

Nikki Dugas
Barbecuties – Austin, Texas

Date: 26 September 2007
Location: Barnes & Noble Bookstore – Austin, Texas
Interviewers: Melanie Haupt, Carly Kocurek
Length: 46:00
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail - Texas

Southern Foodways Alliance
&
American Studies Department
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[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

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Melanie Haupt: We're here with Nikki Dugas of Barbecuties. Nikki, could you please state your full name and date of birth, please?

Nikki Dugas: Charity Nicole Dugas, August 23, 1982.

MH: Great, thank you. So, to start out, can you please, um, tell us how Barbecuties got started?

ND: Yes, I can. Um, we got a permit on Sixth Street and my sister and I were wondering what we were going to sell, and we went through the whole line, you know, gross hot dogs, wurst, you know, tacos, and then we both thought about my dad's barbecue, so we decided we were going to name it TD's after my dad. He's Tom Dugas *[Laughs]*. And we talked with him about it and he was like, that is not a good idea on Sixth Street, you're not going to sell anything. You're two pretty girls, why don't you just use it. So, we decided to use it. So, we had the girls wear little red dresses.

MH: And so the Barbecuties name was between you and your sister. You—

ND: No, the name was a disaster. We, um, first it was Grills Gone Wild, and then it was the Smokettes, and it wasn't until I was having a conversation with the owner of Best Wurst, you know, those guys on Sixth Street; they've been around a long time and him and I were just discussing, you know, what to do on Sixth Street, and we were throwing back names and he named us. So, he came up with the Barbecuties.

MH: He was helping out the competition.

ND: Yeah, he was.

MH: That's pretty funny. So, um, I'm just going to do a little exposition for people who hear this who aren't familiar with Sixth Street but it's basically, like, a strip of night clubs and bars, right? I think that would be the best way to describe it.

ND: And a few restaurants.

MH: And a few restaurants. It's kind of like an entertainment district.

ND: Comedy club. Dueling piano bars.

MH: Drunken frat boys.

ND: Oh, yeah. And a lot of homeless people too.

MH: Yeah, and the king of Sixth Street, the jazz musician guy.

ND: Oh, yeah. I think they kicked him out; I haven't seen him in a while.

MH: Actually I think he retired, which is sad. Um, so, why don't we talk about the barbecue first? Um, so, what kind of—what do you sell and, um, how do you prepare it?

ND: We sell chopped and sliced barbecue sandwiches and, um, we—they're just sandwiches, so we don't just sell the barbecue or racks of ribs or anything like that. Um, and how we prepare it is we do like a big cook-out once a week, um, and we basically just, you know, throw in ten briskets and, um, cook them for twenty-four hours; it's a twenty-four hour cycle. So—

MH: And do you, so you tend, you tend the meat for, you yourself tend the meat for twenty-four hours, or it's you and your sister, or you and your sister and dad?

ND: Well, actually, um, I have a full-time job. So, what we do is I get up around five. I put the brisket in at six, and then I go to work. And then I come back around noon and take it out and check on it, because we actually have a propane smoker. I probably shouldn't have said that, but *[Laughs]* a lot of restaurants use electric, you know, and we use propane, so—

MH: And they hide it?

ND: And they hide it, but I'm not, because I'm a woman *[Laughs]*.

MH: So, by virtue of the fact that you're a woman, you're honest about your cooking techniques?

ND: Exactly.

MH: Or, you use propane because you're a woman?

ND: *[Laughs]* Touché. Um, and so basically we just—we just smoke it for twelve hours in the smoker, and then after I get home from work, we put it in the oven for the next twelve hours.

MH: And then, so what day of the week do you do that?

ND: Usually on Tuesdays.

MH: And you're open Friday, Saturday—Thursday, Friday, and Saturday?

ND: Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

MH: And so you just parcel out those ten briskets just like three, three, three-and-a-third briskets a night?

ND: Yeah.

MH: And so, how do you determine—how did you determine how much you were going need?

Did it—

ND: It was really trial and error. I mean we just opened up three months ago and really every week has been different. We don't have good trends right now, so um, oh gosh, this week is Pecan St. Festival downtown, so it's an all-day festival two days, and, um, we're going to get probably 120, 130 pounds of meat.

MH: Wow. And, so how many briskets is that—that's probably—?

ND: Anywhere from eleven to thirteen, depending on the size. We try to get the bigger ones, just because we do keep it in the smoker so long.

MH: And, um, where do you get your meat from?

ND: It really just depends on whose price is better. But it's all pretty much the same; it's Excel, or—they have a couple different brands they sell, but we usually get Excel from like Sam's Club, or sometimes SYSCO.

00:05:11

MH: And what about your sauce? Do you make your sauce, or do you—?

ND: We make one of our sauces. We make the spicy sauce.

MH: Is this a secret recipe?

