

**MIKE BALLAS**  
**Owner**  
**The Crystal Grill – Greenwood, MS**

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[Begin Mike Ballas Interview]

Amy Evans: Today is Wednesday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, two thousand three, and I'm at the Crystal Grill in Greenwood, Mississippi with Mr. Ballas. Mr. Ballas, would you mind saying your full name and your age?

Mike Ballas: Mike J. Ballas, my name. I was born in February nineteen—nineteen nineteen. I'm eighty-five.

AE: Were you born in Greenwood?

MB: Oh, no ma'am. I was born in Pensacola, Florida. I was raised in Greece 'cause, my father got sick with influenza then in nineteen nineteen, and I was just a little baby when they—when they—he just sold everything and packed up and moved the family to Greece because my mother couldn't speak English at that time.

AE: Where in Greece?

MB: So I was raised in Greece. He sold the store in Pensacola and left. 'Cause he thought he would come back. And so, anyway, I—I stayed in Greece about—until I was eighteen, and then I returned. And I have a brother three years older than me and he came ahead of me when he was eighteen. And we both settled in Cleveland, Mississippi. So, but a few years later, I moved to Greenville, Mississippi and the war broke out, and I enlisted.

Well, I was really drafted from Greenville. My brother enlisted, from after—I was in the service about six months when he also enlisted. Eventually, he got killed in Normandy. [Pause] So, after the war [coughs], I came, back to Greenville, and then I moved back to Pensacola and then back to Greenville. *[Laughs]* And, anyway—been around and around. Then Montgomery, Alabama and then I went to Greece and got married and—

AE: Now, can I stop you?

MB: —brought my wife back.

AE: Can I stop you for a second? To ask you two things. What part of Greece were you brought up in?

MB: Oh, we were living in Skopolos. Island of Skopolos. And it's about a hundred miles south of Solonika.

AE: Okay.

MB: It's in the Aegean Sea. It's an island.

AE: And what kind of store did your father have in Pensacola before you went back to Greece.

MB: Grocery store.

AE: Yeah?

MB: Yeah.

AE: Do you know when he first came to Florida from Greece?

MB: Ma'am.

AE: Do you know when he first came from Glr—Flor—

MB: Oh, I see. He came to the United States when he was just a young man—about sixteen, seventeen years old.

AE: Do you know why?

MB: And then in nineteen twelve, he was—he was born in nineteen eighty-two. *Eighteen* eighty-two!

AE: Uh-huh.

MB: And nineteen twelve, when war broke out between Greece and Turkey—Greece was trying to get, get the Turks out and liberate themselves.

AE: Okay.

MB: So he volunteered, well [Pause] He didn't have—I don't know if he had a store at that time. But anyway, he volunteered. He left Pensacola, went to Greece to fight.

[Pause]

AE: And so okay, we can jump now back to you and Mississippi.

MB: Then, when he got out the service in Greece, he went to the island and married and brought his wife back to Pensacola. And so it was. That was nineteen twelve, thirteen or whatever. And nineteen fourteen, my brother was born. Nineteen eighteen, I was born. [Mr. Ballas said nineteen nineteen was his birth year at the beginning of the interview]

AE: And so then after the war you went back to Greece, and you met your wife there?

MB: Yes, after the war?

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: After the war, I worked around and made a little money and went to Greece and get married. And to the same island. Both us have been back in the years since. That was nineteen forty-nine. And [Mr. Ballas takes a drink of ice water] so, anyway, I went—when I came back went to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where my brother-in-law—had a brother-in-law running a little place over there, City Cafe, and over here at the Crystal was a other brother—older brother—running the Crystal Grill with another guy. So—I worked—I was running that place in Clarksdale, the City Cafe, for about three years. And then this brother Jim wanted to go to Greece to see his folks and asked me to come and help while he was gone, so I came over here and helped. When he came back—before he—after—soon after he left, his partner left. So I bought his partner out. From now on in partnership in Clarksdale and in partnership over here. *[Laughs]* So, well then, Jim came back and said, “Well, I don’t know what to do now.” I said, “You’re partners here and partners with John.” I said, “What do you want to do?” he said, “I don’t know. What do you want to do?” And I said, “I tell you what I’m going to do. I’m gonna go to Clarksdale and see what’s going on over there, and then if I don’t like it, I’m coming back over here.” He said, “That’s fine.” So I didn’t like it over there and came back over here. And at that time, it was just that section on the other side. [Mr. Ballas points over into the front and original room of the Crystal, where there are a few tables, a few booths and the hostess/cashier counter.] And after I started running it, business picked up a whole lot, and we had to expand, so I took this over. [Mr. Ballas is speaking of the second hallway-like room of tables that we’re sitting in for the interview] And later on, business kept exp—picking up so we had to have a place to put ‘em, so I expanded on the other side. And then, many years later, well that, stained glass dining—Jim left and went to

Memphis. I took over the whole thing by myself. And then I bought the property. I bought all this. And I expanded—expanded a whole lot. We expanded the kitchen. We spent about three hundred thousand [dollars]. And we really made it a restaurant then. Up until then it was a mess.

