Paul Bolus
St. Elias Maronite Catholic Church
Birmingham, AL
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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:00:00]

Michelle L.: Okay. This is August 16, 2019, and this is Michelle Little. I'm here with Paul Bolus, and we're in his office in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Paul, if you'll—to start out with—will you just state your full name and date of birth for the record?

[00:00:23:14]

Paul B.: Surely. It's Paul Peter Bolus. I was born February 2, 1963. February 19. Why did I say that? February 19. [Laughter] 1963.

[00:00:36.27]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Okay. To start out with, will you tell me a little bit about your family growing up? Where'd you grow up?

[00:00:43.18]

Paul B.: Yeah, so, I grew up in Birmingham. The city proper, in what was called Crestwood. I guess it's still called Crestwood. So, that's where I grew up. Large family. Mother and father, I had five siblings. So, we were all in one house. It was a three-bedroom house. Quarters were tight. I remember at one point, my brother and I and another brother all shared one room. So, we literally would jump from one bed to the other.

[00:01:14.17]

Michelle L.: Wow. What ages, how much distance was there between all the—

[00:01:19.23]

Paul B.: So, there's seventeen years between the oldest sibling and the youngest sibling. Fourteen years between me and the oldest, and then three between me and the youngest, so.

[00:01:30.06]

Michelle L.: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your parents. What did they do? What were they like?

[00:01:33.14]

Paul B.: So, my father was a—he served in the Army, and then, discharged under the G.I. Bill, he went and got a trade in watch repair work. He opened his own store, called Bolus Jewelers, in Birmingham—actually, the Norwood area of Birmingham. He was at that store for over fifty years, and everybody in the family worked in the store. It was our livelihood.

[00:01:59.22]

Michelle L.: Wow. When did it—is it still open? Is it still around?

[00:02:02.29]

Paul B.: It is not. Actually, I guess I was involved in its closing. We were robbed at gunpoint and I was there. I'd just graduated high school, and it was about the fifth time he'd been robbed. After that, my dad decided he was gonna retire. Eventually, about six months later, he closed the store and retired.

[00:02:27.03]

Michelle L.: Good grief. So what year was that, when y'all were—

[00:02:28.20]

Paul B.: Yeah. So, that was 1981.

[00:02:31.17]

Michelle L.: Okay. Mm.

[00:02:33.27]

Paul B.: Summer of 1981.

[00:02:34.28]

Michelle L.: Gracious. What about your mom? Did she work in the store as well?

[00:02:38.15]

Paul B.: She worked in the store as well. Yes, indeed. So, my early—since this is a food thing—my earliest dealing with food, cooking, was after school, I could either go and work at the

store or I could stay home and get supper going. So, I chose to—a lot of times—stay home and actually cook supper for the family, 'cause I could do work and watch T.V. and cook. So, I would do that and Mom would stay at the store and work. So, that was kind of the trade off.

[00:03:10.26]

Michelle L.: Okay. Who taught you how to cook?

[00:03:12.28]

Paul B.: My mom and my grandmother. So, when I was even littler—before I could cook—my grandmother lived only about three blocks from us. I would actually, after school, go and walk to her house and have an early dinner with her 'cause she ate dinner early. Then I would go home and eat dinner again. [Laughter] I've always loved food.

[00:03:32.25]

Michelle L.: What were some of the things you cooked with your grandmother?

[00:03:36.26]

Paul B.: All the Lebanese food. But then we did all the Southern food, too. She made really good potato salad, taught me how to make potato salad. She could make salmon croquettes, fried salmon croquettes. She did a great grilled cheese. I didn't know grilled cheese could taste so good, but she could do a great grilled cheese, and she taught me that. But then all the staple Lebanese food: *kibbie*, baked *kibbie*, raw *kibbie*, stuffed

squash, grape leaves, hummus, *tabouleh*. *Sof sof*, which is tabouleh with lettuce in it. So, anyhow, I learned how to make all of those. Really—and baklava. *Baklawa*, as we call it; that's the Lebanese name for it.

[00:04:15.06]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:04:16.24]

Paul B.: It's actually spelled exactly the same, exact it's with a w. A lot of people think it's a misspelling when we do b-a-k-l-a-w-a, and then the way you pronounce it—so, the emphasis is different. It's buh-lay-wi, as opposed to baklava, which is the Greek term, which is what most people know about because that's how it's been marketed over the years: as baklava. So, most people call it baklava, but it's actually *baklawa*, is the Lebanese term. So, growing up, that's what we always called it, is *baklawa*.

[00:04:48.02]

Michelle L.: Okay. I did not know that.