ND: Yeah, it is. It's a vinegar base though.

MH: So, how many sauces do you—

ND: We have two. We have a spicy and a regular. Our regular is—I mean it's just a sauce that a lot of restaurants use. You can just buy it, straight out, and everyone loves it for some reason.

MH: Great.

Carly Kocurek: Where's your actual, like—where's the smoker and the oven and stuff? Where do you actually run that out of? It's not in the cart obviously, right, like—

ND: It's in my commercial kitchen or backyard.

MH: Did you have to get permits for that?

ND: Yes, we did.

MH: Seems like a lot of, kind of, um, tethered chefs, have to, like, there's a—there's a pretty thriving business here in town where you can rent a commercial kitchen.

ND: That's actually what we're doing. It's called Just Add Chef.

MH: Right. Right.

ND: That's Herb Levy's.

MH: Sorry.

ND: That's Herb Levy's. It's right on Red River and Cesar Chavez.

MH: Oh, OK.

ND: It's really close.

MH: Um, so, can you please, for the record, describe your kiosk and how, um, you decided upon that design, and kind of the mechanics of getting it down in front of Buffalo Billiards?

ND: Sure, um, it looks like a little log cabin, little stained cedar log cabin. And it weighs about a ton, OK, really, literally. And we pretty much have to load it and unload it into a trailer every single night with an electric winch and a huge—huge homeless man that helps us. It was the only way we could do it.

MH: Do you pay him sandwiches?

ND: Yes, we do, we—no. It's a mixture of sandwiches, beer, and money.

MH: Nice, nice. So, you sell the chopped and the sliced beef sandwiches and can—they can—your customers can choose potato chips, is that correct?

ND: They can have potato chips, but most people just get the sandwiches. Comes with a free drink too.

MH: So, like a soft drink, or a bottled water or something?

ND: Or maybe a shot, in the cart *[Laughs]*.

MH: Oh, interesting *[Laughs]*. Um, so, my next question is, you told me that you, um, had a mentorship under Charlotte [Finch] at Iron Works Barbecue? Can you tell me a little about—a little bit about what she taught you?

ND: Well, it was really first my dad, and then whenever I thought about doing the barbecue, I went to Charlotte and talked to her about it. And she basically just said, “Don’t let people know you’re a woman” *[Laughs]*. And I’m like, “What? I’m going to be in a red dress on Sixth Street.” So, um, she just said—well, she just said that most people don’t like to hear that a woman is running a barbecue restaurant. So—

MH: Why do, why do you think that is? Just your own personal opinion.

ND: Um, I guess for some reason barbecue is supposed to be a man's thing. I don't know, like the woman had prowess over the kitchen, so he took the backyard, I don't really know why it happened. Um, and which is weird too, because it's really easy. It's really hard to mess up smoking a brisket. You know? You just keep it in the oven long enough, or the smoker long enough.

MH: I would find a way to mess it up.

ND: Well, you could burn it, and that would be bad.

MH: That's really interesting that she told you that, because you told me that she is kind of a secret owner of the Iron Works.

ND: She is—she bought her, um, her ex-husband out about thirty years ago. Yeah, and ever since then people don't know it's her. And she just works in the back, in the kitchen, like, she has three managers. They're all men and they all do, like, the ownership—the running of the company.

CK: Where did you know her from?

ND: I didn't. I went there and, um, I pretty much sampled every barbecue place in Austin before I started making my own. Um, intentionally, of course, you know, check out the competition. And, um, I just, I saw that she was back there, and it looked like she was running things. So you know, I asked her and she said, "Yeah, I'm the only woman I know in Austin."

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MH: OK. Talk to me about your uniforms. I'm going to go ahead and describe—well I'll let you describe it, and then, um, if you could explain how you came upon this certain—this particular design, that would be great.

ND: Um, they were thirteen dollars at TJ Maxx *[Laughs]*. No, but I mean I knew what we were looking for. We were looking for, um, little red dresses basically. We wanted sort of a fifties style, um, and so we found these with the big buttons on it and we really liked them. But, we're going to be redesigning them because winter's coming and it's going to be cold. And this is a short dress. So—

MH: You'll want some sleeves.

ND: Yep.

MH: And—and, it—what did you say? You wear a red apron over them, or white?

ND: Yes, a red apron.

MH: Um, anything on your head?

ND: No, sometimes we have crazy hat night and the girls bring hats. Pretty much, that's it though.

MH: Um, talk to me about the girls that you hire. I saw, um, a help wanted ad when I was doing initial research on Barbecuties. I was doing some Googling and not getting much, but I saw, um, a help wanted ad on Craig's List. Um, and it seemed like you were kind of looking for college girls? Um, so talk to me about that particular, um, aesthetic.