AE: Before you became a partner, how long had the restaurant been here?

MB: The restaurant been here—well, it was—the building was built about nineteen fourteen. And they had a little restaurant ever since. Back then, of course, it was small. I—

AE: And it's—

MB: I enlarged all this.

AE: And it's—

MB: I've got two hundred and fifty six [seats] now.

AE: My goodness. And it's always been called the Crystal Grill?

MB: The beg—at the beginning it was the Elite Café.

AE: The Elite Café.

MB: And actually, it was down on that tile floor as you come in—in the vestibule. It was written down: *Elite Café*. But from so many people coming in, they wore the tile out. It just wore a hole in it. So I had to do something. Now, I just had to put the floor over there. But the rest of the floor is the same. All this floor is the same one.

AE: This mosaic one?

**[Counter: 81]**

MB: And we have carpet in the other rooms but this—this is the same tile—the original tile—was—when the building was built.

AE: It looks brand new.

MB: *[Laughs]*

AE: And what is—on the outside of the building it says the “Greenwood Hotel” up top?

MB: It used to be Lamar Hotel.

AE: Lamar Hotel?

MB: Yeah. From—on the other side of this wall a bar—there was a hotel called the Lamar Hotel. And it was operating until I decided to expand over there and take over the lobby. And—*[big laugh!]*

AE: What was here right next-door the first time you expanded?

MB: Uh—

AE: In this part. [Where we were sitting]

MB: What—what about it?

AE: What business was here on—in this part of the dining room?

MB: Here? Well, this was the lobby.

AE: Oh, okay.

MB: I took it over and they built another lobby next door.

AE: I see.

MB: And I took that over, and they had to close the hotel.

AE: *[Laughs]* You ran ‘em out, huh?

MB: *[Laughs]*

AE: So have you been serving the same kind of food all these years?

MB: Oh, I been changing—I’ve been improving e—ever since I’ve been here. We serve really good food here. Really. We got people coming here from all around the states. Even from Tennessee.

AE: Yeah. You have quite a reputation.

MB: Yeah. We have.

AE: So how did you decide to get into the restaurant business?

MB: I had no *[laughs]* I had no choice! I came back—when I came back to the states, I was eighteen, I couldn’t speak English. My brother could but he forgot too. He really had to learn all over. Of course, he was six years old when we went to Greece. Well anyway, well—about six. And I was working in a restaurant just to sustain myself and then—I was making a dollar a day. For twelve hours of work. And it was really worth nothing. I

couldn't even go to school. I'm self-taught. I taught myself. I didn't have the time or the money to go to school so, but I wanted to learn so bad so—I can spell most anything.

AE: So how did you learn about food?

MB: Oh, books and actual practice. Practice. I practiced until I got something right.

AE: Was your family a group of cooks? Did your father cook?

MB: My family—mmm,well, my—my father was a grocer in a grocery store. And he didn't know anything about cooking. My mother did. My wife is a pretty good cook.

AE: So what were your customers like when you first were open in that small dining room originally?

MB: Beg—I beg your pardon?

AE: Your customers? What were they like? All locals or? The people who came to eat when you first opened? Or first became owner.

MB: When I first came over here, we had very few customers. To give you an idea, we were—in—from four o'clock in the morning until midnight we would take in a hundred to a hundred twenty-five dollars a day. Just little or nothing—just about. Didn't have no

customers. But I put a new menu in, new dishes. Well, my brother-in-law was in Greece. Like I said, I came here to replace him. Well, they didn't—he didn't really know how to run it. So he left, went to Greece, stayed about six months—I don't remember how many months. In the meantime, I changed everything. They didn't have dishes, they didn't have pitchers to pour water for the customers. They would—for bread they u—no rolls—they were using just light bread. Cold. The—they didn't have no system. So I saved everything. The food—I changed the food. I changed everything that—I was buying the best. They were buying the worst. So I—when he came back, there was no place—there were people standing on the doorway. *[Laughs]* He looks over. *[Laughs]* He was dressed up, necktie and all, you know, had to get an apron to go—I said, “Where you going Jim?” He says, “You can't do all this by yourself. You're too busy.” I say, “Well, you can have them people [unintelligible]” *[Laughs]* I said, “Go on back, I'm gonna relax.” *[Laughs]* Ohh.