[00:04:51.11]

Paul B.: Yeah. So, I learned how to make that. I also learned how to make meringue; she made the best meringue pies. I would make chocolate meringue, lemon meringue, coconut meringue—which was my favorite—and then, to this day, I still make her coconut cake recipe, which is a homemade coconut cake.

[00:05:06.03]

Michelle L.: Ooh. What kind of process is that like, the coconut cake? Is that pretty extensive?

[00:05:11.19]

Paul B.: It's not as difficult as you'd think. The hardest part is making sure that it's moist enough and you don't overcook it, because unlike a boxed cake, you can't just go by the measurements. You've got to go by how it looks and feels. Because if you cook a lot, you learn that every time you cook, it's not the same. The meat is different. The different products you're using are different. So, you have to be able to taste or look and feel the dough or the batter or the . . . if it's meat that you're workin' with, you need to taste it, because the taste of the meat itself determines what spices you need to put in it. So, it varies.

[00:05:53.05]

Michelle L.: That's a good tip.

[00:05:55.08]

Paul B.: Yeah. So the hardest part is getting the cake moist enough; not overcooking it and not having it to—the icing is easy to do, and the coconut part is easy, so all that. But getting the cake just right—but when you do, oh, there's nothin' like it. [Laughter]

[00:06:11.04]

Michelle L.: So, what were some traditions surrounding food in your family?

[00:06:17.11]

Paul B.: Yeah, so, food is part of our culture. It is every holiday; every everything has its food that you prepare for that holiday. So, like for Christmas is when we always make *baklawa*. And we do—which is really a Southern variation of what you would find in Lebanon. We make it with pecans. In Lebanon, it's only with walnuts or pistachios. But we do the pecans because, in the South, you have pecans, and it actually gives it a little—I think it's the best flavor ever. I have a story, so I digress for a minute. I actually went to Lebanon, and why I thought taking sweets to the relatives I'd never met in Lebanon, but I made Southern *baklawa*. I made it with pecans and took it to Lebanon. They could not believe how good it tastes. [Laughter] They make it. They have stores that sell it, just everywhere you go, and yet that's what I took. But they had never had the pecans. I really didn't think about that, that they had not had the pecan version. So, they actually really, really enjoyed it. It was interesting. So, we always make that at Christmas. So, at our house, not only did we make it for ourselves but we would also make it for our friends and relatives. It really kind of became the gift we'd give out at Christmas to our neighbors and our friends, even some of the family members who didn't make it because it was too difficult for them to make it, we would give them the *baklawa*, and that would be the gift that we would give. So, even when my kids were in school, we would make it and give it to teachers. To this day, just my wife and I were out eating two weeks ago and one of the teachers stopped and said, "I have never had better *baklawa* than—I miss your kids because I miss the *baklawa* at Christmas every year." [Laughter] So that became a

tradition. At Easter, we make a cookie called *kaak*, and it's a round circle, which symbolizes the circle of life—which is what Easter's all about. And sometimes, you fill 'em with dates. You can make 'em plain or you can put nuts in 'em. So, we have that. Later, we'll talk about the festival. We always have those at the festival, as we do the *baklawa*, but the *kaak* is always a big deal at Easter. We always make that. So, just like we would dye eggs, which is a custom that people do, but we would always make the cookies as well because that was our custom. It's just like that for really every holiday and every event—like if you lose a tooth, you're supposed to make bread. On New Year's Eve, you make—it's a doughnut called *zlaybah*, and you make wheat to celebrate the New Year and wish everybody good luck. So, like you would do cabbage and corned beef, we would make the *zlaybah* and have the wheat to resemble the . . . New Year and good luck in the New Year. So, there's a tradition for all of that. So, food—and I've been to Lebanon, as I indicated. You realize when you go, especially the village that my grandparents lived in, is one of the food areas in Lebanon. I never knew that till I went, or I didn't realize to the extent, and so no wonder we always grew up bein' very critical of food. Even within our church, it's very difficult, because everybody has their own special touch that they want to their dish. It's always very difficult to have other people within the community like your food, 'cause they like it a certain way. They're very picky about it. But food is such a big part—I mean, if you come to somebody's house, they have to eat something. Like if they don't, it's an insult. So, when you go to Lebanon, they will feed you and feed you and feed you, and you have to learn the word, "coulas," which means "enough" in Lebanese. They will not stop until you say that word. If you don't know that

word, they will just keep bringin' the food, because you can't leave hungry. That's just a rule. Food is a big part of our culture.

[00:10:10.05]

Michelle L.: And what village is it in Lebanon that you're—

[00:10:11.16]

Paul B.: It's called Weidi El Eish.

