

Interviewee: Patti Domilise – Domilise’s Po-Boys – New Orleans, LA
Interview Date: August 14, 2006
Interviewer: Sara Roahen

[Begin Patti Domilise Interview]

00:00:00

SR: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, August 14th and I'm at Domilise's po-boy shop in Uptown New Orleans. And could you tell me your name and your birth date and how you--?

00:00:17

PD: Patti Domilise, 07/23/1952; I've worked at Domilise's for the past 20 years.

00:00:27

SR: So 20 years--what year did you start in then?

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Patti Domilise: Eighty-five I guess--'85. After my son was born, second son.

00:00:37

Sara Roahan: I'm going to move a little closer. Yeah, that's good. All right, well let's start with where did you grow up?

00:00:47

PD: Tchoupitoulas Street.

00:00:49

SR: Oh so right around the corner?

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PD: No, I was down further--way down by the bridge.

00:00:54

SR: Oh okay; and yeah, so po-boys were a part of your life always huh?
And did you come here as--as a person growing up?

00:01:04

PD: I don't really ever remember coming in here. My daddy used to come pick up sandwiches and we just stayed in the car.

00:01:10

SR: Oh you'd get them here though, huh? Did you have a favorite?

00:01:16

PD: No, I—I still don't have a favorite.

00:01:18

SR: You don't have a favorite?

00:01:19

PD: No.

00:01:21

SR: Do you eat them?

00:01:22

PD: I do for lunch, uh-huh.

00:01:26

SR: And so for the record, you are Miss Dot's daughter-in-law?

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PD: Yeah.

00:01:32

SR: And--and what--what is your husband's name?

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PD: My husband was Steve. He died four years ago.

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SR: Oh I'm sorry to hear that.

00:01:43

PD: That's him on the wall there--that picture.

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SR: Oh there's a picture of him on the wall.

00:01:46

PD: Yeah.

00:01:47

SR: I'll have to take a picture of that for--for our records. So it's Steve Domilise and how did you meet?

00:01:54

PD: Through my brothers. They all went to school together.

00:02:00

SR: What school did they go to?

00:02:01

PD: Redemptorist.

00:02:02

SR: Pardon me?

00:02:03

PD: Redemptorist.

00:02:05

SR: Oh okay.

00:02:05

PD: It was down in the Irish Channel. It's not there anymore, though.

00:02:12

SR: Oh okay; that's why I haven't heard of it I guess. And when you were dating was the shop the--part of your life? Did you come here together? Did he work here or anything?

00:02:29

PD: Oh no; he didn't work here and I didn't work here. I worked somewhere else then, but he didn't work here. I don't know where he was working--fixing machinery I think or something.

00:02:39

SR: What did he do for a living?

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PD: He worked a job but never really did anything.

00:02:51

SR: And so you were saying that you started working here after your first son was born?

00:02:54

PD: My second.

00:02:56

SR: Oh your second son. How many kids did y'all have?

00:02:58

PD: Two--two sons.

00:03:00

SR: And what are their names?

00:03:02

PD: Joshua and Zachary--Joshua works here in the evening a little bit.

After school he comes in.

00:03:10

SR: Okay, I think I know which one he is yeah. And so when you started working here--I mean did you have a sense for--did you have a sense for what this place means to the community and the neighborhood?

00:03:28

PD: When I started working here?

00:03:30

SR: Yeah; or--or now--either one?

00:03:31

PD: Now I do yeah--not when I started working here. I had no clue.

00:03:38

SR: So it was a job?

00:03:40

PD: It wasn't even a job. I really wasn't working. She'd just call me when somebody didn't come in to come help and I lived right around the corner then. And then it got to be more and more and more and 20 years later I'm still here.

00:03:53

SR: [*Laughs*] And what do you think about the--the position that this shop has in the community and the neighborhood?

00:04:02

PD: It's pretty cool; everybody knows it, I mean--people come from all over and say they--it was Domilise's--we've had people from Australia, Japan, and all over come in here and say they came in here to get po-boys. Everybody that comes in says they came right from the airport and they were shuttled I guess right from the airport to Domilise's; this is their first stop when they come into town. And it's always--around the holidays they're real, real busy--they're coming back home.

00:04:41

SR: Oh really--the tradition? When you opened up--well when did you open up after the storm?

00:04:49

PD: Right around Thanksgiving and the end of the month.

00:04:57

SR: And was it busy right away?