AE: So how has your menu changed over the years do you think?

MB: We've been changing the menus here often—for a while.

AE: How so?

MB: Ma'am?

AE: How so?

MB: Huh?

AE: How have the menus changed?

MB: Well, we just—every time I try out, for instance, and I eat something that I like? I introduce it here. If I didn't know how to do it, I get an idea from the way it tastes. I get a book, and I find it and I put it in there.

AE: What is your favorite?

MB: Favorite for the customers? Is the cutlets, I guess. Is one of the favorite dishes. But we have big variety of seafood. And we keep fresh seafood and real god variety. And of course the steaks. We've got the best steaks in here. We go for quality. We don't—don't ever go for cheap stuff. For instance, when I first went to Clarksdale with the other brother—the first month we went in the hole two hundred dollars. I said, "What's going on?" Well, he said, "It'll be better—better later." I said, "Uh-uh." I say, "I'm not staying here. I got a family, my wife pregnant." I say, "Either you let me run the place, or I'm leaving." "Oh! Oh," he say. "Run it." So I just changed everything. He was buying the worst meat he could get. The worst—I say, "Don't say anything. I'm buying expensive stuff. I'm gonna run it and that's it." So I did run it, and in about two, three months—  
*[laughs]* Believe it! We had a line wait—waiting out there to come in. And that's what it takes.

AE: Were you doing all the—

MB: You've got to have quality.

AE: Were you doing all the cooking—back then?

MB: I used to do all the cooking, but now I've got people back there. My son has taken over now.

AE: Yes, Johnny.

MB: And—Johnny. And I'm really just helping him. I told him I don't want none of this. *[Laughs]* I say, "You can have it!" But I know he needs my help, so I'm helping.

AE: And how many employees did you start off with?

MB: Then?

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: Well, we had five waitresses. But then we had a lot of coffee serving. There were no Mr. Coffee's then. And we had a lot of coffee customers and things like that. And now we've got about a dozen, so—

AE: And I understand you have some—

MB: We've got about f—forty-five people working here. Back then we didn't have many.

AE: And I—

MB: It was small. That's all it was.

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AE: Right.

MB: Now it's big.

AE: And I understand you have some employees that have been here for quite some time, is that right?

MB: Oh, we've got waitresses here—been here over forty years.

AE: And who are they?

MB: Rivers, Frances—that's them two. Frances Lott and Rivers Coleman. Who else has been here the—very long? Well, it's—others have gone, I guess. They're not here now. It's—dead. Two of 'em dead. And then fired.

AE: And what's your wife's role in the restaurant?

MB: What about my wife? She—my wife work here until just lately. Now, my daughter is here with her husband and my grandson. And all five of us plan to go to Greece in about three weeks. And we're gonna stay about a month.

AE: And I understand your son-in-law used to have Yianni's—

MB: Yes.

AE: —restaurant. There are a lot of restaurants in your family.

MB: Yeah.

AE: Are they going to do another restaurant now that they're back?

MB: No.

AE: No.

MB: I don't think so. Johnny has only one daughter—their only child—and she's smart as a whip. Over four point grade average. One of the best students at Ole Miss. She's going to be a doctor. So, I guess when he retires he's just gonna sell it. Nobody else to take over.

AE: Huh. What do you think is the reason for your longevity here—in this restaurant business?

MB: Good eating! *[Laughs]* That's true. And of course love—I love people. You know, I love to serve. I—I don't have to work. I mean after eighty-five years, I made enough money where I don't have to work. But, I like to work. I like to serve people. And I don't have Johnny do it the same time.

AE: Have you advertised much at all over the years?

MB: Yeah. A little bit.

AE: On—newspapers or—

MB: Oh yeah, newspapers, not very much TV but, uh, radio. A whole lot.

AE: Yeah.

MB: Yeah, we try to help them—little radio stations in the little towns like Winona or—  
all around here. *[Laughs]* And, here too. Yeah. Locals.

AE: And—

MB: We advertise in football games and things like that. So, we try to help—and help—I  
guess it helps us.

AE: And you have these placemats that I think are good advertising.

MB: Yeah.

AE: I know on Sunday for Sunday dinner you have lots of prayer—

MB: Oh yeah, the—the four faiths.

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: Yeah, those are nice.

AE: How long have you had those?

MB: Oh goodness, many years. Maybe twenty years?

AE: Was that your idea?

MB: Say, I well, I been here in this place since fifty-two so, I been here about fifty—  
fifty-one years. Those placemats maybe for half that time. Twenty-five years.

AE: And your one of the few places, I believe, here in town that's open on Sunday. Is  
that correct?