[00:10:12.22]

Michelle L.: How do you spell that?

[00:10:14.11]

Paul B.: Yeah, that's a good question. [Laughter]

[00:10:17.14]

Michelle L.: It's okay if you don't know.

[00:10:18.15]

Paul B.: It's close to W-e-i-d-i and then E-l and then E-i-s-h. But there's different variations on how actually to spell it. It's very near—it's really across the Berdawni River, which is more like a creek, but from Zahlé, which is one of the fourth largest cities in Lebanon. So, it's really like a suburb, but at the time, it was a separate village. It's a walking

village; there's really not—there's one road now that one car can go down, but it was built as a walking village. So, when I went, I actually got to see the house where my grandfather grew up and the vineyards he cultivated, which are still there. So, it was really, really neat to connect. That was an amazing thing. But along the Berdawni River are some of the most famous restaurants in all of Lebanon. So, between Zahlé and Weidi El Eish, is where we grew up, is these restaurants. And they're outdoor restaurants, all along the river. They're some of the most famous in all of Lebanon. Right there, on the edge of our community where our people grew up, which is why the food is such a big deal for all of us. And a lot of people in our church St. Elias came from the Weidi El Eish. Probably about fifty percent of our church came from that village.

[00:11:34.27]

Michelle L.: Wow! That one village.

[00:11:34.27]

Paul B.: Yeah. One village. So, they came to America and settled all over the place, but at the time, Birmingham—in the early 1900s—was a boomtown. It's where the action was. So, word got out between the people that had come over from Lebanon from that village, that Birmingham was where you could make a living. So, they settled here. Around our church used to be Little Lebanon in Birmingham. I mean, it's where all the Lebanese people lived. They literally lived around the church.

[00:12:06.04]

Michelle L.: When it was on 6th Avenue or where it is right now?

[00:12:06.14]

Paul B.: No, where it is now. Where it is now.

[00:12:11.01]

Michelle L.: Okay. And it's in the—what would you call that neighborhood?

[00:12:08.00]

Paul B.: The Glen Iris.

[00:12:12.22]

Michelle L.: The Glen Iris.

[00:12:15.03]

Paul B.: Um-hm, yes.

[00:12:17.27]

Michelle L.: When did your . . . when did your grandparents decide to come over to America?

[00:12:26.04]

Paul B.: So, unfortunately, I never really had this conversation with my grandparents. I only really knew one of my grandparents, 'cause my grandparents were older and passed away

before I really knew them very well. But they came over in the early 1900s, and at that time, there was a lot of famine in Lebanon. They'd had a big drought, and the economy was very poor. They were lookin' for a better life for them and for their kids. So, that's why so many people came over at that time to America.

[00:12:53.27]

Michelle L.: Okay. And what did they do? What was their . . . ?

[00:12:57.13]

Paul B.: So, they started—on both sides—my mother and father both are Lebanese, and both of their grandparents came over in the early 1900s. Both sides were in the grocery business. They started peddling goods at first and then opened grocery stores. So, there was Bolus Grocery Store, which was my father's last name. Then there was Butrus Grocery Store, which was my mother's last name. My name, Paul Peter, is actually after the two families, 'cause Paul translates to Bolus and Peter translates to Butrus. So, I'm Bolus Butrus Bolus, actually. I have the same first and last name if you put it all in Arabic or all in English.

[00:13:38.10]

Michelle L.: All right. And those grocery stores were both in Birmingham?

[00:13:40.04]

Paul B.: Yes, they were.

[00:13:38.21]

Michelle L.: Do you know where they were ever?

[00:13:42.07]

Paul B.: Yeah. One was located very near Woodlawn High School on—what's that called? Georgia Road. Anyhow. And then the other one was located in Norwood, on 10th Avenue North.

[00:13:57.15]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:13:59.02]

Paul B.: I used to shop at Butrus Food Center, so, it stayed open a lot longer than Bolus. My dad went into the jewelry business, and his brother who had started the grocery store business actually died of a massive heart attack at the age of forty. So, the grocery store went away, but my father stayed in the jewelry business. The jewelry store that my father owned was only about half a mile from the Butrus Food Center, which was in Birmingham for a very long time and was a very large grocery store.

[00:14:25.07]

Michelle L.: And it's closed now, or—

[00:14:26.08]

Paul B.: Oh, yes. Yeah.

[00:14:27.17]

Michelle L.: Okay, great. So, were your grandparents also part of St. Elias?

[00:14:33.26]

Paul B.: They were, yes.

[00:14:36.05]

Michelle L.: Wow. So, the church started in, I think, 1910 . . . is that right?

