess, and I don't know what I'm going to do, and I don't know if I can have my booth because all my volunteers are*

scattered hither and yon. And they all spent time volunteering in her booth this year so that she could have a booth.

01:08:32

SR: The thread-heads?

01:08:33

MN: Uh-huh, yeah. **[Laughs]** So there were things like that; the last Sunday of the show, one of my vendors was alone by himself—his crew couldn't come and his story was really tragic the whole time, but the vendors do this thing they call *church*, where they get together and have a little prayer meeting, and so this was the last Sunday and I walked through one booth to, you know, get to church and the lady grabbed me and she said *Do you know Vance is by himself today?* And I was like *Huh? Yeah, his whole crew just called in.* So we went and we had—said a little prayer thing, and I spoke up and thanked everybody and I said *Oh, by the way, if any of you has an extra pair of hands Vance is by himself today.* And there was this collective gasp.

[Laughs]

01:09:33

SR: That's got to be one of the most terrifying—.

01:09:36

MN: And so my staff all sent like—*Okay, well I'll do this and you do that and you go help Vance for you know an hour and then you—*and they were scheming, and the vendors were

scheming, and I called the volunteer department, and this year we had a new major corporate partnership and one of the things they did was they had a lot of volunteers, and so we had scientists and engineers from Shell working Vance's booth all day. **[Laughs]** So the—the—it was a very spiritual show this year; there were a lot of tears—happy and sad.

01:10:12

SR: And—and Vance, he—can you say what he does?

01:10:17

MN: Vance Vaucresson. His father was actually one of the very first—or the first—vendors; hot sausage was Mr. Sonny's original item, and they have a sausage plant in the 7th Ward on St. Bernard Avenue, which I think had seven-feet of water, and Vance lost his home and his mother's home, and then right before the show his right-hand woman took her life. And he still did the show. **[Laughs]** And he sold—this year he just did the hot—he did hot sausage and he did crawfish sausage, which sells very well for him. So it—it was—it's hard to live in New Orleans right now. I think we all feel like we've been abandoned. But to see the human spirit the way I got to see it and still see it every day, you know it makes me not want to leave. **[Laughs]** You know, and just—you know, realize we probably got some tough times ahead of us, but if we can keep hanging onto that I think we will be all right. **[Laughs]**

01:11:47

SR: Just hard to keep dry-eyed.

01:11:50

MN: Uh-hm.

01:11:52

SR: Well I think that that's a really nice note to end on. I was just going to ask you—we're going to take some pictures and you brought some things or something, I think, for the photo, and could you describe what that is?

01:12:12

MN: One of the things that I do on a show day is get dressed up, and sometimes it's silly. You know, I'll have a pink cowboy hat or a tiara or bat wings or—or I'll glue rhinestones on my face. So I brought one of my tiaras, and one of the most important things at the festival are really good polarized sunglasses. **[Laughs]** And I wear them on an idiot string around my neck, so that I don't ever lose them. We have ID badges that we wear, so I brought those because we wear them. And my ID badge actually, we personalize them and so I have my regular normal you know get me in the gate, this is who I am with my picture on it; and then there's another pass that will allow you to go certain places in the show, and one of the things I do during the day is feed the boss, and it requires going backstage at Acura, so I have the laminate to do that. And then right before the show, my amazing assistant, Renee Tervalon, got married and the—she had a little small wedding after her circus of 300 people got canceled because of the storm. **[Laughs]** She ended up having a little small luncheon at Bayona, and the favors were laminates that she made that are place-cards, and mine is a picture of someone with a tattoo that says *duck fat*. **[Laughs]** And then the other side is a picture of Renee and Jeremy when they were kids. And

then, right before the show we lost someone that was very, very special to Jazz Fest, a guy by the name of Eddie Lambert, Sr., who was our electrician for many, many, many years. And I, for some reason, am very good friends with all the folks on the electrical department, so the new electric coordinator, his daughter, made laminates with Mr. Eddie on them; so—we all wore those this year. **[Laughs]** And then I brought one of my waist pouches that turns into a tool belt. **[Laughs]**

01:14:28

SR: Cool—great. Well we'll take some photos, but I want to thank you for spending the time.

MN: It was fun.

01:14:31

[End Michelle Nugent]