MB: Now, I—don't think around here. I don't know. I don't know who's open. I don't  
know who's open. I know the fast food places are open.

AE: So what might be your favorite memory of working here over the years?

MB: Gosh, I don't know. I can't think.

AE: Have a good story to tell?

MB: *[Laughs]* I can't think of any. Ahhh. What can it be? Um—well, uh, nothing  
outstanding.

AE: *[Laughs]*

MB: I can think of.

AE: Well, I just had lunch here last week with three men who have been coming here once a month for thirty-five years to eat lunch.

MB: Is that right?

AE: Yes, sir. So I know this has to be a really interesting place, where some interesting things have gone on here. All these locals keep coming back. And business transactions going on in here I was hearing stories about. And—

MB: Well, we have customers been coming here—we raised a lot of ‘em from children. That grew up, married and bring their families here. I been here that long. *[Laughs]*

AE: Do you have some favorite customers who keep coming in?

MB: Oh, yes ma’am. A whole lot of ‘em. Yeah. A lot of ‘em I named, you know, from little babies and then just grow on up. Now, they—they got families, they got children.

*[Laughs]*

AE: Well, I wonder if you could tell me now what it was like here in Greenwood in 1952, running this restaurant.

MB: Well, things weren't that good back then, really. On—there were some ruffians downtown then. Some bad people, you know. Had old ways and some bad memories about them. But they're dead now. They were real bad about black people, you know. How they would—used to be back then. And even amongst themselves they used to fight. When I first came here, a lot of drunks used to come in here. Well, the same thing happened in Clarksdale, until I ran 'em all out. And I even got a black eye from one of 'em because I wouldn't sell him beer. I just stopped it, and finally I run all the drunks out, and then I had a lot of customers. And over here I did the same thing. I'll tell you a funny story. We used to have a counter and a guy came in, sit down, wanted a beer. I had instructed my waitresses, no beer to drunks. I said, "I'm going to run all them drunks out of here." Okay. So he asked for a beer. The waitress said, you know, "I'm sorry." She called me and said, "He wants beer." So I asked him, I said, "Can I help you, sir?" He said, "Yeah, I want a beer." I said, "I'm sorry sir. I can't sell you a beer." "Why can't you sell me a beer?" I said, "Because you're drunk!" He said, "Well then you can go to hell!" "I said, "You can go to hell too!" He said, "I'll meet you there." Everybody just died laughing. *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughs]*

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MB: And he walked out. *[Laughs]*

AE: That's a good story.

MB: *[Laughing]* I'll never forget it. Ooh. *[Laughs]* But I did run all the drunks out.

AE: So Mississippi was dry as a state until the seventies—

MB: Oh, yes. Yeah.

AE: —wasn't it?

MB: Yeah. It was. But they still sold liquor. Some people here, I guess, paid off the authorities. I don't know how they did it. It wasn't my business. But I didn't sell it, that's for sure.

AE: Mm-hmm. Well, what is this about this, used to be called the *Crystal Club*?

MB: Oh, well later, when, that decision—Supreme Court decision came about and all the black people were in an uproar. And they were calling us here every day, “Hey, we're gonna s—close you down. We—” ‘Cause until then, we didn't let nobody in—no—no blacks. It was just white. ‘Cause if we had, we'd of had a fight with the whites. You know how they felt. Do you know—no, you're not that old. It was awful! So I told my partner, I said, “Look, we ain't going to stay in business if we don't do something.” And

other people, you know, they were making clubs. There were a lot of clubs around. So we decided, I said, “We’ll make it a club and hold it for about five years.” I said, “My idea is that in about five years, all this thing gonna cool off, and it’ll be all over. And then we can open up. But right now, if we keep it and keep them blacks out, we—we ain’t going to be able to stay open.” So that’s what we did. We made it a club, and we were selling shares—dollar shares. Just an excuse, really, to keep it all white. Until they calm down. Both sides—it was mad. Both sides. Then later on, we just opened it up. But we took more than five years. Took about ten.

AE: And how have things changed since then?

MB: Oh, it’s—like they used to say in the old world war, “All quiet on the western front.” *[Laughs]* We ain’t got no problem. We serve blacks, whites, all mixed up, you know. They don’t—they don’t care. It’s all over.

AE: And what was it like—or what is it like with Lusco’s and Giardina’s and all these different restaurants that have been around for so long—

MB: Well now, what happened—after we made it a club—and a whole—all the other restaurants did the same thing. They made it a club. But they couldn’t stay open. They—they didn’t have any customers! We were so popular here, that our customers would do everything just to come in, so they bought them shares. And we kept being busy. But the other restaurants couldn’t hold it. They had to open up. They couldn’t—they didn’t have

enough people, you know, comin' in to stay open. But, like I said, we were so popular with the—we were able to stay open. And after about five, ten years—about ten years, I believe, we opened.