[00:14:41.06]

Paul B.: Correct. That is correct, in 1910.

[00:14:46.04]

Michelle L.: So, a lot of members of your family have been part of that congregation, then.

[00:14:50.09]

Paul B.: All of my family has. [Laughter]

[00:14:53.28]

Michelle L.: How many people are in all of your extended family? [Laughter] Could you estimate? [Laughter]

[00:15:01.18]

Paul B.: Wow. It would probably be between eighty and a hundred people.

[00:15:05.06]

Michelle L.: Wow. [Laughter]

[00:15:07.17]

Paul B.: You know, Shaia's Clothing Store, which a lot of people know in Birmingham—it's a very famous men's clothing store, well, my uncle started that store. And all of the Shaias went to St. Elias as well, and all of the Butruses. My mother's side went to St. Elias and, of course, all the Boluses. Then we have other cousins, as well. So, if you include all of the cousins and everything, yes. Some people say—and you can, literally, everybody who came from Weidi El Eish were related one way or another. So, you could say fifty percent of the church is technically related.

[00:15:40.23]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:15:42.03]

Paul B.: Now, one of my sons, my third child, has married someone else from our church who is probably—and they were the only ones that were really the largest family that wasn't from the same village, so by marriage, now, we're really related to everybody. [Laughter]

[00:15:59.02]

Michelle L.: So, when you—I mean, when you thought about where you would settle down, was it just you definitely wanted to stay in Birmingham because of all this history? Did you ever think about moving off anywhere else?

[00:16:13.04]

Paul B.: I did think about moving elsewhere. So, of course, I met my wife here in Birmingham, but it was at a cultural convention, which was a Lebanese convention. Which, the purpose was to try to get people to meet up. [Laughter] Which I never thought that would ever happen. But I met my wife at that convention. It was actually a friend of mine was trying to hook up with her brother and had us all out to a dinner one night. She didn't want to make it obvious that she was trying to play on her brother. We ended up across the table from each other and talked and talked and talked. I had already decided to go to Tulane Law School and my wife was starting L.S.U. Med School, which is in New Orleans, not in Baton Rouge. A lot of people think it's in Baton Rouge, but it's not. The medical campus, medical school campus, is in New Orleans. So, we were in the same city. When I moved to New Orleans, we started out as friends and then we started dating. She was in med school. For med school, it's all about where you match. It was a joint decision about where to go, and so, there was a real possibility that I would end up in New Orleans. I had even done an internship at a law firm there and I had an offer from a law firm in New Orleans, and then I had one from here in Birmingham. So, when we

matched, she ended up matching in Birmingham, which is why we ended up here. So, there was a real possibility I would have ended up in New Orleans.

[00:17:40.17]

Michelle L.: So, how did you know you wanted to go into law?

[00:17:44.03]

Paul B.: So, bein' the fifth of six children, I learned the art of persuasion and arguing by watching all of the mistakes that my siblings made with my parents, who ruled with a very—I think with six kids, you have to—a very firm hand, but they were also very judicious. But one thing I learned was that, once they made up their mind, there was no going back. So, I learned to . . . persuade and ask them not to reach a decision until I thought that I could get the decision that I wanted. [Laughter] So, I learned the art of argument. People would say, "Oh, you can argue really well. You should go to law school." That kinda stuck with me, so that's what I ended up doing.

[00:18:35.06]

Michelle L.: What about the rest of your siblings? Are they in careers in Birmingham as well?

[00:18:39.22]

Paul B.: They are. My oldest brother is a self-made computer programmer who has done very, very well. Even though he's the oldest, he knows the most and is the most up-to-date on computer programming and computer knowledge. He now does it in the medical field

and is, like, on the cutting edge of all of the coding and everything that goes on with medical bills and getting payment from Medicare and Medicaid, all of that. Then my oldest sister—actually, she's the only one that doesn't live in Birmingham. She lives in Jackson, Mississippi. She is a nurse, but she does read charts and do that sort of thing now. She's not on the floor of a hospital like she was. She worked in U.A.B. in the emergency room when she first got out of nursing, so she had some stories to tell. I never thought my sister would be calm enough to be someone in an emergency room setting, so it just goes to show you, when you're a professional, you can do—'cause she was always the most nervous person and would always freak out if anything happened to any of us or anybody got a cut or anything. But apparently she was very good in the emergency room. I remember one year we had an ice storm and they needed help at the hospital. They sent one of those vehicles that could have traction, like an Army vehicle, to pick her up at our house because they needed her at the emergency room.

[00:19:57.04]

Michelle L.: Oh, wow.

[00:19:57.04]

Paul B.: Yeah.

