

**VELMA JOHNSON**  
**Mama J's Kitchen– Richmond, Virginia**

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Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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00:00:01

**Sara Wood:** So I'm Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance and it's March 7, 2013. And I'm sitting here with Velma Johnson of Mama J's and we're on First Street in Richmond, Virginia. And I'm wondering if you could go ahead and say hi and introduce yourself and tell me your name and where we are right now.

00:00:20

**Velma Johnson:** Hi; my name is Velma Johnson and I am co-owner of Mama J's in Richmond, Virginia down in Historical Jackson Ward. And we're located at 415 N. First Street.

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**SW:** And for the record could you tell me your birth date?

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**VJ:** I was born November 29, 1947.

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**SW:** And you're a native here. Can you talk about where you grew up and what it was like growing up in Richmond?

00:00:43

**VJ:** Okay; well Jackson – I didn't grow up in Jackson Ward where the restaurant is located but I went to church right around the corner in the 900 block of Clay Street. But I grew up in the West End. I am one of 14 children. My mother and father was married for 56 years and I went to

Maggie Walker High School and the Maggie Walker Center is also in Jackson Ward, so I feel like I'm a part of Jackson Ward.

**00:01:11**

**SW:** And Maggie Ward [Walker] was the first woman to ever open a bank right?

**00:01:15**

**VJ:** Maggie L. Walker was the first female to run a bank; they called it Penny Bank here in Richmond.

**00:01:23**

**SW:** Uh-hm; and could you tell me your parents' names for the record?

**00:01:27**

**VJ:** My parents were Elise and Willard Roland.

**00:01:31**

**SW:** And what was it like growing up out in the West End?

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**VJ:** It was good. It was good. We always had plenty to eat. And having 14 brothers and sisters we're – always had somebody to play with because when you got mad with one of them you just moved to the next one. But it was – it was nice. It – we were right down in my – by Byrd Park and Maymont Park so we had plenty of places to go and plenty of people to play with.

**00:01:59**

**SW:** And now how – where are you in line with – of the 14?

**00:02:03**

**VJ:** I'm in the middle. I'm the seventh child from the oldest. *[Laughs]* It was eight girls and six boys.

**00:02:11**

**SW:** Wow; and do you have a lot of brothers and sisters left in the Richmond area?

**00:02:15**

**VJ:** All my brothers and sisters are here in the Richmond area except two. One is in Boston and one is in Northern Virginia and one has passed away. So it's still 13 of us and I still get mad at them and move to the next one. *[Laughs]*

**00:02:29**

**SW:** Velma I'm wondering if you could talk about just in terms of growing up and – and the food, like did you do a lot of cooking? Did your parents do a lot of cooking?

**00:02:37**

**VJ:** Well my grandmother grew up in the house with us and I learned a lot of my cooking from my grandmother and my mother. My mother stayed pregnant all the time, so and back in the day I don't know why they always had to go upstairs in a chair and they stayed upstairs for two

weeks. They couldn't walk for some reason. And not like mothers now. But we had to learn to cook; we really, really did have to learn to cook. My mother didn't cook from a recipe; it was always looking at how much you throw in of something and that's how she cooks and that's how I cook now.

**00:03:08**

**SW:** And your dad was a – was a cook, right; he – ?

**00:03:11**

**VJ:** My dad was – my dad retired from the railroad and then when he retired from the railroad he went to work in the cafeteria for the Life of Virginia Insurance Company. And because it was 14 of us his boss always – he worked in the executive cafeteria and what it was – his boss always – they always had food left over and because his boss knew my daddy had 14 kids he said, "Y'all can take the food home but nobody gets to take anything home 'til Mr. Roland gets his." So because he knew he had 14 kids to feed, so we grew up eating like filet mignon and stuffed peppers and raisin bread, creamed cheese on raisin bread – things that you wouldn't normally eat but that's what they served in the executive cafeteria so that's what we ate.

**00:03:56**

**SW:** Did you pick up anything from your father's cooking?

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**VJ:** No; my daddy didn't do any cooking at home – very seldom. He was a grill man. He – you know he cooked out on the grill but other than that – and I don't like cooking outside, so – . I didn't pick up anything from him [*Laughs*] – not a thing.

00:04:15

**SW:** Can you talk about what it was like to grow up in Richmond? I mean we're in Jackson Ward right now. You were – you're saying that you guys grew up in the West End but Jackson Ward is just this – it's such an important place in Richmond for the African American community and – and it's basically what Richmond was built upon. And I'm just wondering if you could tell it for people who aren't familiar with Jackson Ward; could you talk a little bit about what this neighborhood is about?

00:04:40

**VJ:** Um, Jackson Ward, well it was – it was Second Street really where – and I think – well Jackson Ward is Jackson Ward itself but Second Street was *the* place where if you wanted to go to the theater or if you wanted to go see a show in Richmond you had to basically go to the Hippodrome. It was only two restaurants here at being black that you could actually – not restaurants, theaters that you could go to was Booker T. Theater and the Hippodrome Theater.

