

DEXTER WEAVER
Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods – Athens, GA

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Interviewer: Amy Evans
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Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Dexter Weaver Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, November 20, 2006 in Athens, Georgia, with Dexter Weaver at Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods. And Mr. Weaver D., would you please state your name and also your birth date for the record, if you don't mind?

00:00:17

Dexter Weaver: Dexter Weaver, November 28, 1954—November 28th; I've got a birthday coming up—fifty-two.

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AE: Thanksgiving and a birthday, that's a big month.

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DW: Uh-huh, November 28, 1954. Uh-huh.

00:00:29

AE: Well happy almost birthday to you.

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DW: Thank you.

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AE: And you were born in Athens is that correct and grew up in Baltimore?

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DW: Yes, I was born in Athens and left here at six years old and moved to Baltimore and stayed there seventeen years, moved back to Athens in December of '78.

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AE: And can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Baltimore? I understand part of your—your biography is shining shoes in—in Baltimore.

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DW: Okay. Baltimore was a great adventure. You know, leaving from a small city like Athens and going into a big city. I would get lost coming from school some days [*Laughs*], you know, not knowing my way around and a different language that they speak up there—we speak down here. They would call this [Athens, GA] country. That's more northern. And I started out my entrepreneurship. I started out with gardens, growing gardens and, you know, even the vegetables. And I also sold Cheerful House Cards; I sold corsages and roses—buds for Mothers Day, sold newspapers, *Gospel News Journal*, Seven-Year Light Bulbs; I made candles that I learned how to make in the sixth grade and sold them up and down in our neighborhood. And my entrepreneurship—. And then in the '60s during the Martin Luther King riots and segregation and all we—my dad made me a shoe shine box, and I began shining shoes all over Baltimore in the areas in the club—nightclubs were at 35-cents a shine and went on from there.

00:02:07

AE: How old were you when you got the shoe shine kit?

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DW: I think I might have been about twelve—all these things I did when I was—wasn't old enough to get a workers permit but I guess that drive and the zeal was already implanted in me, you know. *[Laughs]* And then when I got my workers permit, I think my first job was McDonald's, like all of ours were. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Now when you say you had a drive and a zeal, was it something that was just a personal thing, or did your parents help instill that in you also?

00:02:36

DW: I think my parents helped instill in me. My mother always worked, and she was a nurse and she went to school, and I cooked for her and I—and I think just going from there. And then I wanted to have my own money, so that's one thing, too, when a child is growing up—when you want to earn your own money honestly, uh-hmm.

00:02:57

AE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

00:03:00

DW: Well my dad has—he has one son—two sons, me and another boy and four daughters, so—. And my brother, he grew up in Ohio and my sisters, they grew up here in Athens because he had a different mother, and my sisters have different mothers.

00:03:18

AE: So it was just you and your mother in Baltimore, then?

00:03:21

DW: Yes, me and my mother in Baltimore, and then she had a boyfriend who made the shoe shine box. And a lot of people in his family was entrepreneurs so that's sort of strange, too, you know [*Laughs*]
—I sort of picked up some of his genes. [*Laughs*]

00:03:37

AE: What's your mother's name?

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DW: Her name is Carrie Jackson—Carrie Bradley Jackson.

00:03:43

AE: And can you spell Carrie for me?

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DW: C-a-r-r-i-e—Emily Bradley Jackson.

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AE: And so did you grow up in Baltimore City, the downtown area?

00:03:53

DW: Yeah, I grew up in Baltimore, which will be called the East Side, and I went to elementary school there, junior high school and high school. And a lot of this stuff transpired while I was in junior high school—the shoe shine—I meant elementary school with the shoe shine box and

Cheerful House Cards, the *Gospel News Journal*, the newspaper—*Afro-American Newspaper*; I sold those, too. And then we used to work for an ambulance company that was located within the neighborhood where I lived, and we would pick up glass and paper in the alley and get money for that.

00:04:29

AE: So this was you and all your friends, or were you kind of like the ringleader of all this money making?

00:04:33

DW: I think I might have been a ringleader. And then I had a cousin that I grew up with and he—you know, followed behind me and the ambulance company. Me and him would race around there every Saturday to see who would get there first because whoever got there first, that's who the man would give the job to. *[Laughs]*

00:04:49

AE: Now you mentioned a garden; was that something that you had at home, or was that more of a—like a community garden?

00:04:54

DW: Okay, I had a garden at home. I planted carrots, turnip greens, beets, squash—all kinds of stuff like that. I think some of the country-ness from being down South, you know, was still in me when I went up North, and I was, you know, busy planting there and seeing my grandmother plant different vegetables yearly.

00:05:17

AE: Your grandmother was down here, though, and she taught you those things?