ND: Well, um, I like college girls because, um, they're OK with getting paid a certain amount, you know, and they're, um—they're OK with the hours; I mean, we're out there until four A.M. most nights, so they're OK with that. And, you know, they like to talk to people. They know what Sixth Street is about and they work it, so that's—that's what we were looking for—not just that, but in my ad I didn't say I wanted, you know, real sexy girl with huge, you know. So, I just said that—

MH: Knockers.

ND: *[Laughs]*.

MH: I'll say it. I'm not afraid.

ND: OK, great. Um, I just said I wanted some, you know, clean-cut girls who like girls, who want to be friends, who want to have fun, that kind of thing.

MH: What would you do if you had a man approach you for employment?

ND: Oh, like every night *[Laughs]*.

MH: And not a homeless man, but a cute—a cute boy?

ND: Um, up until—up until now, we've actually refused all of them, but we are going to hire like a manager type position for accounting and shopping and prep work, that kind of thing. And I would consider a man, but I'd just much rather have a woman. I'd like to say it's a woman-run and woman-owned business.

MH: Um, have you ever encountered any, um, problems with being, you know, young women down among a bunch of rowdy drunks?

ND: Definitely.

MH: Can you—

ND: Well, I mean, you know, they, especially drunk guys, just think that they can just touch whoever they want, you know, especially on Sixth Street. So, we have, um—we have bouncers outside of Buffalo Billiards who, I mean, we just have to make a hand gesture, and they'll come over and tell them to walk down the street. So, we have that going and, I mean, the girls—I really encourage them to tell people to fuck off if they don't like them. You know, I mean we're very sweet, we're nice, until people get rowdy or inappropriate with us, you know.

MH: And then it's go time.

ND: And then it's go time. And we also keep a concealed weapon on—no, I'm just kidding
[Laughter].

MH: OK, and we're back. Um, so, when I went down there to visit there were two, um, kind of older folks, um, hanging out with the young lady that I spoke to; I believe her name was Sarah. Um, it was a man and a woman and they were just kind of hanging out, talking. Do you encourage that?

ND: Yes, we do. I try to have the girls sit outside the cart and talk to as many people as they can. Because we're so new right now, they really—they really need to get our name out there, you know. A lot of people walk by and be like is this a port-a-potty on Sixth Street, you know, and like try to walk in—is it a kissing booth? We get all sorts of things, so. And it's really great to have the girls talk to everyone; a lot of people say that we're different than the other vendors just because we will talk to everyone, be nice to everyone. It's not just people we want to buy from, you know; we're sitting out there for ten hours a night, so.

MH: That could get boring.

ND: Yeah. It does.

MH: And tiresome. Well, so this—this might be a slightly more difficult question. But, um, how would you answer, um, critics who might say that you're, um, you know, selling sex, or selling the female body, or using sex and the female body to sell barbecue?

ND: Wow, you know, I haven't actually thought about that. Well, just because we keep such a clean-cut image I thought, you know. Um, most people down there really like it, so I haven't really come across anyone who doesn't. I mean, outside of our cart it says "tips for our boob jobs," right, and people love that. And then we'll get a lot of people that walk by and shake their heads, you know, and say that's awful, you don't need those. We get people saying that all the time.

MH: About the boob jobs.

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ND: Yeah, commenting on our personal boobs and what we have and don't have, and, um, but it's funny because in our original logo it says, "Cuties, not just a piece of meat" on the bottom. So, for me it's just sort of like a joke for us, you know, we're all feminist women that work there and, um, the "tips for our boob jobs" just get us more tips, basically.

MH: Well, and it's interesting because, um, you know, we as a culture, kind of, enjoy making fun of ourselves, for the most part, and not taking ourselves seriously. I mean, obviously, there are exceptions to that, but it seems like it's problematic to make fun of, you know, to make light,

or make a joke out of your, you know, the female body in that way. So, that's interesting that, um, that people feel the need to comment on it.

ND: Yeah, they do all the time.

MH: And I wonder if—if—what would happen if you said, you know, “tips for—

ND: “Our rent.”

MH: “Our rent.”

ND: We say it all the time too when guys come up. We're like, “This is actually for our rent, you can tip us or not,” like, walk on, you know.

MH: Or, tips to cover day care. Or, maybe not college girls. Or, tips to cover books.

ND: Yeah, tuition.

MH: And I wonder what kind of response you would get.

ND: Well, we wouldn't have as many tips, that's for sure.

MH: Interesting.

CK: Were you always interested in cooking?

ND: Yes. I love cooking. I love cooking for everyone. And, um, barbecue is not—it's not so bad, you know. It's not like a soufflé, you know, I mean, just stick pounds of meat in the oven or put some wood in it, and that's it, you know?

CK: How did you learn how to cook first, or when did you start cooking?