00:05:09

And the Hippodrome is right here on Second Street, but Second Street was where all the stars came to go to perform like Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson, and those kinds of people. But a lot of the historical things are right here in Jackson Ward. I guess this was one of the only places that had the first black church. Ebenezer is one of the historical black churches here. The building we're actually sitting in was – was Troy's Department Store, and Troy's was

really the place where you went to get your barrettes and your little socks and your white gloves and stuff for church. We didn't – we didn't venture out too much downtown to Thalheimer's and none of those and places like that – first of all because it was expensive and my mama and daddy had 14 kids, but like I said right – to the church right around the corner which was Moore Street Baptist Church and that was in – it was matter of fact a half a block here and now it's – Jackson Ward is coming back.

**00:06:15**

We have the Black History Museum which is half a block from here and the Convention Center and the Visitor's Center is two blocks down the street. The Hippodrome has been redone, gorgeous inside, bringing a lot of people back down here. When you talk about Jackson Ward people get a little nervous because this is where all the trouble was back in the day. The projects are right here in Jackson Ward. They're our neighbors. We treat them – you know they come in and you know people are moving back into the neighborhood and the Maggie Walker House is here. The only black cleaners that I know that's in – in Richmond is right here in Jackson Ward which is two – two or three doors up the street.

**00:07:04**

A lot of beauty parlors, so people are coming back. I only came – I only came to Jackson Ward when I was a child because I came down here to go to church. And then Standard Drugstore was *the* drugstore that we – we got our medicine from which was on First and Broad. Being a – from a family of 14 I really never – we never ventured away from home much except to go to the theater on Sundays if you went to church. If you didn't go to church you didn't go to the theater.

**00:07:35**

And mama and daddy didn't have a whole lot of money so that was really the only time I ever really came to Jackson Ward but the history of Jackson Ward is very strong. This is one of the places that the mayor is very proud of because the businesses are opening up back down here.

**00:07:55**

**SW:** And what happened to Jackson Ward? I mean you said it's – it's coming back. I mean I know – didn't they – didn't they tear a lot of it down to build the highway through – ?

**00:08:05**

**VJ:** They tore some of it down to build the – the parkway through here. I can't say what really happened to Jackson Ward. I think when – when Broad Street died down 'cause Broad Street used to be a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful place – any time you'd hear somebody on the night show talk about Richmond and Broad Street and laugh about it you know you kind of feel kind of embarrassed. It used to – as a child Broad Street was one of the prettiest places you ever, ever could have gone, but they say when you get older things are not as pretty as it was when you were a child. But I can't really say what happened to Jackson Ward. I know a lot of buildings got boarded up down here. A lot of things – a lot of things changed itself I guess with – you know once you start boarding up buildings and things of that nature, but – . When we found this building it was like finding a diamond. And it's – and it's been good to us.

**00:09:05**

**SW:** Can you talk about how you found the building and what – when you knew like this is it?

**00:09:10**



**VJ:** I didn't find the building. My son actually found it. He was – I have a catering business and I always have had one since I've retired from the sheriff's department 'cause I worked there for 17 years. But he – he was looking for a kitchen for my catering. And he says, "Mom, I found your kitchen." And I says, "Okay," and he said – and he looked real crazy and he said, "But – ." I said, "But-what?" He said, "The restaurant goes with it." So I says, "Oh, cool"; you know first when I really first saw the building and I knew I was looking for a catering I thought that the front of the restaurant would be where I would fix my lunches and people would come pick the food up and – and that kind of thing. And I never imagined it being a restaurant and then Lester says mom, "We're going to open up a restaurant." I says, "Cool."

00:09:56

So I figured it would be a nice small restaurant 'cause really what I did – I bought some new clothes and I bought a bar stool. So I figured I'd sit on the bar stool and – and be cute and a few people would walk in. You know I never thought it would be as big as it is. I never sat in the bar stool. Matter of fact we had to move the bar stool out. The restaurant just blew up overnight; it really did. The new clothes I got to wear but it wasn't sitting here greeting my customers 'cause that's what I wanted, to say, "Hey, hi; come on in and welcome to Mama J's." But that never happened, so – .

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We've been busy ever since.

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**SW:** And what year was that – that you opened?

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**VJ:** Um, it – it will be four years this October. So I can't – it will be four years this October, October 27<sup>th</sup>. I do remember the day; uh-hm.

**00:10:50**

**SW:** Let's back up a little bit. So you worked for the sheriff's department for 17 years?

**00:10:55**

**VJ:** Yes.

**00:10:55**

**SW:** What was that like?

**00:10:57**

**VJ:** It was crazy. [*Laughs*]

**00:10:58**

**SW:** What did you do?

**00:10:59**

**VJ:** I was a Deputy Sheriff for the City of Richmond for 17 years and I'm – I was a turnkey operator. I – you know those big keys and big old bar slamming. When I first went there it was like I was in a nightmare. I couldn't sleep at night. You know 'cause I heard the doors and I didn't know anything about being a deputy sheriff. People fighting around you and doing all the kind of stuff, but after about three months they – my nickname became Miss Meanie because I

didn't take anything off of anybody. But it was cool. I liked the job. But it had come to the point that it had began to get the best of me 'cause I saw kids coming in there 18 and when I left there 17 years later they were still coming. It was like a revolving door for them, so it had become – gotten the best of me, so I thought it was time for me to leave. Anyway my son told me to leave. So that's what I did. But I had been catering all the time so then I just went in catering full-time.