00:05:20

DW: Uh-huh, Francis Weaver, my dad's mother, she did planting every year and you know, we got our fresh collards out of the yard.

00:05:29

AE: So what was that like in Baltimore? Because in the city there's not a lot of green space, so what kind of garden was it exactly? Can you describe it?

00:05:36

DW: Okay, some of the houses that we rented up there—most—some of them had cement backyards, some of them had like partial cement and partial dirt, so in this particular house we had a dirt backyard and you know, that's where we did our planting at.

00:05:52

AE: About how big was it?

00:05:54

DW: Well it wasn't like a—you know, a big space—just small, you know. I had two or three packs of seeds. Don't forget I used to sell the seeds, so I would plant them in the yard too, and bring up some of the, you know—I guess I liked seeing things grow. I liked to turn things to one form to another, so and I was—I think I was in elementary [school], so that was really you know—I really had a vision, uh-hmm.

00:06:22

AE: And a work ethic and responsibility for keeping things—keeping the garden growing and keeping it maintained.

00:06:29

DW: Yes, I think that was—yeah, I think I was like in the fifth or sixth grade, so that’s real good you know, compared to some of the fifth and sixth graders now, you know, such as working like, “No, I don’t want to work,” you know. *[Laughs]*

00:06:45

AE: And you said you would cook for your mother. Did your mother cook at all? Did she teach you to cook, or that would have been your grandmother, or you did it on your own?

00:06:51

DW: Yeah, she taught me to cook and then my step-dad, Robert Lee, he cooked, you know, a lot too. And I—I guess just being around in there and watching and taking note of cooking different things, and I’m not saying, you know, back then I’m the cook that I am now, but I grew to perfection.

00:07:09

AE: How do you think Baltimore influenced or did it influence your cooking?

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DW: Okay, Baltimore was just such a wide appeal. And I'm not saying that people I played with cooked or did those things. Most of the time I think I was the ring leader in a lot of that, and then one time we went out and bought a lot of pets, such as hamsters, white mice, rabbits, and stuff that they sold at the pet store, and we had a pet show in the neighborhood and let all the children come in and see the pets. And then we sold popcorn and hotdogs and stuff like that. So I guess all that was just the beginning of what it is now. And I went to Baltimore one time, and I was knocking on someone's door and someone called me that was sitting on the steps you know, Baltimore is known for the marble steps, and said, "Dexter." And I looked up, and I'm like, "Earline." And you know we went up and started talking, and she still remembered. It was in her yard where we had the pet show. And she said, "You remember we had that pet show when we was little?" And I'm like, "Yeah," you know, so it just went on from then and just grew. And I was always doing different things, having different parties in the neighborhood, you know, like blue lights in the basement. And then we had the waste-line parties—whatever your waste line and then the weight parties—whatever your weight is—is how much you paid to come in, so just—. I heard a cousin of mine, he said, 'You have always been sort of like a leader in starting different things, so I guess there are three kinds of people—those that watch things that happen, make things happen, and those that wonder what happened.'" So I made things happen in my neighborhood and in my community.

00:08:59

AE: And you mentioned the Civil Rights Movement when you were in Baltimore, during that time. Do you remember—or you're about to say something. Go ahead.

00:09:06

DW: Yeah, I remember my mother and Robert Lee had went out to—to the movies that night, and when Mama came home I told her—I said, “They said Martin Luther King got killed last night.” And Mama said, “Oh, Lord.” You know, she hadn't heard it because they was at the movies. And it was during that period we had a lot of white businesses in our neighborhood too, and with all the rioting and burning and looting and all that I was, you know—I witnessed all that and then how we had curfews and had to be off the street at a certain time and how the—what is those—not—is it the GBIs? It’s not really the GBIs. What are those people that patrol the streets, you know, how the—how the Mayor ordered in—I cannot think of their name. They’re not Secret Service, but it’s something in that line, you know, just making sure the streets are clear. The same time—and how we had hardware stores in our neighborhoods the same, you know, across the street from the clubs where I used to shine shoes, and all those got burned down, so I witnessed all that, and I was in the sixth grade. And there’s a part in my book [*Automatic Y’all: Weaver D’s Guide to the Soul*] where a little boy came to school and said, “Martin Luther King got killed last night.” You know, we had current events that we had to do, and this little boy said, “I know some current event. Martin Luther King got killed last night.” And another boy said, “Who was Martin Luther King?” So the teacher really got upset, “You don’t know who Martin Luther King was?” [**Emphasis Added**] You know, she sort of like went off, and that was in my sixth grade year and that was history right there and witnessing all that. And then after all that was over, we had a lot of burned down stores in our neighborhood that they never rebuilt, so it was like our loss.