ND: From my dad and my mom. Probably when I was, like, fifteen or sixteen, I got interested in it. I think that's when my mom was like, you're going to have to cook for your family some day. And then she got me in there and started doing everything, so.

CK: What are some of your favorite things to cook when you're not cooking barbecue?

ND: Um, spaghetti, lasagna, I guess a lot of Italian dishes. Um, I just got on a, like a sort of a health kick. I know I sell barbecue, but, um, I like to make a lot of Mediterranean like hummus and, um, we do some stuffed Mediterranean chicken that's very good.

MH: Do you, um, where do you see your career as a—as a barbecue saleswoman, you know, five, ten years down the line?

ND: Um, I actually have big plans for it. Um, we were thinking about opening up a restaurant in a couple years, after our name, um, you know, becomes more prevalent in Austin. And we were thinking, or I was thinking, of going more natural beef—not organic because that’s too hard to get, but I really like the natural beef idea, and I’ve been looking into it, but there’s just almost nobody that raises natural, natural beef in Texas right now.

MH: There’s a lot of, um, grass-fed beef around here, and that’s very hot these days.

ND: It is hot. It is. The only place I know that actually sells it is, uh, Central Market.

MH: Yeah, you can get it at Whole Foods too.

ND: I’m sorry, yeah, Whole Foods, that’s what I meant. They have a barbecue restaurant inside Whole Foods, right?

MH: Right. Yeah, yeah, um, and you can like go to the farmer’s markets and stuff, but you’re talking—I mean, you’re talking about—I think it’d be hard to find it wholesale unless you contracted directly with one of these grass-fed—

ND: And you know I tried to. They’re organizing something in Texas right now and they’re going to start selling to Whole Foods. Um, Whole Foods was getting it from someone in Idaho, I think. And now they’re, um, they’re getting a collection of like a hundred farmers, because that’s what it’s going to take, in Texas, to, um, produce enough grass-fed for them.

MH: I hope that happens.

ND: Me too.

MH: Um, so you're thinking, maybe, um, a more, kind of—what am I—what am I trying to say—um, a more kind of natural, rootsy, earthy, um, what am I trying to—like organic, but not organic, sort of restaurant.

ND: I would say a healthier alternative to the regular barbecue.

[Recording pauses for off the record section]

00:19:00

CK: So, I'm just curious, like, had you, um, like, had you wanted to own your own business for a long time? Was this a goal?

ND: Yes, it was. I mean, I definitely like the restaurant business, but I have a lot of other business plans I've come up with. This one—this one was really the first one that I just had. I personally had enough capital to start with. So, that's why I did it. But I also love cooking, but that's really not so much, you know, a Barbecuties, a lot of it's really selling, which I enjoy too, so.

CK: Had you done food service before at all?

ND: Yes, I worked at Aussie's in Austin. Um, and it really—that's it—and maybe Buffalo Wild Wings.

MH: Can you explain for our listeners what Aussie's is?

ND: Aussie's is an awful, awful restaurant where they serve all fried food for way too high of a price. But, they do have a really great volleyball court. So, that's why people hang out there.

CK: So, were you waitressing, or—?

ND: I was a waitress there and it destroyed my soul. So, now that I have my own little barbecue place, um, I really encourage the girls to be really fair with each other, you know, with tips and sales and all that. Because it's just not, you know, most restaurants, it's a really unfair business.

CK: Can you talk a little bit more about how that experience affected, kind of, how you manage the business you have now?

ND: Oh yeah, definitely. Um, we actually just hired a new girl—excuse me—and I, um, I told the girls we're going to start, um, letting the newbies, like the trainees, um, share the tips, because in most restaurants, you know, you're training, and even though you're doing the work and, like, your trainer is behind you, the trainer gets all the tips. And I just think it's ridiculous.

You know, I mean you're doing everything. So, I just told the girls we're going to do like a pay it forward, like, more like a welcoming, you know, thing, and let everyone share the tips.

CK: How many employees do you have right now?

ND: Um, five.

CK: And, when, um, when you were starting up, how do you and your sister, kind of—you and your sister co-own the business, right?

ND: No, no.

CK: Oh, OK, sorry.

ND: No, I do, and Melissa helped me start everything.

CK: Oh, OK.

ND: She's—I mean, she's a lot younger. She, um, is twenty still. So, she's still in school. But, um, whenever she took a semester off, that's when she helped me start everything, and she's back in school. She's not working anymore.

MH: So, what—the comment that you make about, um, tip sharing is really interesting because I worked at The Salt Lick back in the day, 1989, 1990. And back then we did tip sharing, and all the tips went into a great big jar, and at the end of the night it would get divided out. And all the, um, the host, the, you know the, kind of, floor captains and the waitresses and the drink girls—and I was a drink girl—and it was all, kind of, based on seniority, but since—but I think that the busers actually got more than, like, the drink girls did. And of course, I don't want to be reductive, but, you know, the busboys were male, so I wonder. But, I never really thought of it being particularly unfair. But, maybe it's because I was in high school and I was just happy to have that kind of mad money back then, but, I don't know. So, how do you divvy up the tips among your employees?