**00:11:57**

**SW:** So you were catering on the side while you had your full-time job?

**00:12:00**

**VJ:** Yeah; I was – I was catering on the side and then after I left the sheriff's department, First Baptist Church of South Richmond which is the mayor's church they asked me to come over there and do my catering out of his church and in turn you know I would do things for the church as far as the church anniversary and the pastor's anniversary and things like that. So I got licensed out of that kitchen and then when we found Mama J's I just – we just brought everything over here. So we're still partners. I still help them out when I can.

**00:12:32**

**SW:** Now how long had you been catering? I mean had – had you done it like as – when you turned 18 did you do it? I mean –

**00:12:39**

**VJ:** Um, I should say probably – I was probably about 25 or 26, just doing little small wedding rehearsals or baby showers, nothing real big and then I did my niece's wedding which was like

300 people strong. And she's been married almost 25 years now. And longer than that; she's been married about 35 years now. But she had her wedding reception over at 31<sup>st</sup> Street Baptist Church and then after she had that reception, the same night she had her wedding reception at the Diamond so it was like okay I just did this – I did two wedding receptions for 300 people in one day. I said, "Oh, I can do this!" and so that's when I decided okay I can do this and I went full-time with it.

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**SW:** What made you want to start catering in the first place?

**00:13:31**

**VJ:** I've always liked to cook and Thanksgiving, Christmas, after mama passed – my mama and daddy passed, I had something called nieces and nephews day and they would come over. And one morning they came over for breakfast during the holidays. This was during Christmastime and I had them over for breakfast and they didn't go home. And okay it was time to eat lunch, so then I ended up fixing lunch. And then the next thing I know it was dinnertime and they were still there playing cards and it was just cousins, it's like 65 or 70 of them 'cause – . And they was just sitting around. So I said, "Well, okay I got to fix something for them to eat dinner." And they ate dinner and they sat there and they played some more cards and they laughed and they talked and then I realized they hadn't had any dessert. So I started baking a cake and before I could get the two cakes out of the oven they were slicing up and eating them and they had cake and ice-cream and we did that every year for – for the last 10-12 years.

**00:14:26**

**SW:** And what – what day is nieces and nephews day on?

**00:14:30**

**VJ:** It's usually during the Christmas holidays. It depends upon when – when that Friday or Saturday falls you know after Christmas or before Christmas and the kids are home from college or out of high school and they can all get together, but no aunts or uncles are allowed to come – just cousins and I'm the only big boss there. But I – you know I didn't bother them 'cause I was in the kitchen cooking. And they enjoyed it; they exchange gifts and do all that kind of stuff. But it was an opportunity for them to get to actually know their cousins and what they were about.

**00:15:04**

**SW:** And what kinds of things do you make when you – going back to when you started catering and cooking for your nieces and nephews and family and all these events; what – what kinds of things would you make or do you make?

**00:15:17**

**VJ:** Same thing I serve in the restaurant and the same things my mama used to cook – macaroni and cheese, candied sweet potatoes; they just got to have those. Fried chicken, meat loaf, baked chicken, ribs, just whatever – and it really – it really started out – I really when I did this started doing the nieces and nephews I really had to go in the freezer to figure out what I had in the freezer 'cause I hadn't planned dinner. And it was always chicken in there and you always had sweet potatoes or white potatoes. It was just a big smorgasbord of whatever I had in the refrigerator. But that's what they ate – waffles and scrambled eggs; well the breakfast was big

‘cause we had like grits and scrambled eggs and waffles and fried potatoes and baked apples and biscuits and just – ‘cause I had planned, I had actually planned the breakfast, yeah.

**00:16:07**

**SW:** So I just wanted to ask you this before – ‘cause I want to talk more about the restaurant but how did you end up becoming a deputy sheriff? Is that something that you wanted to do?

**00:16:16**

**VJ:** Never dreamed of it in my whole entire life. I needed a job. So my brother, my oldest brother Willard was a deputy sheriff and had been a deputy sheriff for like 20 years. And I needed a job, so I went down and applied and I don't know; I just – it was – it was just a job in the beginning but I really grew up to love it. I really did. But it was time for me to go, because I had become attached to some of the young girls ‘cause I worked mostly with the girls. And when you get a girl that's 18 and you see her keep coming in and she's 20 and then she's 25 and then she's 30, you know you talk to them and you think you – you say, “Okay I saved that one or I helped that one,” – it didn't work. My sons hated it; both of them hated it ‘cause they say I had gotten mean. And I think that's how I got my name at the sheriff's department Miss Meanie ‘cause I really wasn't mean ‘til I went to work there. But I got hard on them. And they grew up to be fine young men.

**00:17:15**

**SW:** What are your sons' names for the record?

**00:17:17**

**VJ:** My son's name is Lester Johnson and my other son is Darrell. Darrell is a – a staff sergeant in the Air Force and has done 17 years and Lester is an engineer for Verizon with a Masters in Business Administration, who – which helps me a lot in the restaurant because I only know the food part. He knows the business part of it all.