AE: So what is it do you think about the ethnic community here that's been here so long? So many Italians and Greeks and Lebanese.

MB: I think we're not having any problems. I think that they all are accepted by the population. And I don't think they feel bad about it. Even amongst the blacks and the whites and the—it's normal.

AE: Was there a big—

MB: The way I see it, it's normal now.

AE: Is there—

MB: Probably more normal than in the North, I tell you! *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughs]* Well, is there a big Greek community here now?

MB: Ma'am?

AE: Is there a big Greek community here?

MB: No, ma'am. No, ma'am. Just us. Used to be. Used to be a good many. About fifteen families or so. Not now. Nobody—don't—

AE: How's that?

MB: Some of 'em died, some of just relocated. They're just not here. And just us here now.

AE: Not—Greenwood's not bringing in many new people, huh?

MB: Greenwood's getting smaller. We're about—probably around eighteen thousand now.

AE: What *was* the population?

MB: Well, somewhere around twenty-two, twenty-three and—what's happening, they—they're moving to the hills. The white people. And that's why in Greenwood were actually like sixty-five percent black. 'Bout thirty-five white. We're outnumbered.

***[Laughs]***

AE: So who makes your pies?

**[Counter: 322]**

MB: Ma'am?

AE: Who makes your pies?

MB: I started this, but now hardly—I got—I trained the lady back there.

AE: Uh-huh.

MB: And she's gotten to be real good at it.

AE: And you started with coconut and chocolate pie?

MB: Yeah. Well, we used to make all kinds, but now this is the mainstay—coconut and chocolate. And of course we make lemon icebox and cheesecake and pecan pie. We make different kinds. But the most popular is chocolate and coconut.

AE: And I understand—

MB: Have you tried any—have you been here?

AE: I've eaten here three times in two weeks.

MB: Oh, really!

AE: Yes, sir. *[Laughs]*

MB: Oh.

AE: And your food is wonderful.

MB: That's good.

AE: Um-hmm. And I love pie.

MB: Well, would you like a piece of pie now?

AE: Well, I would love a piece of pie, sir.

MB: What kind you like?

AE: Chocolate. *[Laughs]*

MB: Be right back.

AE: Okay.

MB: How 'bout drink?

AE: Uh, maybe a glass of water to go with my chocolate pie.

MB: Coffee?

AE: No, no coffee.

MB: Iced tea?

AE: No.

MB: Anything else?

AE: No.

MB: Okay. [Mr. Ballas walks into the first dining room to get a piece of pie from the pie case that is behind the hostess/cashier counter. A waiter brings me a glass of water. Mr. Ballas returns with a yummy-looking slice of chocolate pie]

**[Counter: 336]**

[Recording stops while I eat my pie, and Mr. Ballas finishes the slice of pie he brought to the table with him at the beginning of the interview.]

[Recording resumes]

MB: Maybe I broke it out a little too far. [Regarding the restaurant expansion]

AE: No, not at all. It's good. So I'd like to know, though, this first dining room, when it first opened, you said it had a bar in there. What did the rest of the restaurant look like then?

MB: When I first came here—when I first bought the place, there were two counters over against that wall over there. [Mr. Ballas points to the far outside wall of the main dining room] Well, originally—the very, very beginning when they built it, they had a window across the wall over there.

AE: In the outside wall?

MB: Yeah. You know, where the girls are. [A couple of female employees were standing near the hostess/cashier counter along that wall] On that wall about halfway, there was a window, and they were selling things to go.

AE: Oh, okay.

MB: And back in the corner where the office is now, that was a kitchen like. They had—they were cooking hamburgers and things like that. You know, short orders. Everything was different. And we didn't have much of a kitchen. It was mostly sandwiches.

Standard. And they had lunches. But they were serving the counter. When I first came and started working, at noon the only customers we had were sitting on the counter. All those tables would be empty. Now, that's how much business they had. Just—very little.

Like I say, a hundred and twenty dollars. Oh, from four to twelve at night, you talking about many hours. That's not much money. That's not much business. And in about four—I'd say in about three months I had not doubled—tripled the business! But I spent some money, and I got new equipment: new booths, new plates, new—beautiful plates.