ND: It's half and half. It's always two girls that are working, unless we're having someone train, and then it's three. And it's just, you know, divided by three, divided by two, that's it. I mean, it's a team effort there all the way. They have to set up two hours before; um, they have to bring the cart down there; they both have to take this, you know, ton cart off of a trailer together. It's dangerous. It's scary, you know, especially for girls who maybe have never done anything like that. You know, I mean they have to get the gloves on; you know, they're bending over in the short skirts; it's really funny, but, I mean, it's all a team effort. So, I really encourage that.

00:24:33

MH: What do you do with your—do you sell out most nights?

ND: No, not most nights, um, because that's like my worst fear, is to sell out. So, I always make sure they bring a lot of food, but we have sold out before, and I think it's helped business, really.

MH: It creates a demand.

ND: Yeah, it does.

MH: So, what do you do with the surplus, like on Saturday night if you have, you know, ten pounds of meat left over, what do you with it?

ND: Um, lately we've been giving it out to, um, people. I mean, I don't want to call them homeless people. I know there's probably more of a politically correct word, but, um, there so many downtown and, um, the man that we employ is homeless and he lives at ARCH [Austin Resource Center for the Homeless]. So, I guess he's not homeless, but he takes all of our extra food down to ARCH every night. He's easily the most popular man on Sixth Street at ARCH.

MH: Well, that's great, I mean, because, I mean, the people at ARCH are—I think they're technically homeless. So, I mean, that's—I think that's great. Good for you.

ND: Thank you. That's also part of his payment too, and I'm pretty sure he barter with the meat—I'm not sure yet. I never wanted to ask him, but I think that's what's happening, so.

MH: And how did you find him?

ND: You know, our first day there was, like, maybe five girls just running around with their heads cut off, you know, because we didn't know what we were doing. And about twelve homeless guys came up and, um, helped us with the cart, but they really just like put their hands on it and walked beside it, you know. And then there were twelve hands looking, you know, for money within four minutes, you know. So, um, he was the only one that didn't ask for money, and he just sort of walked away, you know, and then the next day it happened again, and he helped and he did the most work, because he's eight feet tall, so *[Laughs]*. After that, I just went and talked to him, and he was very genuine and sweet, and he hasn't had a job in thirty years. Yeah, he loves us. Every night he tells us he loves us. He's very sweet.

CK: What's his name?

ND: Darren. Yeah, he's a real sweet guy, and we've actually sort of created a little job for him, because the vendor across from us saw him helping us for the past three months and hired him as well. So, now he makes double, every night, helping the other guy.

CK: It sounds like the work. I mean, particularly as you were describing setting up the cart, like is a really intensely physical job. Um, have you found—how does that work when you hire people and they think they're going to be, you know, just serving food and then they have all this manual labor to do?

ND: Well, I try to prepare them. In our ads I say you've got to sweat your ass off in a little red dress, you know. And, I don't put on the ads you have to lift fifty pounds, but when I'm

interviewing them I talk to them about it, because it's definitely something they have to do. I just make sure that they know they've got to be really physical and, you know, they can't have fake nails—they cannot *[Laughs]*.

CK: I'm imagining horrible fake-nail-popping-off scenarios *[Laughs]*. Have you had employees you've hired that haven't worked out because of—because of the level of labor?

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ND: Um, maybe my sister *[Laughs]*. But, so far, no. No, that's awful to say; she helps out so much; she's a really hard worker. But, yeah, I mean, I think it gets tiring for them, and especially whenever we get downtown, I think they put a lot of it on Darren, you know, and he's so sweet, he just won't let us carry things sometimes, you know. But, it's funny setting up on Sixth Street, even though we've done this, you know, at least a hundred times now, you know, we still have people every single time ask us for help. They're always men of course, either, you know, homeless men looking for money, or just people on Sixth Street that see these girls in these little red dresses trying to, you know, put up the cart. And we get it two or three times a night, every night, even though we know what we're doing, and it looks like we do, you know.

CK: What do you tell people when they offer help that you don't need?

ND: “No, thank you. We have it. Thank you, though.” I'm always very sweet and very, you know, um, you just have to be really, like, no thank you, always, you know.

MH: How often do you work at the stand yourself?

ND: Every Saturday. I try to stay in it, um, as much as I can with a full-time job, just because I always want to know what's going on and how things are being done when I'm not there, and making sure that the customers are happy, and that kind of thing.

CK: So, how long do the shifts wind up being? Like, if someone is going to come in and work Saturday night, what time do they show up? And I know you said they usually don't get to leave until almost four.