**00:17:46**

**SW:** And I wanted to know – I think I read somewhere and I'm going to let – . Did you need to get the phone? The phone is okay? Okay; I read somewhere where you decided to stop working for the sheriff's department and you went out to buy a – a van for catering and you thought I hope this works out 'cause I just bought this van. Can you –

**00:18:05**

**VJ:** Yeah; you know a whole lot. You know a little bit more about than I know about myself. [Laughs] Well what happened with the van, I knew I was going to quit the sheriff's department and I turned my resignation in and after I turned my resignation in I realized that okay, I had a raggedy old car, so I says, "You can't cater – you need to go buy you a truck." So that's what – I went to look at a little minivan and my oldest brother Willard was with me when I went to buy it and he says, "This is not big enough. This – this van is too small." And I says, "Ah", but I bought a big van anyway.

**00:18:39**

And glad I never bought the minivan 'cause it would have never worked. And I realized that – I says okay, I – and I went to buy the van because I knew they were going to do a credit check on me and I – I needed to have a job. So I ran out and bought the van before the resignation actually hit the sheriff's desk or personnel or wherever it went. And then I – I said – I

bought the van and I actually left the van sitting on the lot. I wouldn't drive it home and then on my way home my little raggedy car, I says, "God, send me a message 'cause I don't know what I just did. I just got myself in 20-some thousand dollars-worth of debt and I don't have a job." So when I got home the superintendent of schools – I can't remember who he was at the time, but it was a message on my answering machine that he needed me to cater a job, a three – it was three days; it was at the technical center and it was for 110 administrators – teachers and administrators, but he was on his way out of town.

**00:19:41**

And he would not get back until Monday morning and they had allocated \$10,000 for these two meals. It was three light breakfasts and – and three light breakfasts and three light lunches, and if it was anymore that he would get it straight with me when he get back. It had been – they were supposed to have something out at Brandy Hill but it happened during the time they had laid a lot of teachers off. And one of the teachers that – or administrators they had laid off lived in Brandy Hill. So they wouldn't let them have it out at Brandy Hill at the clubhouse so he had to find the first source, so he got me. And he went out of town hoping that I would be I guess available and I was. And I got my sister Barbara and my sister Crystal and my sister Linda and my brother Willard together and that was my catering team at the time.

**00:20:31**

And it was that Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and we – it was more than I would have ever charged him because I really didn't know how to charge anybody anything, so after that I says, "Okay; the sky is the limit." And I never looked back – never looked back.

**00:20:50**



**SW:** Did you get a lot of clients after that just through word of mouth? Like how did you get – how did you build the business up?

**00:20:55**

**VJ:** I still stayed a little small because I – I was still working on the process of actually getting my licensed and getting licensed and you can't be licensed out of your house. But a friend of mine's had a restaurant – a small restaurant and she let me ride on her license and that's the way we did that.

**00:21:17**

**SW:** And what's her name?

**00:21:18**

**VJ:** Her name is – we call her Dee – Dee's Kitchen and I can't remember Dee's last name to save my life but it was – she ran a restaurant called Dee's Kitchen.

**00:21:29**

**SW:** Is it still around, Dee's Kitchen?

**00:21:31**

**VJ:** No; uh-um, she – she didn't stay open very long. She didn't have the support that I had. That's what she tells me. "You've got so much support. You've got your son and he knows how to run the business part," and you know because you have to have bookkeepers and all that kind

of stuff and that's something that I know nothing about and they laugh at me 'cause I don't even know how to use a cell phone either, so – .

**00:21:51**

**SW:** Now did – did Lester help you all along the way, like was he there with you when you first started?

**00:21:58**

**VJ:** No; Lester was in school. Lester went to VMI and most of my kids were young. Both of my kids were young.

**00:22:06**

**SW:** How old were they?

**00:22:07**

**VJ:** Lester is 40 now, so he was – he was still in high school when I – when mama died and – no, he was in college. He was in college. And Darrell is younger than he is. He's four years younger, so no. I had my brothers and my sisters to pull me through but then I had to end up firing all of them [*Laughs*] 'cause they didn't want me to be the boss.

**00:22:32**

**SW:** So then how long have – now you built your catering business up and then how long was it from the time you started – officially started with the school event to when you found and opened Mama J's, the restaurant?

**00:22:46**

**VJ:** Oh I guess it was – um, I left – I left the sheriff's department in 1999 so – and then we opened up four years ago so what is this – 2013, so it's been 11 years, 11 – 12 years before I actually opened up Mama J's.

**00:23:05**

**SW:** And it just sort of – it just naturally evolved into a restaurant?

**00:23:07**

**VJ:** Mama J's, no; it didn't. Yeah; I guess you could say that. I mean we opened up a restaurant but it was my son's – it was his dream. You know I've always wanted an event hall. And he keeps on saying, "Well you're the one that wanted a restaurant." No; I wanted an event hall. I wanted to actually book stuff and do things on my schedule. I didn't want an everyday – this is an everyday job, coming in here and making sure you're meeting all the health inspections and all that kind of stuff and making sure you – your payroll is made, but with the – an event hall you have one event on Saturday nights or maybe two and then you have maybe one on Friday nights and then you go home and you got the rest of the week off. But it didn't – it didn't work out that way.