China, you know. Shenango China and all that stuff and it didn't look the same when he came back. So that's what it takes. You got to—you got to look ahead a little bit. But those people, like my brother-in-law, he—he was just here you know. You—he didn't know how to operate. They had a few water pitchers, for instance. To show you how bad it was—a few water pitchers and they were covered up with dust. Which means they were not even using them. They didn't have rolls, they didn't have—they—booths were made out of wood, and they had a little color on them. And I'd be watching some customers come in and go over there and sit down, thinking it was a booth, and it would go booop! And I'd just shut my eyes. *[Laughs]* I say, "Oh." *[Laughs]* They're saying, "Yes." *[laughs]* I say, "I got an extra one." So [unintelligible phrase] and that's when I just throw everything out. Uh, called Westbrook Company in Jackson. They were man—they were making them, and they came over here and we fixed the place up.

AE: So you're a real businessman to have come in and seen what was here and taken it all over like that.

MB: Well, I made all these changes because it was—it was just a little old joint. That's all it was.

AE: And you've enjoyed the restaurant business all these years?

MB: Yeah. I been improving ever since. I can't improve no more though. Done about all we can do. Unless we move to a new building. But this is what I had to work with, and I—

AE: And when did your son Johnny start working here?

MB: Johnny, my son, been working here all his life. *[Laughs]* And of course he went to school. He went to Mississippi State. But his daughter went to Ole Miss.

AE: Uh-oh.

MB: *[Laughs]*

AE: But he came back to run the restaurant, huh?

MB: Yeah. And I tried to get him to be a professional like a dentist, a doctor, a— something. He said, “Nooo, way.” I said, “Well, what do you want to do?” He said, “I want to do what you’re doing.” I said, “I tell ya,” I say, “I promise you one thing. You can make a lot of money in this business, but there’s a lot of work too.” He say, “That’s okay.” I say, “Okay, you’re on.”

AE: So that surprised you that he was interested in running the restaurant?

MB: He—he what?

AE: That surprised you that he wanted to stay in the restaurant?

MB: Yeah he say he want to do the same kind of work, so I say okay. All right. You have to make money.

AE: And your daughter didn’t want to be a part of it?

MB: My daughter was a teacher. She was teaching—she went to Millsaps. And my grandson too graduated from Millsaps. Well, she graduated from Millsaps a teacher and then she was teaching at St. Andrews in Jackson. From there, she came to Greenwood and was teaching at Bankston. And then—in North Greenwood. And then—so they didn’t make that much then. I think about a thousand dollars a month. I say, “Elaine, for goodness sakes.” I say, “That’s no money.” And they—and those mamas used to call her

at night. She didn't have no rest. At—even at night. I say, "I tell you what." I say, "I'll pay you twelve hundred if you come over here and just take [unintelligible phrase] and just help over here." She said, "I'll do it." And I said, "Okay!" **[Laughs]** So she came over here and started working, and she liked the business. She say, "I like to work." I say, "That's good!" And later on she—she got married. Her husband didn't have no—didn't know how to do nothing anyway. He—he was a radio operator in a ship—nothing. So, they started work. No, actually, what I did, I put 'em in business. By that time, Yianni got out of school. So, I told them, I said, "Look, you and your husband, Yianni, and Johnny," I say, "I've got a place for you." Dr. Persons had the Holiday Inn out on the highway, and he said—he came to me 'cause he had heard, years before, there was another case—another motel—the Travel Inn, and the restaurant wasn't making any money, and he had rented it out to somebody, and it was going broke. They couldn't even stay open. They had to do something. He came to me and—the owner of the motel—and he said, "Look, he says, "I need help." He says, "I'm gonna lose my hotel and my—my restaurant *and* my motel!" He say, "I got to do something." I said, "What can I do?" He say, "Come and run the restaurant." I say, "Oh, my goodness." I say, "I'm already tied up." He said, "Please." So I start to deal with him. I say, "Okay, I'll pay you eight percent." No, I don't remember what I told him. Eight? Ten? But anyway, I took it. I took it over and, of course, I put my stuff in there and had my wife working a little bit in the morning, taking cash. And I was opening that restaurant at—at six in the morning and I was closing this restaurant at twelve at night. It was about to kill me. **[Laughs]** But I brought that business around. So much so that there was no business in *this* one. My partner was furious. He said, "Now, you can't do that." He say, "You taking business away from here." I say,

“No, we’re not doing no worse than we used to do.” I say, “I’m getting business off the highway.” Well—well he said, “You’re doing more than we are.” I said, “Well, that’s just how it is.” So, I said, “You’re getting half of the profit anyway, so what do you care? I’m doing the work, and I’m giving you the money.” “Well,” he said, “I guess. All right.” So it went on.

[A waiter interrupts the interview to tell Mr. Ballas something]

**[Counter: 465]**

Waiter: I’m gonna run over and get a, um, an application from the ABC.

MB: Yeah.