[00:19:59.23]

Michelle L.: Was it when we had the Snowmageddon? [Laughter]

[00:19:58.27]

Paul B.: It wasn't Snowmageddon. It was a lot longer ago from that. This was one of the ice storms, when we had just pure ice. We used to have a lot of bad ice storms. I don't know—or we'd get two inches of just ice.

[00:20:11.20]

Michelle L.: Oh, goodness.

[00:20:13.02]

Paul B.: Yeah. It would accumulate on the trees and the trees would snap, and—we haven't had one of those in a while, thank goodness. But yeah, we used to get those more often. It wasn't a snow storm; it was an ice storm. Yeah, so, I remember that. Then my third sibling is actually deceased now, but he was a schoolteacher and worked in the Birmingham City Schools at Woodlawn High School, and then worked for a little bit at John Carroll, worked for Alabama School of Fine Arts for a long time as a math teacher. He was very good at teaching math. He tutored people on the side as well, and actually became very well-known in the community because of all of his teaching. He taught a lot, a lot of kids. Then my sister also is a teacher, Dora, my other sister. She taught at Huffman Middle School for a long time here in Birmingham. There's me and then my youngest brother, who started the festival with me, Norman. He is a nuclear medical technologist and he works at U.A.B. He's worked there for over twenty-five, thirty years now.

[00:21:19.11]

Michelle L.: All right. And you've been here at this firm for quite some time.

[00:21:23.01]

Paul B.: So, yes, I started at Burr Forman, which is a law firm across the street. I worked there nineteen years. Then I've been here for now almost twelve years at Bradley Arant, so, yeah, I've been doing the same work at both firms. So, I've done it for over thirty years.

[00:21:39.12]

Michelle L.: All right. So, I guess you've been at St. Elias as well for—

[00:21:44.18]

Paul B.: My entire life.

[00:21:44.22]

Michelle L.: Your entire life. [Laughter] Wow.

[00:21:49.01]

Paul B.: Yes. So, we have a thing at six weeks—or even earlier—where you're churched. You actually present; the first time you come back to church after the birth of a child, you present the child to the priest, and the priest actually carries the child to the altar and places the child on the altar in thanksgiving for the birth of the child. So, I was churched at St. Elias. I was baptized at St. Elias. I was actually married in New Orleans because

that's where my wife was from, but our priest from St. Elias came and helped perform the ceremony in New Orleans for our wedding. All of my kids were churched and baptized at St. Elias, so, yes.

[00:22:36.11]

Michelle L.: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what—it's a Maronite church.

[00:22:43.00]

Paul B.: Yes. Maronite Catholic. So, there're actually twenty-three different rites of Catholicism. Most people don't know that. All under the Pope. So Roman Catholic, obviously, is the most predominant; it's the one most people know about, but there are the other rites, as well. Birmingham happens to have both a Maronite and a Melkite-Rite church, both under the Pope and both Catholic. That is very—like, for instance, even Atlanta doesn't have both a Maronite and a Melkite; they have a Maronite church, but they don't have a Melkite-Rite church. Birmingham is a very—people don't realize how diverse Birmingham actually is because, in the 1900s when it was a boomtown, everybody came here from all over. So, you had the Greeks and the Italians and the Lebanese, and they brought all their customs and traditions. You also had African Americans. I don't think people realize how early in Birmingham's history—because of, unfortunately, the strife in the [19]60s—but how early in Birmingham's history it had a large African American population, as well. They came for the opportunity, not because they had to be here, but because of the opportunity—because there was great opportunity in Birmingham. Anyhow, where was I goin' with that? [Laughter]

[00:24:00.26]

Michelle L.: We were talkin' about the Maronite Church and the different rites and the Catholic—

[00:24:03.05]

Paul B.: Right, right. So, we actually have both of those rites. Then we also have a Greek Orthodox, large Greek Orthodox community. I mean, we have a Russian Orthodox church. We have a very diverse religious community in Birmingham. The Jewish community, we have . . . so, we have a very diverse and long history of those churches in Birmingham, as well as, obviously, the Protestant and the others. So, that's a great thing, I think. It brings a lot of diversity and continues. And people will continue their traditions. That's somethin' that's always been very important to us, to keep our traditions. Not only that, but to teach other people about our traditions. We'll get into that, but that's one of the reasons for starting the festival.

[00:24:47.06]

Michelle L.: Okay. Then, so part of the service—and I attended a service a couple weeks ago—

[00:24:52.00]

Paul B.: Yes.

[00:24:52.05]

Michelle L.: A good bit of it is in Aramaic, Syriac, and so does most of the congregation know the language?