ND: Six. So, it's a ten-hour shift—sometimes eleven hours if it's a busy night. So, that's really rough on the girls, you know, I mean, eleven-hour shift. So, we're actually doing something to shorten the shifts. We're going to have, um, someone come in and do all the prep work before, so it should shorten it by a couple hours.

CK: Can you talk a little bit—I know you said your sister helped a lot—um, but can you talk a little bit about the specific things she helped you with, or, kind of, how you guys work together?

ND: Yeah, sure. Um, she helped me—I mean I pretty much did all the business plan behind it—um, but whenever we first started, she was my only employee. I mean, we, um, she worked for free for the first month. I mean, that's a month of no pay, you know, which was really sweet of her *[Laughs]*. And she took a lot of shit, because I'm not, you know, always nice and sweet on the job; you know, I get mad sometimes. So, she put up with it and she really, um—she just

made it better. She saw things that weren't working, you know, and she told me and she worked it out. And it's a lot better now.

CK: Did she have a background in food service?

ND: No, I think she was a waitress at a pizza place once, but no.

CK: Just sharp. She just knew.

ND: She just knew, yeah. No, I mean, you know, she had cooked at home with my parents and everything too, so.

CK: I know you had said that, you know, one of the first things you thought of was your dad's barbecue. Can you talk a little about, you know, your dad's barbecue and kind of how his barbecuing affected your own and also kind of what that was like when you were a kid, or—?

ND: Oh, yeah. Well, um, I mean he has barbecued forever with—you know what the Little Smokies [grills] are? Yeah, so that was always a big part of our life. Whenever we didn't have much money, he would always, you know, he'd have like the thirty-dollar Little Smokey, and then like as his business grows, you like, you know, you see the smokers getting bigger and bigger, you know. Um, and he—his barbecue—he almost cried when I told him I was buying a propane smoker *[Laughs]*. And then he came up and visited and saw it and like fell in love, because it was so beautiful, you know, it's all stainless steel, and it's a vertical smoker. Um, but

he—he's, you know, like a traditional smoker. He, you know, only uses, um, oak, you know, and he'll stay up all night—or not all night; he'll go to sleep; he'll wake up, you know, every couple hours and get out there and blow the smoke, you know, and clean it up and poke the meat *[Laughs]*. You know. Um, so that's what I learned from him. And he was sad about it. He's sad about my whole process that I do. But, that's OK; he likes how it tastes, so.

MH: Is this something that he does, like, just for his, like hobby, or does he—

ND: Oh, it's just a hobby. Yeah, he, um, he's pretty proud of it. I mean, um, when we have parties or families over, he always smokes. He doesn't smoke just brisket, you know, he does the racks of ribs and the, um, pork and all that.

CK: Where did you get your smoker from?

ND: Cabela's *[Laughter]*.

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CK: Cabela's is a fairly terrifying place, like, it's so big.

MH: It's like a city.

ND: No, those animals are terrifying, right? There's like two-hundred stuffed gorillas, or whatever they are, on a huge mountain. That was scary for me.

MH: Do you have plans to expand your menu at all?

ND: Um, not on Sixth Street. I mean, Sixth Street is pretty tough because you have to—you have to keep your options at like four or less, or the drunk people don't understand. You know *[Laughs]*? Like, we have a menu up, but no one reads it because they just ask us like, "What are you selling? What is here?"

MH: "Do you have any sausage wraps?"

ND: Oh, God. "Is this a pizza place?" It's just, you know, on and on. So, no, we just keep it really, really short. But, if we ever expand into a little restaurant, then for sure we would expand.

MH: Well it seems like, too, that, you know, as long as you're in a kiosk on Sixth Street, you're going to want something that is portable, that doesn't require spoons, or, you know, much chewing probably *[Laughs]*.

ND: That's true.

MH: It's been a long time since I've been part of that scene. So, I don't know.

ND: But you know.

MH: What has the interest been for potential employees? I mean, do you get a lot of responses to your ads?

ND: We do, um, on Craig's List. We've actually had a hiring sign up in the kiosk for about two months and no women have asked to work there, which I think is interesting. Um, and then on Craig's List we get a lot of responses. And a lot of people don't know what it is. You know, some do, but a lot of the students don't because they just came back and we just started, you know, before—or, after they left. So, um, once I explain to them what it is and they go down and visit, then they're into it.

MH: And you started in June?

ND: Um, oh gosh. May. The middle of May.

CK: You got to experience all the heat this summer.

ND: Oh yeah, that was great. We don't have any A/C in our kiosk either.

CK: I would think that would actually probably be a fairly good time to start because that's kind of the low season for Sixth, so you guys could work out all the kinks, while everyone—while it's not as slammed as it gets during the semester.