00:04:59

PD: The first day it was open. We had people when we were in here working and cleaning up and all; we had people stop all day long wanted to know if we were open. I didn't have electricity for two months and then we had to wait for--we had to wait for this refrigeration and all. That's why we couldn't open 'cause we didn't have any refrigeration. Everything that was in the refrigerators--the whole thing went straight to the dump. It was like dead bodies in there--the roasts and all--it was--and

they had been in there for like two months before anybody could get here to clean it up 'cause they wouldn't let anybody uptown for one thing. And then we didn't have electricity; so--.

00:05:47

SR: And how--how is your business now? So for the record it's almost a year later; how--has the storm affected your business?

00:05:56

PD: Oh we're busier.

00:05:58

SR: Busier huh?

00:06:00

PD: The problem is we don't have any help. It's the biggest one--we don't have any help and we can't even answer the phone. Some days it's just her and I.

00:06:12

SR: And the employees you had before the storm--?

00:06:18

PD: There were two young girls that just had babies and I'm sure they were getting any kind of help we could get from this storm--getting unemployment and anything they could get from the storm they took and didn't want to work. Picked one up the other day; she just didn't finish and didn't come back and the other one--we've got an old lady and she fell and broke her hip so she didn't come back. So we lost three employees that didn't come back and didn't get replaced. We've got one lady who comes twice a week and one that comes once a week.

00:07:01

SR: It seems to be the story around town. So when--has this place--the physical place changed since you started 20 years ago?

00:07:10

PD: The only thing that's changed is that refrigerator. It's the only thing. Had a man come one night in the middle of the night somebody hit the building over there and knocked that whole wall off—off the building. And the people putting it back together wanted to change this and change that. She didn't let them change anything. She just wanted them to put it back the way it was and leave it.

00:07:33

SR: But the whole--somebody ran into the wall?

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PD: Somebody ran into the front of the building out there. Knocked that whole wall off the building.

00:07:39

SR: Oh my gosh. When was that?

00:07:42

PD: About four, five years ago, I guess. Had to change everything. They did paint this after the hurricane.

00:07:54

SR: Oh you painted the—

00:07:55

PD: The steam and all for being in here was sticky and it was just--it was just gross and sticky so we just painted it.

00:08:02

SR: So that's the--they painted the base of the counter?

00:08:05

PD: It was paneling--just like this--the dirty--but it was just sticky then. I guess it was greasy being so close to the fires.

00:08:15

SR: Right.

00:08:16

PD: And then the steam in here for so long, the water and all that; it was just--

00:08:22

SR: Who did that po-boy painting?

00:08:26

PD: It's an artist who is now on 5th Avenue in New York I believe, Alex Beard. It was Steve's; it was supposed to be my husband Steve.

00:08:42

SR: I like it; it's a painting of a man eating a po-boy. It's a little bit abstract.

00:08:49

PD: Yeah; it's not a very precise painting but [*Laughs*]--

00:08:56

SR: Right; but I think you know when people come in here they--they love seeing the old Jax clock and all the old paraphernalia. What about people's ordering habits -- have they changed since you started?

00:09:09

PD: Hmm; no. I mean we really haven't changed the menu. We've put meatballs on it but that's about it since it got started. We haven't changed the menu.

00:09:21

SR: So was that your addition, the meatballs?

00:09:24

PD: Yeah, I went to a food show one day and they had them and it was kind of easy to do so we put those in there. I was just trying to think the other day of something to do, but we got enough work to do now we can't--we don't really have time to do the things--.

00:09:43

SR: Right. What's the most popular po-boy?

00:09:45

PD: Probably the shrimp.

00:09:50

SR: Yeah; and do--do a lot of people make up their own?

00:09:59

PD: You mean like--?

00:09:59

SR: I don't know--crazy concoctions or do they just pretty much order straight from the menu?

00:10:06

PD: A lot of the people get the shrimp with the cheese and the brown gravy, roast beef gravy, but I mean it's not one person--a lot of people get that. We have one person who gets like a ham--or gets like a roast beef with like chili and roast beef gravy on it and would eat it.

00:10:25

SR: I'll have to try the shrimp with the cheese and the gravy. So your one son works here sometimes, what's his name--which son?

00:10:34

PD: Joshua.

00:10:34

SR: Josh and how old is he?

00:10:36

PD: He's 22. He's at UNO, like in his fifth year--I'm hoping he's going to graduate. And the other one is a fireman; he just started the fire academy to be a fireman, a New Orleans fireman

00:10:51

SR: Really?