W: So I can—so I can fill out those alcohol things and I can serve liquor and stuff. I just called them to make sure it was what to do. And they said to come up there and get an application and fill it out, and then I could get the card.

MB: Okay. Well, you want me right now? Just a minute, I’ll be there.

W: No, I was just telling you I was going.

MB: Oh, yeah. Okay. Okay.

[Interview resumes]

MB: So two, three years later, the place burned down. They had an upstairs—they had a room upstairs—and some drunks living up there, smoking and just went to sleep. The place caught fire and burned the whole thing to the ground. So I had to come back over here. Now—later on, Dr. Persons came to me. He knew what—he knew about the Travel Inn. So, he said, “I want you to come and run the restaurant at the Holiday Inn.” I said, “What? [Next couple of [unintelligible phrase]. I about killed myself with the Travel Inn.” He said, “I know—I know what kind of job you did.” So I say, “Okay.” I say, “Okay, I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you know.” I talked to Yianni, Elaine and my son. I say, “I got a place for y’all.” I say, “I’ll help you to start it off, but you can run it.” So I explained to him everything, and the lease and all that stuff. So they moved in, and I was helping to get ‘em started. And we started real good business. I mean, *real* good business. I told ‘em to start with, he won’t—at that time he wasn’t doing really nothing. So I said, “I’ll give you eight percent for the first twenty thousand.” Say, “Right now you’re making between fifteen and eighteen thousand.” Say—I say, “I will pay you eight percent on twenty thousand. And when it gets on up to thirty thousand—” No. I told him I was gonna pay him ten or twelve percent and something like that. And I said, “When I get on up over thirty thousand—thirty-five thousand—then I’m gonna drop it down to eight percent.” He said, “That’s too little.” I said, “Look, how much you make now at fifteen—at twelve, whatever you get?” I said, “You—you’re not making little or nothing.” I said, “If I get it on up to forty thousand dollars at eight percent, that’s over three thousand dollars and you’re not getting half of that now, are you?” He say, “I haven’t thought about it that way.” I say, “That’s how it is.” He say, “You ain’t gonna get it up to no forty

thousand.” I said, “I bet you I will.” And sure enough, we did! *[Laughs]* So—so, okay—now, listen to this. So, like I said, we started and—and business kept building up, building up, building up. Went to thirty, thirty-five, forty. My son-in-law said, “Look.” He said, “I had a five year lease [unintelligible phrase].” He said, “I mean look, we giving Dr. Persons a lot of money.” I say, “Yeah, so what.” I say, “You’re making a lot of money. Aren’t you?” Say, “Yeah, but why you—why you give him all that money?” I said, “Because that’s his building. That’s h—” I say, “That’s how you’re in there. Otherwise you wouldn’t be in there.” “Nooooo,” he say, “Don’t give him that money.” I say, “You ain’t got no choice. Unless you gonna leave.” “Oh,” he said, “No.” I say, “Well.” He say, “I want you to break the lease.” I say, “You got your mind straight?” I say, “Why break the lease?” See, he can’t break the lease anyway. He say, “Well, you figure out a way.” I say, “Well, I can figure out a way.” “But,” I say, “that’s not to your advantage. But if that’s what you really want,” I say, “I’ll break it. I think I can.” Well, so, it happened that he had a big lounge, and his son was running the lounge. And that’s really against the law. The lounge—I mean the—in order to operate, you supposed to have restaurant sales. So many—fifty percent, sixty percent—supposed to be food business. You can’t just run the lounge. I guess it’s still the same. I don’t know. But that’s how it was. So I told Dr. Persons, I said, “We—I signed this lease but,” I say, “you’re gonna have to let me have it, or I’m gonna sue.” He said, “Oh, no. Oh, hey. That’s for my son. He got to own it.” I say, “Okay.” I said, “I hope you know what you’re doing.” He say, “I got a lawyer [unintelligible phrase].” I say, “Okay.” So, we run it—now this came up. And they wouldn’t give him the license. He comes to me, he says, “You know, I’m having a problem.” I say, “Yeah.” He say, “I—the state wouldn’t give