**00:23:56**

**SW:** So you're here every day?

**00:23:57**

**VJ:** Mondays and Tuesdays are supposed to be my days off but it's hard to keep me away from here. Yeah; but I'm here every day.

**00:24:05**

**SW:** How has – how has just the quality of your life changed from going – you know you talked about why you needed to leave the sheriff's department but what has this done for you, the catering business and the restaurant done for you that's changed things?

**00:24:17**

**VJ:** The sheriff's department had gotten very stressful for me. It really, really had, like I said you know just seeing the young kids come in and out. Mama J's is – is a joy. It really is. I get to meet people whereas when I was at home, I – I didn't – it was not – the only people I knew were the people that I knew. But now it's – these people are coming in the restaurant, they in here every day, some of them are in here twice a day and they're like family. We've created the atmosphere in the restaurant to make people feel like that they're actually at home when they come here.

**00:24:56**

So I know more people now than I knew when I was at the sheriff's department and I feel like these are family; these are people that come in the restaurant and are really family and friends, whereas when I worked at the sheriff's department, I tell people you – don't get it confused 'cause these are your coworkers. And it's a different between coworkers and family and friends, so – . That's how we look at that.

**00:25:18**

**SW:** I'm wondering, too, in terms of when you opened and you talked – you talked a little bit about how Jackson Ward is – is building itself back up, I mean how much of a part of the restaurant is that? I mean it – I was in here yesterday and it just seems like – it's a place where everybody comes to eat, but it just feels like – very much like a community too, like people are just very comfortable in hanging out and – .

**00:25:39**

**VJ:** They – they actually – I mean it – it's – it's like home for some people here. I mean and we have people in the neighborhood that just walk here. We don't have a whole lot of parking but you never hear about our customers complain about parking because if they want to come here they're going to find somewhere to park. So we have actually people that walk the street and will look in the door and especially during the summertime if I'm out there, they'll look in the door and they'll see tablecloths and stuff on the table and say, "Man we can't eat in there." And I – I stop them and I say, "Yes, you can. We want you to come in here. This is your restaurant." This is in your neighborhood. And – and that's who you see, a lot of the walkers and they just think because they see tablecloths or flowers or something on the table that it's too nice for them.

**00:26:33**

We have a couple of homeless people that have actually come in and hungry and the first thing they used to ask me, "Do you want me to fix it so they can go?" No; I want them to sit down and – and go to the bathroom and wash their hands if they choose to and I don't want to put it in a styrofoam plate. I want them to have a glass and a plate, and you know give them a meal. We had a family that come in here it was a couple of weeks ago. She had five little kids and we hadn't even opened the restaurant up. But she was staying in the shelter but in the shelter they tell me you have to be out at a certain time in the morning. But these little kids were hungry.

So we brought them inside and we fed them. We try not to get in the habit of feeding a whole lot of people that are coming in and asking because then what you get is a lot of people hanging around and coming in and going out. But every once in a while if you do it – I want people to be treated like they're people regardless of whether you're homeless or whatever.

**00:27:38**

And because I got an attempted mugged out on – they tried to mug me about two Thanksgivings ago out on the front and if it hadn't been for a couple of guys that actually walk the street you – sometimes you have to help people 'cause you don't know who is going to have to help you. They saved my life 'cause me and this guy that was mugging me we were battling from my training from the sheriff's department and he was trying to take my pocketbook. I fought him for about five minutes and then somebody came to my rescue. So you never know who you may need, so I just try – I try not – you know you can't help everybody but I just try to help those that I feel like need help.

**00:28:19**

**SW:** Hmm; and that was on Thanksgiving that you – ?

**00:28:21**

**VJ:** That was – I'll never forget it. It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, because he could have had my pocketbook but the reason I didn't let him have it – he could have had the money in my pocketbook and I told him he could have, but I knew I was going out of town for Thanksgiving which had all my credit cards in there and it had my driver's license and things that I needed to travel. And he wanted my pocketbook; that's what he wanted. And I was refusing

– I refused to give it to him so we had to – I had to put my sheriff's department training into action, yeah.

**00:28:55**

**SW:** He got his?

**00:28:57**

**VJ:** Yeah; Sara he got the best of it. I ended up losing my glasses and scraping my knuckles up but it was all good. I was carrying two bags of cabbage and that's how much Mama J's have grown 'cause I used to go to the grocery store and just pick up six heads of cabbage so we could have cabbage to get us through the day 'cause we cook all our food fresh every day. But now we're getting two cases of cabbage every other day, so that's how things have grown. But that's what saved my life, I had those big old heads of cabbage 'cause we were bouncing them around.

**00:29:28**

**SW:** I only have a couple more questions for you; do you have a few more minutes?

**00:29:32**

**VJ:** I got all the time in the world. I'm having fun.

**00:29:35**

**SW:** Okay; I'm glad.

**00:29:37**

**VJ:** I knew you'd laugh.

**00:29:37**

**SW:** How did you – how long have you –

**00:29:40**

**VJ:** You got to do something with this thing.

**00:29:43**

**SW:** Is that you? How long have you been – when did you start Mama J, like when did you start like being called Mama J? Has that been your whole life or – ?