00:11:06

AE: I’m curious about the clubs, too—being interested in food and such a part of the community. I grew up in Houston, Texas, and I had a lot of musician friends who would talk

about going to Baltimore and it being segregated, and there weren't a lot of pieces to eat. And a lot of people would bring food to their buses or their cars and bring trays of chicken and biscuits and that kind of stuff. Did you ever hear anything like that?

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DW: In Baltimore—I didn't witness any of that. I know that in Fells Point a lot of Jewish people were down in there, you know, selling the corned beef sandwiches. And oh, when I go to Baltimore now, I have to get me a corned beef sandwich. And I went there last year, and I went to Lexington Market, and that's where they have all the fresh fruit and the fresh fish and the crab cakes and all that, you know. It's known up there for the crab cakes and the crabs—Chesapeake Bay is not too far away. And I really enjoy going there, and every time I go to Baltimore—I think different cities, when you go to them, there's different things that you know, you like to eat there, different places you like to go, so I love to go down to Lexington Market and Lombard Street too where Jack's Corned Beef used to be—and Ottoman's, yeah.

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AE: I went to college in Baltimore, so you naming those streets and Lexington Market kind of brings back some things I hadn't thought about in a while.

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DW: What school did you go to in Baltimore?

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AE: Maryland Institute College of Art.

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DW: Okay, okay, yeah. And my mother went to CCB [Community College of Baltimore], and she also went to Coppin State College, and I went to CCB also.

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AE: Your mother still lives up there?

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DW: Uh-uh, she's here now, uh-hmm. She's a Registered Nurse. Yeah, she's retired now, uh-hm.

00:12:43

AE: Was there any soul food up in Baltimore when you were growing up there?

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DW: Yeah, down on—I'm trying to see—in West Baltimore there's a place called Sampson's, and they sold collard greens and they sold chitterlings and yeast rolls. It might be on Baltimore Street—West Baltimore Street, if I'm not mistaken, somewhere over there in the Saratoga, Mulberry—over in that area—West Baltimore—Sampson's. Okay.

00:13:08

AE: Well let's talk about when you came back to Athens. Did you know immediately you wanted to get in the restaurant business?

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DW: Well when I first came back to Athens, I managed Kentucky Fried Chicken, and then I managed Krystal [Hamburgers] in Atlanta, and then I went back to Baltimore for a year—'83 to '84—and I managed Wendy's on Liberty Road, so—. And being in fast-food management, I never thought that I would own my own place. It was just that, you know, when different equipment breaks down, as the manager you learn how to fix it, and I did that. And I didn't know one day I would apply [that knowledge] to my own business, so it all worked out—that learning that and the long hours and controlling paper calls, controlling labor calls, cleanliness, you know. At Kentucky Fried Chicken we had such thing as QSC—Quality Service Cleanliness. And we have different anonymous people that come around, and you have to always greet them. You would always have to have your name tag on; the store would always have to be ready; your parking lot had to always be clean, your bathroom, and just different things like that because you never know who they are when they come in. And then if you get good scores you can get a prize, your store can win money—just different incentives that employees could get and managers.

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AE: So was the fast-food thing, was that something that because you were interested in food that it was something that you were—had an interest in or was it just a job or something—a stepping stone to something else?

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DW: Okay, I had—I went to CCB in Baltimore, and my main goal really was to be a Registered Dietician, but I never did make it. But I took a lot of classes like in principles of management, principles of supervision, introduction of food administration, sanitation and equipment, you

know; so a lot of different courses that would apply to being a manager. And then I went for an interview with Kentucky Fried Chicken in Marietta [Georgia] and got on right here because the corporate office was up there in Marietta. So I got on right here in Athens, so that was a blessing. I have led the way, you know, in food service.

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AE: So do you remember the moment when the light bulb went off and you said, “I want to have my own place”?

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DW: Okay, how it was—I had lost a job at one time, and I was working out of my home selling dinners on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. And a group of people came over from the Recreation Department and told me that Riverside Café had went out of business and that was the name of this restaurant—Riverside Café. So after I got through serving everybody—that Friday—I began to come down here and knock on doors, you know, to find out who owned the building. And when I approached the landlord, you know, he didn’t know anything about me. I told him, you know, I do a lot of catering around town. I let him know those were my peanuts in Golden Pantry Stores. And so he left that day, and I guess he asked around who I was, and I knew his lawyer, you know, who took care of his leases and stuff. So when he asked him about it he said, “He is a good man.” So the next day he met with me, and he said, “Here are your keys right now.” So Weaver D’s was born, and we began to remodel this building and went under construction for about a month. And then we opened up with commercials on the radio, newspaper ads, and we just had lines out the door. We couldn’t hardly, you know, handle all the people, but we managed some kind of way. So that was in ’78 and then we’ve you know—I was

already known for the Fraternity circuit, catering for them on a daily basis, doing parent days and tailgating.