00:10:51

PD: He's starting his fourth week of school today.

00:10:55

SR: Wow; he'll be a fireman here?

00:10:58

PD: Yeah.

00:10:59

SR: We need that.

00:10:59

PD: My brother is a fireman so he wants to be a fireman. He's doing good; I mean he's studying--he's kind of scared today. They were starting the ladder and they just put the ladder up straight and you got to climb it and then hook your legs and then lean back on the ladder and I don't know--he was kind of worried about this week because—I'm hoping he makes it.

00:11:25

SR: Is--how old is he?

00:11:25

PD: He's 20--he's 20; he'll be 21 in September.

00:11:30

SR: Is your brother a fireman in New Orleans?

00:11:33

PD: Two of my brothers. I mean two of my brothers are firemen in New Orleans, yeah. One is a captain and one is a chief.

00:11:40

SR: So were they here throughout the storm?

00:11:44

PD: The first day Zachary went to the Academy he was told from now on he can't evacuate. And the first day in the Academy—you're here for good, we have a storm you stay.

00:12:01

SR: They've had a lot of struggles huh?

00:12:04

PD: Yeah. My brother's were lost on top of the--Delgado College—they were on on the roof of there for two days and nobody knew where they were. They couldn't get out; nobody--they said they had 170 people up there and they couldn't--so they finally--one of them found a boat or something and they took--went to the KB around the corner--the Rite Aid or whatever and they tried to get through the water to all the people that were on top of the roof and nobody had food or water. They said it was so hot. And at night it was pitch black; you couldn't just--you couldn't see like--if you were sitting here and I couldn't see you. Anyway the roof was a flat roof—he said I was afraid I'd fall off.

00:12:48

SR: Were those your firemen brothers?

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PD: Uh-hm.

00:12:50

SR: So you didn't--did you know where they were?

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PD: Nobody knew where they were. There was no communication; the radios didn't work. The cell phones were dead; everything was dead. There was no electricity to charge anything.

00:13:04

SR: Wow.

00:13:06

PD: Finally somebody had a phone and I think my brother called his wife or something or another and a fireman called his wife and told her to call the--call like the news--a news station and tell them they were trapped on top of the building, so then like the next day the helicopters started coming and getting them.

00:13:30

SR: So that was like the second day or something?

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PD: Nobody knew they were up there.

00:13:37

SR: Does your family come in here and eat?

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PD: Oh yeah. They come over. My brother works the bar on Saturday.

In fact, the one that's a fireman he works here on Saturday.

00:13:53

SR: So firemen probably come in here.

00:13:56

PD: Yeah, they pull up in their fire trucks and order something.

00:14:01

SR: What is your clientele? Can you characterize your clientele?

00:14:08

PD: I mean the locals are uptown people you know but we have people from all over. I mean they call all day long for directions of how to get here from everywhere. I had one the other day that called from like Mississippi and wanted to know how to get here. Well just take the I-10 to New Orleans and call when you get to New Orleans and I'll tell you how to get here. Tell me where you're at and I'll tell you how to get here, but they come from all over.

00:14:38

SR: What--can you tell me a little bit of what--how--what your daily schedule is like--what time--?

00:14:44

PD: My daily schedule? Well I get here about 8:00--8:15--you mean what I do here?

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SR: Yeah, like what time you get here and--?

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PD: I get here about 8:15 or so and I go in and I put the money away from the day before and all and put it where it goes and make sure we have enough memos to pay for our supplies and then I come out here and I order the supplies and then I bread all the shrimp--batter all the shrimp, fish, and get everything ready over in that corner. And then I slice the cheeses and the ham and the sausage, whatever I need for the day. And then cut the bread. Sweep up and it's like 10 o'clock then and then about 10:30 people start coming in.

00:15:39

SR: People are hungry for po-boys at 10:30?

00:15:42

PD: This is our--this is actually our--our slowest time--August and September is like our worst months. And--and I mean it's slowed down since the hurricane but we're still busier than we were before the hurricane. September is always our worst.

00:16:03

SR: And what--what time does it start winding down in here?

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PD: About 2:30 or so. I start picking up and we put like the gravy into a smaller pot and clean all that up and fool with the money again and then I go home around 3:30 or 4 o'clock.

00:16:24

SR: And where do you live?