me a liquor license.” I say, “Oh, I told you that, didn’t I?” “Yeah.” I say, “You can’t say you didn’t know ‘cause I told you.” Well, he said, “I want you to help me out—to sign the—let me run the lounge. Give me some food sales as an excuse.” I said, “I tell you what. My son-in-law moves out.” I said, “He wants to break the lease.” “Oh,” he said, “We can do that.” And I say, “Okay, break it.” So he broke the lease. Now then, we have no lease. So it goes on a few months. Some company out of St. Louis want to—saw that profit that the Holiday Inn was making, rooms full all the time, big restaurant business. So they paid him a handsome profit on the restaurant, and they bought it. So now, Dr. Persons is out. The new people come in. In the meantime, Yianni and my son were running it without lease. If they had the lease, even the new people couldn’t do anything. They had to honor the lease. So, what happened now, they took over. They saw all those sales and all that profit, and they want it all for themselves. So they told my son and my son-in-law, they said, “Well, you all gonna have to go. We gonna run the restaurant.” So they told me. I went and saw the new owners. I say, “You know, you’re making a mistake.” They said, “What do you mean?” I say, “If we get out, your business if gonna go down. Way down.” Say, “Nah.” He say, “You can’t make me believe that.” I say, “Okay.” I say, “Can’t say I didn’t tell you.” So sure enough, we got out. We had to get out. So now I had to do something with them. Meantime, I found a place in Jackson that was for sale. Restaurant. To the north—right next to the Holiday Inn North. Okay, I was ready to buy it. And I told my partner here, I say, “I’m moving to Jackson.” He say, “Where?” I say, “I got my son and my son-in-law—they—they got to do something. I can’t leave them out in the cold.” I said, “We gonna move over there.” Say, “It’s a good restaurant, and I know we can make a go.” It was closed at the time. For \$125,000, I was

gonna buy a property and all. Right on the interstate. So I even put money down. Came over here to close out, to get out with him. He says, “No way! I don’t want this by myself. You can run it.” He say, “You can have it.” I say, “I don’t want it. I got a place.” He say, “You can have it. I’m gonna move to Memphis with my son and my daughter.” His son and daughter were in Memphis. So it was. So I bought him out. Now, in the meantime, I got my son and my son-in-law here. So us three were running it. Now, what happened at Holiday Inn? Exactly what I told ‘em. It went broke. *[Laughs]* Ahh.

AE: My goodness.

**[Counter: 627]**

MB: So now some Indians got it. Some of them got it.

AE: And then when did Yianni open the restaurant—the other restaurant?

MB: Well, they now—we work here several years. And I’m going to build the—have you been around? You’ve been around. [Around to all of the dining rooms at the Crystal Grill]

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: To the other side?

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: With the skylight? That one? Well, that was a shop. A repair shop for motors. So when I bought all the buildings, of course I bought that too. And I told my son and Yianni, I said, “Look, we can’t—we ain’t got enough room for all the people comin’ in here.” Say, “That room over there gonna make beautiful dining room. Skylight and everything. Will be quiet away from the kitchen. So let’s do that.” My son say, “Okay.” My son-in-law say, “No way.” He said, “Not here. We need to move out on West Park [Avenue]” I say, “Look. Uh-uh. I’m not moving.” I said, “When you have a cow bringing you *[laughs]* a lot of milk, would you kill it?” I said, “Heck no!” I say, “Pull that milk cow as long as it brings milk. If she quits, then kill her.” I say, “I’m not about to give up on this place.” I say, “It’s doin’ fine, isn’t it?” “Yeah, but you don’t know. Later on—oh, you know how they’re comin’ in from the south like a tide.” I said, “Well, when it gets to the point where we not doing any business,” I say—I said, “What commands everything is a business. If you don’t do the business, then you gotta move.” I say, “Right now, we’re doing the business. We’re not moving.” “Well, I—I’m gonna move.” I said, “Go. Go.” Said, “I’m gonna build a place out there.” I said, “That’s fine. You got it.” I say, “You wanna go? Go. I give you some money to.” I gave him about \$150,000 to go on and build it. That’s when he built Yianni’s.

AE: What year was that?

MB: Oh, about fifteen years ago. Something like that. He did well. He did fine. But my daughter is shrewd. She's real smart. Real—very likable girl. I don't know—you met my daughter?

AE: I've not met your daughter.

MB: Oh, she's a real sweet. Really is. Uh, everybody in town loves her. And they did well. And finally they sold it, and now they retired, I guess. I can retire but I'm still around.

AE: So what do you think the future of Crystal Grill might be?

MB: Well, so, the way I see it, after Johnny retires, we gonna just be out of business. Course, I'm—I don't know. I—I'm gonna leave. I feel good right now.

AE: Well, keep eatin' that pie. [Mr. Ballas pats me on the arm] *[Laughs]*

MB: What's your name, hon?

AE: Amy.

MB: Amy.

AE: Yes, sir.

MB: Sweet name.

AE: Thank you.

MB: Sweet girl.

AE: Thank you very much. Well, I sure appreciate you time. And I—

MB: Yes, ma'am.

AE: —definitely appreciate the pie!

MB: Oh, my goodness.

AE: It's been a pleasure visiting with you.

MB: It's the least I could do.

**[Counter: 694]**

[End]