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AE: And you were doing all that out of your house?

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DW: I did. I started there, and it just grew. So when I opened up this building, I had a customer base already [*Laughs*] because people were saying, “Why don’t you do it on Sundays?” And, “Why don’t you do it all the time?” You know. But you just didn’t want everybody at your house, you know. So we went on from then, and when I opened up here, I already had a customer base, uh-hmm.

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AE: So were you making and serving and selling the same things back then, when you were working from your house, as you are now?

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DW: I did. I sold lobster tails. I sold fried chicken, baked chicken. I did collard greens—stuff like that all the time, uh-hm.

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AE: Where did your recipes come from?

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DW: Oh, they came from like family, you know, knowing how mother cooked her chicken and what she put in her flour and how she made her cornbread. And then I was always picking up little tips because I was in a choir in Baltimore—the Holiness Church—and every choir member had to bring a covered dish and the organist told, “Whoever do the potato salad, please do not wait until those potatoes are ice-cold before you put the mayonnaise on them.” So you know, you’re always just picking up little tips, and everybody loves my potato salad, and I took that tip and ran with it. So I usually boil my potatoes and let them cool for a little while and then add my seasoning—begin adding everything together and let them cool for about fifteen minutes. They’ll be still warm and that way the mayonnaise can do its thing.

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AE: When you were cooking out of your house, was there kind of a learning curve to cooking in—in a big quantity for all these catering gigs and what not?

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DW: Yes. Yes, that was my only job really back then, and I would just get up in the morning and just start cooking. I really used to cook for like sixty boys a day, Monday through Thursday. And a boy next door, when he got out of school, he would come over and load my van and unload it, and they would serve with regular plastic plates over there, and we’d wash the dishes and, you know, got ready for the next day. And I did banana puddings and all kinds of little stuff that I could do out of the house.

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AE: Do you remember some of the prices back in those early days?

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DW: Back then it might have been like five dollars a person, six dollars a person—something like that. And believe me, the Fraternities have not moved up a whole lot. Some of them still want to pay you six dollars a person, or some you can get seven dollars out of a person.

00:19:29

AE: Early on, did you see the Fraternities and Sororities as a great outlet for a catering business? Was that definitely going to be part of your business early on?

00:19:38

DW: I did because they were always having parent weekends. They was always having tailgating—games and they was always having date nights and things like that, so I became a part of the things that they did.

00:19:53

AE: Now you said you had help delivering and what not, but did you have much help cooking in those days?

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DW: No, I have been basically my own cook, especially out of my home. But it's only when I came here that I had, you know, got me some more help, yep.

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AE: Are you living in the same home where you started the catering business?

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DW: No, I moved about two or three times since then, uh-hm, but that was my foundation—that house.

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AE: Where was that and what was the address?

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DW: It was in East Baltimore. The rent was very reasonable, and it had hardwood floors. And as I catered, I began to have a kitchen tile, and I put a stainless steel sink in, you know, just bigger light in the kitchen—just things to just make me be more, you know, more food service ready.

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AE: Was there some licensing that you had to kind of jump through some hoops, or was nobody really looking that way, working from your house.

00:20:48

DW: Not really, not really. It was just—I guess with all businesses, you know, started out of the home. You know, I didn't stay there for years and years, you know what I mean? It was just like a starting point, and I think everybody has started out of their home, in their car, or something, yeah.

00:21:09

AE: All right. So tell me about Automatic. Tell me—tell me about that.

00:21:12

DW: Okay, my Automatic slogan—at first I didn't have it copyrighted. It was just “Automatic for the People.” And then it was such a catchy phrase, everybody in town loved it, and I thought I needed to copyright it, you know, before you know—just it would be taken out of my hands. And then in '92 [the rock band] REM approached me. They came down here to the restaurant and wanted to name it their next album title, and I'm like, “Oh.” When they came I really didn't know who they were, and I thought they might have just been some salesmen, you know, coming to see me. And then when they identified their selves on who they was, and I'm like uh—. And then my attitude wasn't you know—I wasn't really just shining and bubbling over like I usually do because they had, you know, been burglarizing the place every night. As fast as we could put the food in, they was coming in and taking it out. **[Laughs]** I even had to cater out of a plant for Christmas; they came in and took all my hams **[Laughs]**. So it was just like, “Oh.” And then after they told me who they was and what they wanted, you know, it began to make my day. I began to smile and—and it went on from there. Then we went to the Grammy's in '94, which was another adventure. And then tours from all around the world came visiting me. And the *Rolling Stone Magazine* has said that they had got their album title from a soul food restaurant. It didn't reveal the name; it just said a soul food restaurant, and it just went on from there.

00:22:46

AE: So when the guys from REM came in asked you about it, how did they explain that they wanted to use it for their album title?