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PD: I live out in Metairie but then I have all the books to do when I get home. I take--I do all the books and all for her; I do everything for her--all the bills, books, taxes and everything. And I used to do it--I used to be able to sit here in the morning when we got three other people here cutting everything and doing stuff in the morning. But I got to do it at home. I go home and I do a little bit of that and I cook and the boys come home and we eat--clean, take baths, and go to bed and come right back and do it the next morning. [*Laughs*]

00:17:09

SR: It's constant huh?

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PD: Well we're off on Thursdays so that's good. She gets her hair done on Thursday.

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SR: Oh you're off on Thursday.

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PD: Yeah; it's closed on Thursday right now since we don't have anybody. She goes and gets her hair done, number one priority.

00:17:28

SR: Getting the hair done? [*Laughs*] Thursday is hair day. What do you feel--I mean is it--do you feel the weight of keeping this place going for--
-?

00:17:45

PD: Yeah, especially since we don't have the employees that we have. We lost three of them. So I have pretty much picked up in the morning what they--they did--I do besides what I used to do. So I've been more rushed and more pressure on to get ready for 10 o'clock. I used to come at 9:00 and do the shrimp and--we had the other ladies here doing the cutting and all and now I don't have anybody; so.

00:18:23

SR: I don't think that the average customer probably understands that.

00:18:32

PD: I mean I was around here for years before I worked here and didn't understand it. But of course back then they had you know four or five people a day working. So it wasn't--just like two people you know--just--her sister used to work here. Her sister and her niece for a long time--but her sister retired and the niece got married and moved to Boston or somewhere. I mean there was always like four or five people back here in the morning doing everything that us two are doing now. She comes out in the morning and fries the hamburgers and fix the gravy and all.

00:19:13

SR: That's what Miss Dot does?

00:19:15

PD: [Inaudible]

00:19:18

SR: When your boys were growing up were they around here a lot?

00:19:22

PD: We lived right around the corner on Tchoupitoulas.

00:19:26

SR: Oh you did?

00:19:30

PD: So they came around a lot.

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SR: So are you open on the weekends right now?

00:19:42

PD: Saturdays. We never were opened on Sunday. We're open on Saturday; that's our busiest day--Saturday.

00:19:52

SR: Okay; and so I was also--my favorite po-boy used to be the pepper wiener.

00:19:58

PD: I know; that's what everybody says. People who--like people who travel from all over to get the pepper wiener and I've got to tell them we don't have it.

00:20:10

SR: Can't get it?

00:20:13

PD: We've tried other kinds but it's just--it's not the same. Like they burst open when you cook them; they don't taste the same.

00:20:24

SR: Did you cook the pepper wiener?

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PD: We used to steam them. That stainless steel steamer thing that we've got up there--we used to steam them in there and then we would peel the skin off of them and slice them and put them on the bread.

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SR: So did you steam them ahead of time 'cause they weren't hot on the po-boy were they?

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PD: You mean hot--they were just warm I guess.

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SR: Oh okay, warm; I see. Oh I didn't realize that. So you'd steam them and then peel the red casing off? Do you have any idea what kind of seasoning was in there?

00:21:04

PD: It had to be some kind of like cayenne pepper or something but it wasn't really that hot but I don't know. They just stopped making them; so--. I mean they didn't even tell anybody; they could have at least told the customers you know that--they just stopped making them.

00:21:26

SR: It's just over huh?

00:21:29

PD: Said there wasn't enough movement on them to--we may have been the only ones to buy them; I don't know. **[Laughs]** We used to get them from the Dubuque, Iowa.

00:21:41

SR: People up there don't eat spicy food really. Well do you--I don't know how to say this. Do you look forward to carrying on this tradition?

00:22:02

PD: I'm looking forward to retiring. I'm not going to be here when I'm 84 years old. I'm going at 60 or 62 at the latest--if the place is still here by then. I don't know. [*Yawns*] I don't know what's going to happen when she goes.

00:22:19

SR: Do you think that your son that works here now is interested?

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PD: Uh-um; I think he thought he was until he saw what was involved. He's more of an artist. He drew those pictures and all back on the wall.

00:22:39

SR: Oh.