ND: That was a blessing. At first I was, you know, worried about it, because, you know, we need some cash to keep the business going. But, um, so what we did to sort of compensate for that is we got in really good with the bartenders and the bouncers on Sixth Street. So we, um, at the end of the night, if we didn't sell very much, then we would just go up and down Sixth Street and deliver sandwiches to all the bouncers and bartenders. And they tip us better than the drunk people downtown. They definitely do, you know, and especially if it was a good night for them. So—

CK: I'm sure some of that's, kind of, I mean, it's—I used to work retail and I always am like very empathetic to people who work retail. And I think there's a similar camaraderie with the service industry, you know.

ND: Definitely. It's really—I never see service people that don't tip, except for pedi-cabbers. But that's another story.

MH: I—yeah, my years of waitressing have forever changed the way I tip. Even if I get bad service, I still will tip fifteen percent—grudgingly.

ND: Oh yeah. Oh man, one of my girlfriends tips forty percent. I mean, she's just insane; she throws money away. But, I mean, it definitely affected her working at Aussie's [*Laughs*].

MH: Um, are you turning a profit yet?

ND: Yes, we are. But, all of my profit goes to my loans and what I took out to start it, so.

MH: So, I'm assuming you took out like a small business loan.

ND: Actually, no; those are the devil because their interest rates are so high. So, um, I basically just used a line of credit that I got at my bank, and, um, a small family loan that someone gave me. So, um, and I mean, you know, I also had a money saved, so it was a combination of both.

CK: How do you balance out—I mean, I know you said you have a full-time job, and I mean this sounds like very taxing work. How do you balance those two things out? It sounds like a lot of time and a lot of energy.

ND: You know, I don't know how—I don't know if I balance it very well. I think my friends and family would say I don't. Um, but I pretty much just work all the time, probably like sixty, seventy hours a week. So, and which doesn't bother me for some reason. Not right now. I don't mind working.

MH: You're not too long out of college, are you?

ND: I graduated last year.

MH: From?

ND: Southwestern [University]. It's in Georgetown [Texas].

CK: What are some of your favorite things about running the business, like what are the things that really make it worthwhile for you and really make it enjoyable?

ND: I really like it when, um, I hear about us outside of Sixth Street, I guess. You know? Like, um, some guy was on the radio, a DJ, and one of my friends, um, or one of her friends of her friends heard him on the radio talking about us. I really love that, you know, because it means people are into it, they're liking it, maybe sales will increase, you know. For me, I mean I like being out there, but really I just like the problem solving of it all, you know. I really like that. Like there's a problem every day and I get to fix it, or, you know, cry about it, so.

CK: What did you end up studying at Georgetown?

ND: Psychology, but I started out in business. But then I realized you didn't have to do business to own your own business, so then I switched to Psychology.

MH: Which would add an interesting dimension to, um, working with the population you're working with.

ND: Exactly. Well, we definitely diagnose a lot of the, um, homeless people, you know

[Laughs].

MH: So, do you plan—like, when you get your loans paid off, do you plan to quit your full-time job and do Barbecuties?

ND: No. No I don't. I plan to expand within the next year. We just got two more permits on Sixth Street, which are incredibly hard to get. So, um, I'm thinking we're going to expand within probably eight months.

CK: Can you talk a little bit about that permit process?

ND: Oh yeah, it's a nightmare. Um, basically the permits are grandfathered in, so people who have permits—there's about sixteen, because there's four blocks of main Sixth Street before it starts getting scary on the edges, you know. And, it's all grandfathered in, so some people buy the permits for like five, ten years, you know. And, um, a lot of the businesses on Sixth Street own those permits because they don't want vendors outside their business, you know. So, um, what you have to do is, you have to find out their permit expiration date, and everyone has one on every year. You have five days to renew your permit. If you don't, then if there's an application waiting, the application gets your permit. So, basically I just called the director of permits for the city every single day and just bugged her and bugged her and bugged her, you know, like, "Is anything open? Is anything open?" I mean, um, I memorized her number, you know, like *[Laughs]*. So, that's how I got the permits.

CK: And can you talk about, also, kind of, related to that—um, we've talked to a lot of people about the food-handling regulations and things like that as they pertain to restaurants. Are there any specific regulations that pertain to those carts?

ND: Oh sure, I mean even more so. We, um, you have to have your food manager certificate, and, um, the girls who work there don't, but you know, obviously I have my certificate. So, I've given them all of the very important points, you know, that you have to know about. So, especially on Sixth Street, we're sort of trying to change—there's a population of people that go to Sixth Street and do not eat from vendors. They don't do it; they've just never done it; they probably won't do it unless—yeah, exactly, some people just don't and then some people do, you know. And so what we're trying to do is sort of convert those people, you know. So, we want to have a very clean look, different from all the other vendors, which is I think what we accomplish. And, you know, in doing that, I, um—we have really strict rules, you know, about using gloves and about washing your hands and, you know, pulling your hair back and, um, keeping the cart clean inside and outside, you know. So.