00:22:54

DW: Well I lived next door to a member of Driving and Crying, which was another group, and some kind of way I didn't catch on. I had went next door; the lady that cleaned up for me also cleaned for the guy—for Driving and Crying—for him and his wife—Driving and Crying. And I said, "Is the lady going to clean up for me in the morning, you in the morning, me in the afternoon or what?" So she was telling me. So she said, "Have you seen REM lately?" And I'm like, "No," you know I just—then the next day they came to see me, and I'm like, "What?"

[Surprised] So when I went home that day I said, "Amy, I am so happy." She said, "I know, REM came to see you." I said, "How did you know?" And that's when she told me a member of Driving and Crying and a member of REM was up in Atlanta in Buckhead—at a bar and said, "We want to name our album *Automatic for the People*, but we haven't talked to Weaver yet." And I'm like, "What?" **[Surprised]** You know, so she knew, you know, and I didn't know. But she said—she said, "Oops, let me be quiet before I the spill the beans," you know, the first thing, so it was just so funny. And then when I went over, "I'm so happy and—" And she said, "I know; REM came to see you." I'm like, "How did you know?" **[Laughs]** So it went on like that. And it was the beginning of so much you know—the book deal, the customer flow. I heard Warner Brothers, they had a meeting explaining all about this restaurant and what all—you know, and then they had started answering the phone, "Automatic," you know, at Warner Brothers New York and all around the world. And it was just really something, you know, the way—. And then people—tours and travelers—and I had to hire a publicist back in the back and we had a 1-800 number and it just went, you know, on and on and on and on.

00:24:49

AE: Where did that phrase originate and how did you come up with Automatic for the People?

00:24:54

DW: Okay, I used to sell leather goods on the streets here in Athens and when I was in Baltimore, and a guy said, “If you didn’t have a product one day you would have—have it the next and I combined Automatic—. Oh, and then I worked at a fast-food chain when the lady manager over me informed me that if hourly employees didn’t report for work, then we had to work a double shift, automatic. So I had combined automatic and having that product ready—if I didn’t have it one day, I’d have it the next—meaning ready, quick, and efficient. **[Laughs]** So I just combined those two, and then we went on and had it copyrighted, so I don’t have a registered trademark that’s a mark of service. I have an SM—service mark—behind my Automatic for the People SM.

00:25:43

AE: And what year did you acquire that?

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DW: It’s sometime in the ‘90s that I had it copyrighted, and so far we’ve sold it to REM and we’ve also sold it to a computer company out of New Hampshire, so different people are still calling and, you know, wanting this phrase. And my thing was for Presidents to use it. And then Billy Payne [president and chief executive officer of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games], I wrote him that they could use it for the Olympics theme—Automatic for the People—but he wrote me back and said it was a great slogan but they had chose the Olympics of the Century. So that was nice. But Al Gore was here campaigning, and he said that him and Bill Clinton were—were going to be Automatic for the People and Bush and Quayle was out of time.

So it was something, you know. And then I was in the market that night and—and somebody said, “You wasn’t over at the rally over at the University today when Al Gore was there. Even the President started using your slogan.” And I said, “That’s what I want,” you know. **[Laughs]** So it went on from there.

00:26:56

AE: Well and I understand you have some other things that you say too like *Come on out of that coma*, talking to people who come into the restaurant here.

00:27:02

DW: Okay, at—when we were doing the book they—they wanted to do *Automatic Y’all* and then they thought about *Come Out of that Coma*, but they thought *Automatic Y’all* would be more fitting to the slogan of Automatic for the People. And we have this other thing—“Communication” that we use at the register when they, you know, are not saying anything—“Communication!” you know—come on. **[Laughs]** Let’s communicate. And so many phrases—“How you going to carry it?” It was just a quote that they had used in Baltimore, like you know, if something happened, how you going to carry it? I mean and then my slogans and phrases are just created you know during situations, so I just happen to just come up with “Communication” one day in line, when somebody was just standing up there taking forever ordering. I’m like, “Hey come on,” you know—. So just little stuff like that. And I’m sure there’s more phrases to come and more quotes, so someone told me that I had a song or quote for everything and life is a song worth singing. **[Laughs]** Am I right?

00:28:19

AE: Is that something that just comes naturally as part of your personality or you try to come up with things to kind of mix it up a little bit?

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DW: I think it's part of the personality—personality. It is and they love it, you know, because they say you can always count on me to make you happy. I try to.

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AE: Well what is that part about what you do about working with the public and interacting with people every day that, in addition to making the food, but serving the public, what do you—what do you enjoy most about that?