00:22:40

PD: He likes music and art. This ain't what he wants to do though. I told him the other day--I said why don't you come, you can be working full-time in the summer. I'd lose my mind or something, he said. He don't like it. He's just really here helping us out right now. I think he always thought that he might want to do this but I don't think now that he knows what's involved. I don't know why anybody would to tell you the truth. You don't make money and you don't--I mean it's just constant work. And I told her the other day you know we're probably going to have to raise the price of sandwiches with the price of gas. Everything just went sky-high and even though--we used to pay like \$600 maybe--last month it was over \$1,000 and they're going to go up again.

00:23:41

SR: Thousand dollars for the electricity in this one room huh?

00:23:45

PD: Well this—and the house, but the house is only like \$100 and the rest of it's out here. It's like two separate bills but you know it used to be like about \$600 in the summer, you know. Like right now the hot peak of summer--last month it was over \$1,000; I'm sure this month it will be way over \$1,000 again.

00:24:06

SR: And just for the record this is a pretty small room. Like how many people can sit in here at one time?

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PD: About twenty-eight--twenty-eight seats.

00:24:15

SR: Twenty-eight seats huh?

00:24:18

PD: We've had parties in here where they've had 100-150 people.

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SR: That would be interesting. [*Laughs*]

00:24:23

PD: Yeah.

00:24:24

SR: Right so \$1,000--that's a lot of po-boys.

00:24:29

PD: Yeah, but it's not just that. Everything is going up. I mean the price of seafood--everything with the price of gas going up--everything. I hate to keep raising the prices but you can't do anything if you don't make the money and everybody thinks we're rich and make money and all but it

ain't true. I never owned a brand new car; I don't think she has either.

We don't make a lot of money.

00:24:59

SR: That's really not something you understand when you--I think when people come in here they're so enamored with the place that they think it must be the greatest job.

00:25:09

PD: Oh yeah. But I mean I got people telling me we'll come help you--we'll come help you but they never show up to help. They just say that.

00:25:22

SR: Well that's really interesting; I hadn't thought really about how the price of gas would affect a small business like this--and also seafood--do you use Louisiana seafood?

00:25:35

PD: And then everything that goes up they say it's--but the price of gas--it never comes back down once it--it goes up it never comes back down.

00:25:46

SR: I imagine the hurricane affected the seafood prices too somehow.

00:25:53

PD: Well we couldn't use our guy that we had been dealing with all these years because he--his business went underwater, his house--everything. And he was out of commission for--about two or three months he just opened up again and the people we weren't using you know--you can't blame them; they were charging us higher prices than before the storm but when we went back to the original guy he was pretty much in line with what he had before the storm and now everything is going up again--the price of gas. Now I usually fill up my van for close to \$29 and I went Monday or Tuesday and it cost me \$71.50 to fill up my van.

00:26:39

SR: And that's got to affect like the bread delivery trucks and--.

00:26:42

PD: Yeah, anybody that uses gas--especially the seafood you know using the gas for the boats to run.

00:26:51

SR: What about--I wanted to ask you a little bit about just food in general. You said that you'd cook most nights for your sons or what--

00:27:01

PD: Most nights yeah; they don't eat a whole lot that I cook--

00:27:05

SR: But you like--you like cooking? Where did you learn how to cook?

00:27:08

PD: From my mom. I like it if I have the time to do it you know but if I'm rushed, I--

00:27:16

SR: Right.

00:27:17

PD: Sometimes like on my day off I'll just cook some things you know--just cook all day and have it for the week or whatever. I enjoy doing that. But if I go home and I'm rushed then I just throw something together--.

00:27:31

SR: What kinds of--what kinds of foods might you make?

00:27:35

PD: Meatballs, fried chicken, red beans, roast, pork chops--whatever; of course my kids said I gave them pork chops for seven days in a row one

time and they don't want pork chops anymore. I said y'all are crazy.

They never got pork chops--they might have got them twice in one week maybe but they didn't get them seven days in a row.

00:28:03

SR: What was the heritage of your parents?

00:28:07

PD: My dad was policeman and he was Irish. Mom was Irish and she didn't work. She had five kids; she didn't work. My dad had three from another marriage, so he had eight altogether.

00:28:21

SR: So she was cooking a lot?

00:28:23

PD: Yeah, well she didn't cook for the other family. They lived with their mama. My dad had eight kids.

00:28:31

SR: And what was your maiden name?

00:28:33

PD: Lampard--L-a-m-p-a-r-d.

00:28:36

SR: Oh Lampard okay. All right; well thank you for taking the time.

00:28:44

PD: Thank you.

00:28:45

SR: I appreciate it.

00:28:45

[End Patti Domilise]