**00:29:52**

**VJ:** I have two daughter-in-laws and I know you know the story. *[Laughs]*

**00:29:56**

**SW:** I don't actually.

**00:29:57**

**VJ:** Oh, um, but long before there was a restaurant I have two daughter-in-laws and they didn't know what to call me. They didn't know whether to call me Velma which they knew was out and they didn't want to call me Mom because both of their moms are still living and they didn't want to call me Mrs. Johnson. So one day the two of them came to me and they said, "We got a name for you." I said, "What? We're going to call you Mama J." So I said, "Cool." I liked it.

**00:30:22**



So when we got ready to open the restaurant up it was a toss between Mama J's and Elise's. Elise's you know I really wanted to call Elise's 'cause my mom was my heart. But it didn't mean – Elise's didn't mean anything to anybody but me and maybe my sons Lester and Darrell. So we took a vote and we actually had people to come and you know – "What do you like best for the restaurant?" And Mama J's won, so we – we went with Mama J's. The logo, the pot, my son came up with that. The colors, the red, white, and the black, my son came up with that. I'm the food person. So anything outside of the food person is him.

**00:31:04**

**SW:** I've noticed your hours. You're open all day long and you do the catering. How the heck do you do that?

**00:31:11**

**VJ:** Well we don't have catering every day. If I'm going to have catering, if I'm going to have something catered unexpectedly it's probably going to be a funeral. And I have staff; I have like I said I have a sister Donna, who works with me, and I have Richard and Julia, who has been – and Jerome who has been faithful. And I don't even go out to parties. Very seldom I got out to a party to set up or do anything anymore. I stay here and fix the food. Jerome knows how to go; he knows how I want it set up. We go to the site maybe a couple days before to make sure we're going to put this, that, and where we're going to put things. The restaurant takes care of itself. We cook the food. We come in at eight o'clock in the morning; by twelve o'clock we're ready to start serving – at eleven o'clock we're ready to start serving. Around 4:30 – I have two teams; one comes in at eight and the other one comes in at one so we cook food from eight – for eight to

run us through four o'clock and the one o'clock guys come in and they cook food to run them through then night.

**00:32:22**

We try to cook – we cook most of our food fresh every day, things like collards, and yams. They're better when they're cooked the day before, so – but everything else, we wash chicken, we pick feathers, we scale fish, we – we do it all. But the team of them, they – they put it all together.

**00:32:45**

And if I don't feel like coming to work I just don't come but that never happens. I'm in here every day.

**00:32:49**

**SW:** You can't stay away?

**00:32:50**

**VJ:** No; I can't and my son is the same way. I fuss at him and I say, "I thought you were supposed to be off today." "This is my job; this is my life." [*Laughs*] But like I said, we get a kick out of talking to the customers and the families and we have a good time.

**00:33:06**

**SW:** When you were growing up and because this whole project is about women and entrepreneurship and food, I'm wondering was it common for women to have their own business. I mean did you know a lot of women who owned their own restaurant or their own business or anything like that?

**00:33:20**

**VJ:** No; I didn't know – um, any women that owned anything. Edloe's Pharmacy [Edloe's Professional Pharmacy] was my first cousin and he was a man and he – he was over in the Church Hill area. But like I said I never really ventured away from home. The doctors came to the house to see us if we were sick. And even when – even – even after I got out of high school I can't think of any woman that I know that started anything.

**00:33:56**

All of us – all of my sisters know how to do something 'cause my sister – I have a sister that has a craft shop and I have a sister that has an alteration shop. I have another sister that has an upholstery shop. So we could do everything you know because I don't – like I said I didn't know any women but all my sisters we – we can hang wallpaper, we can hang sheetrock, we can paint 'cause those are the things that we learned from my father. We learned how to use a screwdriver and a hammer, and how to chop wood. We even had baby chicks that we had to actually go out and feed and how to shovel coal and all those kinds of things. But I can't – I can't ever remember other than coming downtown to go to church or going to the movie, I don't ever remember leaving home except to go to school.

**00:34:50**

**SW:** Have you ever been presented with any challenges being a woman in this business or if there are any upsides to it?

**00:34:57**

**VJ:** No; um, I haven't. Everything has its ups and downs, but I – I can't say it's an upsides to it.

**00:35:14**

**SW:** And I'm also wondering, you talked a little bit about this maybe like 20 minutes ago but you said that you bought all of these new clothes and you had a stool and you were going to sit in it in the front and say hi, welcome to Mama J's. I mean watching this place take off the way it has do you think that it was this inherent need for this community to have a place like Mama J's?

**00:35:36**

**VJ:** Yes; I think so. Although they had some restaurants here and Croaker Spots was one of them who is now located over the South Side. And I hate – I really didn't like the fact that when Croaker Spots left because I wanted – we were in the process of talking about restaurant owners getting a little community together, a little meeting or something together that we could actually sit down. And then we have a little wagon up on the corner that sells hotdogs. And when Mama J's opened up we wouldn't sell fish because – we wouldn't sell trout because Croaker Spots that was their specialty. And we didn't sell hotdogs or bologna burgers because of the little man up the street that's what he sold. And I didn't want to come in the neighborhood and step on anybody's toes. I wanted to do me.