00:28:48

DW: I think of just, you know, putting smiles on faces, you know, after they eat, you know. You feel real good, like all of us do, especially if it's good. And I guess just seeing expressions and how they'll change from one part to another you know—different feel, I guess, when you are hungry and when you are full you know—more jolly and more happy, you know. You're ready to go to sleep sometime. **[Laughs]** And then sometime you're ready to go to work, you know—so just different things like that.

00:29:28

AE: Now tell me about your food here. Now I know you're well known for your three-cheese macaroni and the sweet potato soufflé, which I could just eat my weight in, I think, but your fried chicken and all that. Talk about what you have here.

00:29:38

DW: Okay, we have our squash casserole, which is a vegetarian. All right, and we got a broccoli casserole, a vegetarian item, sweet potato soufflé is a vegetarian item, and we now cook our green beans with butter, and we have the buttered potatoes and we have the rice—all those items. We get a lot of vegetarians in and we also—we just appeal to just a wide range of people—those that are diabetic. I’ve been a diabetic now for about two years, so I really try watching my fats in my foods and the salt and the seasonings, so it’s not what you will say greasy food or any of that. We’ll cook it more healthier because, as we get older, all of us, you know, are eating more healthy, and a lot of people emphasize on baked chicken—baked items. Sometimes I might do baked pork chops. Sometimes I might do baked fish. That’s just every now and then. And then a lot of food I cook for ourselves back there is baked.

00:30:40

AE: So did that evolve for—to serve your personal needs or how about the community here and there being a lot more vegetarians in the general population in Athens?

00:30:50

DW: Yeah, we are. And then even upon my catering I’m finding us a lot of vegetarians because, when I do rehearsal dinners, they say, “Well a lot of us are vegetarians,” or, “Half of us are vegetarians,” or, “Four or five of us are vegetarians.” So people are ordering extra vegetables now—most of them. And then, like I said, with the—with the cholesterol, diabetes and things of that nature, we’re incorporating a lot of baked chicken, you know, along our menu item. And sometimes I even suggest, “You want some baked chicken?” And he’s like, “Oh, yeah. I didn’t know you do baked.” So it’s coming in handy.

00:31:31

AE: What is the ratio of catering to restaurant business, do you think?

00:31:34

DW: I feel as though maybe seventy-five-percent of our business is the restaurant and maybe twenty-five-percent catering, because catering is far and between, you know. You might have to cater today, and you might not have another one 'til two weeks, but this customer flow comes in every day.

00:31:50

AE: And how about this location? You've been here for a good long while now, but there are just a handful of tables in here. Have you considered expanding, or are you going to stay here for the long haul or move along?

00:32:01

DW: I think one time in my thirties I really wanted a bigger place. I wanted a drive-thru and this, that, and the other. And then every now and then a wild idea will hit me like I need a bigger place, or I need another place, you know. But I have to really get—I have to come out of that coma then. **[Laughs]** Like how are you going to run two places, you know? So and then I thought about another place one time, and some other people that are in business who have had two locations—not restaurants—they might have had two pharmacists, but they feel as though that you can only run one real successful, you know, unless you're the hands-on—on both, which you cannot be. So I've had a lot of different advice from people that have been in business before I opened up. Because when I first opened up, I was pacing the floor wondering where everybody

was at. So some of the old restaurant owners uptown came to see me, and they told me it takes a year before everybody knows who you are, what you're selling, and all like that. And really, after a year I saw a change, so that was some true stuff that they was telling me, uh-huh. After a year I saw it, you know, pick up a little.

00:33:17

AE: So how has this place changed, if at all, since—since you opened it since the beginning days?

00:33:23

DW: Okay, it have changed. The neighborhood have changed. We have the walking bridge out there now. It was a lawn mower shop next door; the City bought that property and made a little park out there. We have the bicycle trail going down the street; we have condominiums going up the street; we had apartments that were remodeled across the street and now they were sold, and now they're being torn down and now some exclusive apartments and condos are supposed to go over there. So I've just been in the midst of all kinds of changes right here. And when I first opened, around the second or third year, they did a thing—East Athens on the verge of rapid growth, so I was a part of that and seeing the different trend changes and the new buildings and then—. Oh and then we had classes set up there because that hadn't always been up there and then the brand new newspaper building, you know. That hasn't always been there. So it's just a lot of changes. And then the apartment right there where the Farmers Hardware used to be, so it was just a lot of things and I'm right in the center of it.

00:34:28

AE: So as the—as the town has changed, how has your business changed as a result of that?

00:34:33

DW: Okay, we're getting a lot of tourists, like I said. There's a lot of conventions being held here and we're getting a lot of students. I do—I've done some—a breakfast at a First Baptist downtown for newcomer students' orientation, and they were given breakfast, you know, because they're trying to get members, too, while they're here the four years. So I'm—then I'm finding ones that discover us in their last year of school that say, "I've heard of Weaver D's and never been there." And then they say, "Oh, I should have been coming here to Weaver D's," you know. So it's just, you know, different trends, different people, and even ones that graduate they come back for games and tailgating and all that. So we, you know—we're constantly getting the flow of new people and then return of old and then people bringing their families back now. [Someone will say,] "This is my wife; this is my kid." And I'm like, "Oh." So I've been here twenty years, okay, so that's about it.