[00:25:06.02]

Paul B.: So, you went to the 10:30 liturgy, which is what we call our High Mass. So, at that mass, yes, about half of it is in Arabic and Aramaic, Aramaic being the language of Jesus—which the consecration is actually done in Aramaic and always has been in our Maronite Catholic Church. It's a tradition that, during the most holy part of the liturgy, that it should be spoken in the language of Jesus and so it is. Then, but if you came to a Saturday night or an early Sunday morning, it would be mostly in English with just a little bit of Arabic songs and singing. So, do most people know the language? I would say maybe thirty, forty percent do, but I don't, and I'm a lifelong member of the church. I know some words, but I don't speak it, even though I've been to Lebanon and all of my relatives speak it. They also speak English, which I wish I learned the language, but when I was little, it was the thought at the time back then that . . . my parents didn't know English at first because they came over with my grandparents and it was hard for them to learn English, so they thought it was most important that we knew English. So, they did not teach their other language. Now, people understand that, as children learn, if you teach 'em both languages—or three or four languages—they pick it up really easily. But that wasn't. So, they never spoke Arabic around us because they wanted to be sure we knew the English, because they felt it was a barrier for them at first.

[00:26:48.01]

Michelle L.: It was a beautiful service.

[00:26:51.12]

Paul B.: Thank you. It has a lot of customs and traditions, and it's more chanting and more . . . prayers, set prayers, than if you go to a Roman Catholic church. So, there are definitely differences. There are different anaphoras for every season. So, the main prayers change based on the season.

[00:27:14.08]

Michelle L.: And anaphora is prayer?

[00:27:16.21]

Paul B.: Yes.

[00:27:18.02]

Michelle L.: Okay. Well, so, tell me about how you came up with the idea for the festival.

[00:27:29.04]

Paul B.: So, the idea is pretty easy. Growing up, we would go to the Greek Orthodox festival in Birmingham, which had been going on for a very long time and, really, had a lot of fun at it and enjoyed it. Then, later, the Melkite church started a Middle Eastern festival. Theirs was always in the fall. The St. George Melkite Church is only about less than a mile from St. Elias, and they're very similar churches in that both of them are from the Middle East.

St. George has more Syrian, but they also have Lebanese, as well, which used to be all one state—a Syrian state, until Lebanon broke off. So, a lot of them—a lot of the people intermingle and marry. Some come to both churches. It's always been a close relationship. Well, we would go to the Middle Eastern festival at St. George, my brother and I, and we would say, "We need to do this at our church." Oftentimes, whenever we were in the city and we would tell people that we were Lebanese and all, they would immediately think that we went to St. George because they had been to the festival or heard about the festival at St. George, so they just assumed—because that's what they knew—that they were us. So, people didn't know who we were, our church. In 1998, Birmingham changed the—our church used to supplement its income by running a bingo. That's just what a lot of Catholic churches did, and our church did it. My family was never for that. We didn't like bingo and thought it was a form of gambling and that we shouldn't promote it through our church. So, we didn't participate in it. We didn't help with it and we didn't participate in it. Well, when the city of Birmingham changed regulations, the church had to stop bingo. So, the church was looking for a way to supplement that source of income because they had come to rely on it to make ends meet at the church. So, my brother Norman basically challenged me and said, "We've been talkin' about this all this time. Now is our opportunity. If we're gonna ever do this, this is the opportunity, because now there's a need." So, I had four young children at the time and a career, tryin' to make partner at a law firm. It was not the best timing for me personally, but we said, "Okay. Let's do this." So, we took a proposal to the church. I had, at that point, been just involved enough to know I needed to do a written proposal and actually kind of put some parameters around it and that sort of thing. My brother and I

did that, and we asked the church for ten thousand dollars seed money in order to start the festival. I may be goin' into too much here, but—

[00:30:17.16]

Michelle L.: No, no, this is great.

[00:30:18.23]

Paul B.: Ten thousand dollars seed money in order to start the festival, because we knew there would be a lot of start-up costs with it, and we would need that kind of money to do it. So, we made a presentation to the church council. One of the things that we put in it from the beginning is that we wanted to give twenty-five percent back to the community, because we were asking the community to support us. We thought it was important for us to do more outreach, really, because we had not done a lot of that in our church. We had always been in a position of tryin' to pay things off and do things, but our church had recently pretty much paid everything off and was in a better financial position, as well. So, we thought it important that that be a part of it. So, the church council said, "Well, we need to replace this income." We didn't make any promises. If we break even the first year, we'll be really happy, and then that will set the table for us to make money in the future. So, it passed. We met with both the Greek church and the Melkite church. They were very helpful in tellin' us what to anticipate and what kind of equipment we would need and that sort of thing. So, we were very appreciative of that. They let us see their kitchens and their equipment. So, we made plans for that first year. We blew through the ten thousand dollars way, way before the festival started, and we did not want to go back