**00:36:29**

The reason I think and – and I'm not bragging but what sets me aside from the other restaurants that I know of is that we cook things fresh. We don't get any collards out of the can. The yams don't come out of a can. The mashed potatoes are not instant. Our chicken is fresh chicken; we get it from the chicken house. And we do things fresh. Our crabmeat is – is fresh. Nothing comes out of a bag, cut and serve, so when you come in here your pork chops may taste a little bit different today than from yesterday. The batter we – batter our chicken and pork chops

in I make because they got certain seasonings in it so you can't – . But as far as the other restaurants in the neighborhood, I like having them here because all us do everything different. And if you like going this place and not coming to Mama J's that's fine. It's so many people that come here; the ones that don't come, we don't miss them because we have – actually have like an hour – 20 minutes, hour and a half, hour and 45 minutes people will actually come and wait to eat. They do.

00:37:53

**SW:** When are you – when is the busiest day or time here?

00:37:57

**VJ:** The busiest day and time is every night. [*Laughs*] Lunchtime is always busy every day, even when – 'cause we didn't open on Mondays and we started opening up on Mondays and it was like we've been open on Mondays all the time 'cause people still come in here on Mondays you know 'cause when we weren't open if we came down here to clean – Mondays was our clean – really our cleanup day or our staff meeting day and when we're here people steady are pulling on the door. "Oh I forgot y'all were closed on Mondays. Ah!" So any – for any given time you sit here during the day you may see 20 people pull up that – so now that we're open on Mondays and Monday is busy. You know it slows down a little after lunch every day except maybe on Fridays.

00:38:43

But it's constant; hmm. This is one of the man's favorite eating places. The coach of VCU, Shaka Smart. he loves to eat here, him and his wife. We've had a lot of stars that come in town that they found Mama J's is the place to eat. So it's – it's kind of cool.

**00:39:04**

**SW:** I wanted to ask you about the cakes before I forget. Who makes all the cakes?

**00:39:08**

**VJ:** I make most of the cakes, but I've showed Richard how to make cakes.

**00:39:13**

**SW:** And who is Richard?

**00:39:14**

**VJ:** Richard is one of the guys that works down in the catering kitchen. He's a sweetie pie but I've taught him how to make cakes and he gets excited 'cause he makes cakes now. And my son also dropped the hint that, "Mom, now we're making cakes like crazy," and – 'cause we make our corn muffins now. We used to didn't make our corn muffins. We used to get them brought in already made. "We need to open up a bakery." I says, "Okay; you open it up 'cause I'm not going anywhere." But yeah; we make our cakes. We got about 40 different cakes that we make and every day we may create another one. And the way we create a cake is because we kind of put the different kind of flavoring in it and we kind of mess it up a little bit – oh I didn't meant to put this flavor in. And I said, "Okay; let's see what we're going to name this cake." So that's how a lot of our cakes got names, yeah.

**00:39:59**

**SW:** I couldn't believe how many cakes there were yesterday.

**00:40:02**

**VJ:** Yeah; just about – oh you just saw a little bit of them. It's about 40 of them.

**00:40:06**

**SW:** Yeah; but I was impressed by 10. They're at least 10.

**00:40:09**

**VJ:** Yeah; it's about 40 of them. *[Laughs]* Sometimes I go at – I lay at home in the bed and I say oh, I forgot we used to make the almond cake. And we make all kinds of cakes, uh-hm; we come up with crazy names for cakes like the Lemon Volcano and we have the Reese's Pieces and the Dreamsicle and the Nutty Buddy and it's crazy.

**00:40:30**

**SW:** Do you like baking more than you like cooking or do you like one more than the other or is it all the same?

**00:40:35**

**VJ:** I don't love one more than the other. I just love to cook. I just love to cook; yeah.

**00:40:42**

**SW:** Do you – I just have two more quick questions for you. One is – you know you talk about Jackson Ward coming back now and I'm wondering you know now where you are do you see

other women in the Richmond area opening their restaurants or businesses? Is there a trend of that happening or maybe not? I don't know – from your perspective.

**00:41:01**

**VJ:** I don't – I don't know any of the – the owners of the restaurants. I can't tell you whether they're a male or female. I just know it's a lot of them down here in the neighborhood now. It's also been a lot down here that's actually gone out of business. They've closed down; it's about five or six since we've been here that's actually left Jackson Ward. But you've got other ones coming in; whether they're male or female I couldn't tell you. I hear good things about all of them, I really do. We have our customers sometimes come in here comparing the restaurants but we don't feed into it. It's not important. We do what we do and they do what they do. If they're successful with it that's fine; if – if they want to know what works for Mama J's we'll tell them. But we don't give out any recipes. *[Laughs]*

**00:41:52**

**SW:** That's good. They did a barbeque oral history last year and you don't ask people about their sauce. We learned that very quickly. I'm – I know this is sort of a strange question so bear with me on this one. But I mean looking back at all the work you put into this I mean and – and how – just how hard you worked to get this to where it is now, I mean what does that mean for you or what goes through your mind when you think about all of the work you've put in and you continue to put in to make this so successful?