00:35:42

AE: Well when did you paint the outside green? Was—that's pretty recent, is it not?

00:35:45

DW: Okay, we painted that, let me see—been like that about three months—three or four months and everybody just loves it. I even get calls at home complimenting me on the green, uh-hm.

00:35:59

AE: How did you choose that color?

00:36:00

DW: I don't know; I don't know. I'm always looking at color charts and new colors, and I saw it and liked it because this building has been a white building for so long, so we did that.

[*Yawns*] And they said that you can see it from the University [of Georgia] now. They're just over-exaggerating you know, uh-hm.

00:36:23

AE: So tell me about the interior here and some of the things that you have on the wall.

00:36:28

DW: These are—are pictures, a lot of them for different newspapers like *Banner Herald*—I mean, listen to me—*Los Angeles Times*, REM's picture, pictures for the book—just different articles throughout the world.

00:36:56

AE: What do you think—I mean obviously REM naming their album *Automatic for the People* has had a big effect on you and your business. What do you think it has meant to them?

00:37:05

DW: I think it has—well they usually try to spotlight the city—hold on a minute. What was we saying?

00:37:15

AE: What *Automatic for the People* and—and the use of your phrase means to REM.

00:37:20

DW: Okay, they usually try to spotlight things—people in our city—and by me having that slogan or phrase, which was real appropriate for—for an album title or whatever, so they began to choose it as their title and the album and then, you know, it's like I said, it's a shining or spotlighting a business within their hometown and in the town where they live, so I thought that was real nice.

00:37:50

AE: Do they come in here much?

00:37:52

DW: They do. I see them periodically. I think Mike Mills comes in the most, then I seen all of them at the Taste of Athens, when all the restaurants come together in February. Sometimes they'll be there, and I catered all their record release parties from four or five albums back; I've catered most release parties, where they have the silent auctions and auctions and people come from everywhere for that too. So and then I've catered to different people in their families.

00:38:31

AE: And back to your menu, you said that you made a lot of changes for diabetics and vegetarians. Are there any other things that have been added to taken away over the—the past twenty years?

00:38:41

DW: Hmm, we do chitterlings sometimes in the winter, and that has been taken away because it's taken a lot of time for me to do chitterlings. We have a lot—a big fan base of that. I do ox-tails. And I don't think anything mostly have been taken away. I think some things have been added. And through the years we have improved certain items, you know, adding different things more to our dressing, more to our sweet potatoes; I add the orange flavoring now along with the lemon and vanilla and the nutmeg, so it's a lot of different things we add. You know it's only improvement with time.

00:39:20

AE: How does that happen, though; how do you decide that you want to add a little something new here to something that's been selling well and doing well?

00:39:27

DW: Well we go by the spirit here, and I think the spirit led us in a lot of different areas because I'm trying to see when I used to do sweet potatoes that I always put lemon in it, so I'm just thinking, you know, different things. And like we used to do our cabbage in fatback grease, but now we do it in the butter, so that's vegetarian, too. So just improvements as we went along—.

00:39:59

AE: And tell me about your cookbook [*Automatic Y'All: Weaver D's Guide to the Soul*]; what was that experience like?

00:40:03

DW: I was—it sold over 5,000 copies the first quarter and I was nominated Georgia Author of the Year and I was in a category with President Carter and it was a great experience, you know

just to have the book and then for it to sell so many copies, and then it was all around the world. So and then I made different appearances to Thames River, New Jersey; I went to Memphis in May; I went all around promoting the book and doing cooking demonstrations, so that was real nice. And I was on—on—and in the South Carolina Book Club; I was on the podium with many other famous authors from around the world, so that was a great experience, you know—just me coming from a single family home, self-entrepreneur, self-taught, so I think it went a long way.

00:41:00

AE: Did you have a vision of this kind of thing for yourself when you were young and growing a garden and cooking with—for your mom?

00:41:09

DW: No, I—I just felt as though that if I kept on working hard it would eventually would lead to something. And I didn't know what, but all I know the drive was there and what I had accomplished along the way came from that, yeah. This is that. [*Laughs*] You know—this is that yep.

00:41:28

AE: And your recipes, when you were doing the book, I wonder if a lot of what you make was that stuff you had written down or had written recipes or was it just by touch and feel?