to the parish council because we did not think we could get any more money. So we actually, on our own, went out and raised additional money to buy things that we had to have. Everything else was on credit. So, before the doors opened, we had spent over thirty thousand dollars. [Laughter] We were literally up at midnight putting up signs all around the city, like almost all night long, because we're like, "If we don't get enough people, if we don't at least break thirty thousand, then we'll never have another festival." So, it was very, very stressful that first year. We had never been in the health—we had never been in the food business, and we knew we had to get a permit with the Health Department. Well, we had to go through all that training, and then the Health Department showed up the first day that we opened the festival was like, like, taking temperature probes of all of our food while we were serving food. It was very nerve-wracking. But we had a tremendous turnout from the community. It was unbelievable, and we could not keep up that first day. We were out of chicken by noon for lunch on Friday, and we'd already sold all these plates of chicken, so we offered people our top plate, which was the Beirut Classic, which was the *kibbie* and the grape leaves. "We'll either give you a refund or we'll just give you the plate of food." It was, like, four dollars more than the chicken plate. Most people took the Beirut Classic, and that turned out to be a great marketing thing, because a lot of people who had never tried Lebanese food tried Lebanese food because we didn't have the chicken. [Laughter] They ended up loving it and coming back. So that ended up being— that was not the purpose. So, I remember the people who were cookin' the chicken in the pit challenged us that there was no chicken; they sent so much chicken back, there had to still be chicken, so they literally came from the pit themselves to check to see where all the chicken went. [Laughter] 'Cause they didn't believe that we'd

already sold it all. Now they have to start—we open on Friday—they have to start on Thursday making chicken ahead of time in order to keep up. It was and is one of our most popular plates. We sell, like, two thousand chicken halves in two days, so.

[00:33:54.02]

Michelle L.: Good grief.

[00:33:54.21]

Paul B.: It's all grilled out on a pit, so, our men have to start . . . it's mostly men, we have some women out at the pit, too. They start . . . on Thursday afternoon now, in order to keep up. That's great. We did not have—we had just our church treasurer tryin' to count all the money. They're both deceased now who were doin' it, Abbie and Juliette Milton, God rest their souls. They were great. I'll never forget when we closed that first night, we were just in recovery mode, tryin' to figure out what we were gonna do the next day. We were havin' to make a list of supplies we were gonna need. Ladies were gonna have to cook more food early in the morning because we were running low on things. So, we were making plans and everything. It was after midnight. Abbie came up to me and he said, "I really don't know what y'all were expecting. I have no idea. These numbers are really unbelievable to me, but we're at thirty thousand dollars." This was the first day, yeah. It was unbelievable that we ended up making almost that same amount the next day and turning a profit of almost thirty thousand dollars our first year; which was more money than bingo had ever made in a year of operation. So, that cemented the success of the festival, and it's just been a great thing ever since. My brother and I ran it for many years

together. He stepped down as co-chair just because of other obligations. I became the sole chair. Twenty years into it, I've now turned it over to my nephew, who you met on Sunday. He chairs it; I still help him. I call myself a consultant. [Laughter] The great thing about that now is, when everybody comes up to me with all the suggestions and comments about what I need to do differently, I'm like, "Oh, you need to talk to Anthony, my nephew." [Laughter]

[00:35:46.29]

Michelle L.: So, I mean, what are—you decide to start the festival, you get the money. What are some of the things you had to buy and put to—what are the behind-the-scenes logistics?

[00:35:58.12]

Paul B.: So, one of the biggest challenges was, when were we gonna make the food? And whose recipe were we gonna use for the food? Those were probably the two biggest challenges. Since both Norman and I worked during the week, we were like, "Well, the only day that we can do this is on Saturday, 'cause we can't do it on Sunday." Sunday's church day. So, we have to do it on Saturday. There was a lot of resistance to that, especially amongst the women who had always cooked during the week, and they would clean on Saturday. You know, and be at home. That was their deal. It was not to cook. So, there was a lot of resistance to that. But we were like, "We have to be there if we're gonna be in charge, and we have all the food training, so we're gonna have to do it on Saturdays." So, we started, and at first that was difficult. It was a lot of our own family members. Now, on Saturdays, we have over a hundred volunteers that show up to help us cook. So, that has