**00:42:22**



**VJ:** Um, it's a lot of hard – it was hard work. When we moved in the building the building was in disarray so it took us two months to clean it and to get it where we wanted and it's still really not where we want it. And I can't take credit for the – all the hard work. It was days that when we started to open up I didn't even come in here because I'm not a cleaner. So it was a team of them that actually got Mama J's up and running.

**00:42:49**

And it's still not hard. We have people that make it easy for me. I have Kelli [Lemon], who is one of my managers who – who makes it easy and my employees make it easy 'cause as long as they do what they're supposed to do and everything runs smooth – you have your ups and downs days with you know people because each – everybody is an individual. I have Lester who is – who is a jewel. I don't even know how he does do what he do. And then we have Jonathon which is another one of our owners and then I have my daughter-in-law Yolanda who helps out.

**00:43:23**

So the hardest part was trying to figure out how much chicken I needed to keep in the building without letting it go bad or Lester is a big thing on don't open up a restaurant and people coming in and they want macaroni and cheese and you say, "Oh, well we don't have any today." Every now and then we may run out of something but you don't want to do that 'cause that upsets Lester very, very bad. So it's – it was after about six months it became easier. The health inspector comes in here and she gets on us about something and – and I welcome her because I says, "I've never opened a restaurant and I need to know where I'm making a mistake." And now when she comes in here to do her inspections we – we may have a little flaw or something but we kind of breeze through them.

**00:44:18**

Keeping the paperwork straight for the ABC Board – it's – like I said it's just a team. I can't – I can't take all the – all the work – blame – all the good works that are being done here. The service, they say I got the sweetest servers on the front. They don't know how much I fuss at them but when it comes to the customers they're cool. So and everybody thinks their nice, polite, um, and my motto is here if you come to Mama J's and you get something that you don't like don't leave here with a sour taste in your mouth. Tell your server. So she'll give you something that you want to enjoy 'cause you know you may come in for fried chicken. Chicken may not be cooked the way your mama cook it; you know don't eat it. "I don't want this chicken." We get people to come in here and they may order fried shrimp but then they see the same person sitting at a table with a big old piece of fried catfish. "Oh this shrimp doesn't taste good." It is nothing wrong with the shrimp; it's just that they decided they wanted catfish which is cool with us but just be honest about it. "This is not what I want today," so – .We take it and throw it in the trash and give them some catfish. We want them to be happy when they leave.

00:45:31

**SW:** And before I forget, I just want to make sure, just a couple names. What is Jonathon's last name?

00:45:38

**VJ:** His name is Mayo – M-a-y-o – and he is my son Lester's best friend. They went to high school, college together and they have a business together, a sports business, yeah called The Avail [*Avail Marketing*]. They do the Soul Bowl and they do a lot of community things out in the community. They raise money for charities and – which is pretty cool.

**00:46:06**

**SW:** And what is Richard's last name?

**00:46:08**

**VJ:** His name is Richard Canada; yeah.

**00:46:12**

**SW:** Is it spelled just like C-a-n-a-d-a? And then what is Kelli's – is it K-e-l-l-e-y?

**00:46:19**

**VJ:** K-e-l-l-i.

**00:46:21**

**SW:** And –

**00:46:23**

**VJ:** And Lemon like the fruit.

**00:46:23**

**SW:** L-e-m-o-n, okay. And then Yolanda – is Yolanda's last name Johnson?

**00:46:27**

**VJ:** Her name is Johnson and then I have a sister that works here. I haven't spoke of her; her name is Paulette Pulliam and then Julia Talon and my – my best, best worker of all the world is Jerome Fleming. That's – that's – I'd fire everybody I have if I could clone him and make him

into about 20 people. He could serve. He could cook. He can go to the store. He does all my shopping for me when I have to go out and get something. He's a jewel. And that's – that's the biggest of – that's the backbone of Mama J's. And then the rest of the people that come in and actually fry the fish and the chicken and – and that's all they really have to do is batter stuff because all the macaroni and cheese is made, the collards are made, and all they have to do is take it out of the warmer and scoop it and put it on a plate and make it look pretty and – that's – that's how it's done.

00:47:25

**SW:** How – how many people are on your staff in total?

00:47:28

**VJ:** Thirty-five(ish) and – and it's so funny because my son and I was talking about the minimum wage that they're fussing about up in Washington and they said it should be at least \$9.00. Well I says well they need to come to us because we pay all our people way over \$9.00 – \$9.00, \$10.00, \$11.00, you know and for a small restaurant I think that's great.

00:47:58

**SW:** Yeah; absolutely.

00:47:59

**VJ:** Yeah; nobody makes minimum wage here, nobody – not even our dishwasher.

00:48:02

**SW:** That's rare; that's really rare in this industry. Well I don't have any other questions for you. I think I've exhausted all mine but is there something you want to add that you think is important that I didn't ask you or anything else you want to add?

**00:48:17**

**VJ:** No; uh-um.

**00:48:19**

**SW:** Well thank you for doing this. I appreciate your time.

**00:48:20**

**VJ:** You're welcome; thank you.

**00:48:23**