00:41:37

DW: See, I'm spiritual. And like I say, I go according to the spirit. So whichever way it leads—even when I was doing the TV show that went around the world on PBS, the Christmas special with Virginia Willis and Erica McCarthy, Nowhere Productions, some things we did on the set

was just doing them, and you hope they come out, you know, and you're talking and some things were not already rehearsed. Some things were not already made—not already cooked; it was just something that was cooked, you know. So that's the deal there.

00:42:18

AE: And here in the restaurant what do you like most about what you do here?

00:42:23

DW: Just meeting new people and managing people and cooking the product.

00:42:30

AE: How many employees do you have now?

00:42:32

DW: We have a total of five—five employees and we're open six days a week eleven [a. m.] to six [p. m.], and we're open some game Sundays like that.

00:42:45

AE: Do you still do the majority of the cooking, or do you share that responsibility from time to time?

00:42:49

DW: Yeah, I do the majority of the cooking and—yeah, the majority of it.

00:42:58

AE: How about things like the caramel cake and that kind of thing? Do you do the baking too?

00:43:01

DW: Those—the cakes and stuff are brought in. I can't do cooking and baking. I know I'd be leaving a lot of stuff out of stuff, yep. I got to get back there—how much more we got to go?

00:43:13

AE: Well we—we can wind this down. I can just ask you if there is anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add, maybe?

00:43:19

DW: Okay, I just want to invite people to Weaver D's, you know, who have never been here, who have heard about the experience and never have witnessed it, to come and see us and bring friends, and I'm sure you will enjoy this food, and I'm sure you can compare this food to other places you've been and tell me what you like the best, so we want you to just keep on coming and then purchase the book and pass it out for Christmas gifts. *[Laughs]*

00:43:45

AE: Can I ask you just quickly what the future of Weaver D's is?

00:43:49

DW: Well I don't really know about the future yet. I've been here twenty years; I'm getting a little tired. I do feel as though that the future is not to do as much catering, and I'm coming out of that because I want to just mainly concentrate myself to being at the restaurant. And we're going

to do catering by occasion. I was telling somebody one time this is going to be the only restaurant open by appointment.

00:44:16

AE: And then one last thing and I promise this is it, but we didn't talk about how the restaurant got its name, since you're Dexter Weaver and it's Weaver D's. Can you talk about that?

00:44:22

DW: Okay, how I got the name—when I was in high school my last name was Weaver. We went by last name, first initial, and a number, so I was Weaver D 43 in high school in the tenth grade in gym and out of 43 solid, now it's Weaver D 52 *[Laughs]*. So that's how we arrived at the name.

00:44:49

AE: Just to be different and to be a little catchy or something a little more personal?

00:44:53

DW: Something that happened and something—you know, things happen; you know they're not always planned; it just happened. How y'all doing? *[Talking to Customers]* So it was just happened, you know. And then I just happened to be Weaver D 43, and I just happened to be at Mirabeau [?]. It just happened.

00:45:11

AE: How did the 43 not make it into the restaurant name?

00:45:15

DW: We didn't—I don't think it would be, you know—Weaver D 43—but it was—used just the last name and the first initial and a number and we just dropped the 43—the 43 is silent now.

[Laughs] What can I say?

00:45:34

AE: All right. Well we can wind this up because I know you're a businessman, and I'll let you get back to work, but I really appreciate you sitting with me. Thank you.

00:45:39

DW: Anymore questions?

00:45:40

AE: No, I believe that's it.

00:45:40

DW: That's about it, okay.

00:45:42

AE: Unless you want to talk about the Grammy Awards. I heard you got a mink coat to go out there.

00:45:46

DW: Oh, yeah. We went to the Grammy's in '94 and oh, that was a great experience. That was a life changing experience. We've had different people come in here and say their life was transformed, but being at Grammy's and Radio City Music Hall with Whitney Houston when the curtains opened, her singing *I'll Always Love You*, as though her voice was ringing out throughout New York City and being in New York among all the celebrities at the big parties and the before parties and seeing all the stars and then returning back to Athens. I was depressed for like two year—two weeks. **[Laughs]** You know just being among all that and being back in the pig pen. **[Laughs]**

00:46:26

AE: Got a taste for it, huh?

00:46:27

DW: Yeah. So I'm like, "Oh, take me back!" So now I know where that song—Whitney sings—*Give Me One Moment in Time*—sometimes we need that, yeah. I got to make some sweet potatoes for somebody to come and pick them up.

00:46:41

AE: All right, well I got to let you do that. Thank you so very much.

00:46:42

DW: I was hoping I could get to them before you came but them things was so hot. You came—you know I had just boiled them and they was too hot to peel and get them—but now I'm getting ready to go over there. They supposed to come at four [o'clock]. Lord help me.

00:46:54

AE: Well thank you again and I—I really appreciate you taking the time.

00:46:58

DW: Okay. Thank you.

[End Dexter Weaver Interview]