MH: How does one go about getting their Food Manager Certificate?

00:40:48

ND: Um, well you basically have to study for, with a—I have a food manager's study guide. And, um, or you could take a class, but the—I like studying on my own and it's cheaper. So, um, you do that, and then you take the, um, the test. And then, that's it; you have your Food Manager's Certificate.

CK: And, this is jumping back a little bit, but where did you get your cart?

ND: I had it made in south Texas. Yeah, I did.

CK: Who made it? How did you find a business that does that?

ND: Isn't that weird? I know. I went on eBay and I looked at all these people that were selling them, and I found a guy—you know a few guys that were making it—so I just called all of them, asked them, you know, their general prices, and said, “I have, you know, a tricky little thing that I need done.” Because they're used to doing, you know, carts four times our size, you know. But, the Sixth Street regulations are four-by-five foot. So, it's just ridiculously small, you know. So, um, anyways, him and I came to an agreement and I sort of designed it, and he, you know, made—he fixed a few things. We were originally going to have a smoker inside the cart, which is just so stupid *[Laughs]*. And he was like, “Nikki, we can't do that. I mean, first of all it's going to, you know, set your place on fire, and it's going to be too hot.” So, we ex-nayed that.

CK: Where'd you get the idea for the design of it? Like the part you see—to do it looking like a cabin and things like that?

ND: Um, well, I think what I did is I just, I went to a lot of restaurants before, obviously, and I looked at the outside and the inside, and you know, they all had a very rustic wood look. And we wanted everyone to know that we make our own food, you know. We don't buy it and resell it.

It's ours; it's Barbecuties, you know. So, that's where I wanted to have like a very authentic look.

MH: OK so, um, what—tell me about you clientele? Do you get mostly men? Do you get mostly women? Do you get a mix of both?

ND: See, that's disappointing for me, because we mostly get men, you know. And we really try to get the women to come eat, and like a few of the bartenders are women; they come down and eat and then they tell their friends and they come, but it's really hard to get the women to stay. I don't know if it's just too messy, or they think it's dirty, or they don't like us, or I don't know what it is, you know. There's a lot of women walking by with their boyfriends and their boyfriends are like, "I want to eat here," and they're like, "No, keep on walking," you know. Yeah, so.

MH: I mean, I for one—I for one am one of those people that is very wary of street vendors. I just have a fear of—

ND: You know, you should have—the guy—I hate to talk crap, but I mean the guy, um—I'm not going to say his name or where he is—but he's been thrown off of Sixth Street several times. And it just, it gives everyone else a really bad name, because we really try a lot harder, you know, to be better and to show people that we're very clean. And we've even, um, Best Wurst—John at Best Wurst was talking about, um, having a food vendor association, just so we can sort of, you know, edge out the people who are throwing raw chicken on the grill on Sixth Street.

CK: Upsetting [*Laughter*].

MH: You're glad you're a vegetarian right around now, aren't you?

ND: So, only eat at Barbecuties.

CK: Do you think—I mean, do you thing some of that, um, with having more men eat there than women—and you listed a few reasons—but do you think some of that, maybe it just has to do with food practices and, kind of, like how, you know, the way that women tend to eat, or feel that they're supposed to eat, in public?

ND: Oh, for sure. For sure. Um, I mean it's a pretty heavy sandwich, you know, first of all. But, I think more men eat downtown than women do because all the—I mean there's no salads, you know, like whatever they're looking for. I mean, there's pizza and tacos. And so, I think, for sure I see a lot more men eating downtown in general. And the other vendors have said that as well. It's always more men. And I almost went as far as, like, I mean with our new permits I was thinking about opening up a little dessert stand or something to have the women, you know, because I love dessert, you know. I was thinking maybe a little like hot donut with chocolate syrup on it, but then I did a, um, a survey and they weren't into it. The girls weren't, and neither were the guys, so.

CK: Yeah, one of my friends had talked about doing a crepe stand on Sixth Street.

ND: That's such a good idea. And it's not hard. I mean, the crepe, you could fit that in a four-by-five foot. Yeah, have you heard of Flip Happy? I love those. And those two sisters are started it too.

CK: You know, I haven't been there, but I've seen it.

ND: And it's good stuff.

CK: So, is there anything about your business that you didn't get a chance to tell us about that you think is really important for us to know, or important, you know, for the record, or any of that?

ND: Um, not really. I mean, for the record, we're women owned, and women run, and barbecue-loving. That's pretty much it.

MH: What's your favorite barbecue restaurant in Austin, or Texas, or the world, apart from Barbecuties?

ND: It's actually Bowie Street at, um, Whole Foods, the organic; yeah I just think it's really good and it like feels good, you know.

[END]

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