ended up being a really great thing. As more people work during the week, it's actually been a very, very good thing. In fact, the ladies who have always made the *kibbie*—which is one of the dishes that we have—and I say the ladies, 'cause they've always had their own *kibbie* committee, even before the festival started when they would make it for their church functions. At first, they refused to do it for the festival. Then, they agreed to do it for the festival, but they would not do it on Saturdays. They did it on Wednesdays, 'cause that's when they normally did it. So, they were the only ones. But now they're moving to Saturday as well, because they've seen that they can get more help now. So, they haven't completely moved to Saturdays, but they're moving in that direction. So, I think that's gonna happen soon. So, picking the recipes, we could not agree. Because one, as I told you, everyone thinks the way they make, for instance, grape leaves—so, stuffed grape leaves is one of the things we do. So, everybody believes the way they make stuffed grape leaves is the right way. We couldn't get people to agree on a recipe. So, finally, we decided what we would do is a bake-off, and we would make it three different ways and we would not tell people what recipe we used. So, when everybody came for the cooking session—so, we would be making maybe spinach pies that week. We would make the grape leaves three different ways and we would put 'em out at lunch. Then, we'd have everybody vote on which one was the best. That's how we finally—and we wouldn't tell anybody whose recipe it was, because that in and of itself would be controversial, which recipe we decided on. So, to this date, we have never told anybody which recipe we ended up with, but we have not changed any of our recipes that we started with that first year. They have remained the same the entire time. So, that was deciding which ones. Then, you know, we didn't have a dough machine. We did all the dough by hand, 'cause

our meat pies—well, we didn't have meat pies the first year. Our spinach pies, we make our own dough. So, the person who made the dough, which is my sister-in-law, she'd always done it at home for her own spinach pies. Well, she and her friend Ziza would make them by hand. Kneading the dough. Her hands would be red from kneading the dough. Now, we have a dough machine. You just turn it on and it's great. But that first year, it was difficult. And then, making stuff ahead of time, we had to have freezers to put it in. We had to rent freezers 'cause we didn't have enough freezer space. Then, the electrical issue; you had to make sure you had enough electricity for all of that. It was a lot of behind-the-scenes planning. But again, a lot of that we were able to anticipate, 'cause we'd gotten help from both the Greek church and the Melkite church about what to plan for. So, that was extremely helpful. But yes, deciding on recipes was very difficult. I'll never forget, one of the ladies in our church who loves making grape leaves, and she's now deceased, as well—Selma Domit—she would come every year to make grape leaves, 'cause she loved makin' grape leaves. But we did not use her grape leaf recipe. One of the things we put in our grape leaves was tomatoes, and she never put tomatoes in her grape leaves. Every year, when we set down to make them, she would say, "Paul, these have tomatoes in 'em." I said, "Yes, Selma. We put tomatoes in our grape leaves." So, after we would cook 'em, we would always give people samples who were working, 'cause that was one of the benefits of coming to work. I'd always make sure I'd give Selma a sample, and she would always take the sample and eat it and look and me and go, "It does taste good." [Laughter] She wouldn't admit that it was okay to use it with tomatoes, 'cause she didn't, but she would say, "It does taste good." [Laughter]

[00:40:49.19]

Michelle L.: She gave it her blessing.

[00:40:50.02]

Paul B.: She did, she did. So, it was good.

[00:40:54.01]

Michelle L.: When you say nobody knew whose recipe—I mean, you had the—

[00:40:58.24]

Paul B.: My brother and I are the only ones that know.

[00:40:59.17]

Michelle L.: And you've kept the secret all these—

[00:41:00.29]

Paul B.: Oh, yeah. We will never tell anybody about it. [Laughter] No, we will never tell anybody.

[00:41:05.11]

Michelle L.: But now, does Anthony know? I mean, he . . . [Laughter]

[00:41:07.11]

Paul B.: Well, we have the recipes. We have the recipes and everybody in the church shares the recipes, 'cause you have to in order to do it. But no one knows whose recipe it is. They have the recipe, but they don't know how we developed that recipe.

[00:41:21.17]

Michelle L.: Good grief.

[00:41:23.22]

Paul B.: [Laughter]

[00:41:24.25]

Michelle L.: So, before you decided to do the bake-off, I mean, were you all just sitting around a table looking through recipes and trying—I mean, I bet everybody was just . . .

[00:41:31.04]

Paul B.: Yeah. I mean, basically, whose spinach pies do you like? Which dough can we replicate, like, for a thousand as opposed to just when you would do it for thirty or forty? My mom had resorted to using biscuit dough, and they were like, "We're not usin' biscuit dough. That's not—no way." [Laughter] So, and there's one particular lady in the church who's a very good cook. We used a lot of her . . . talents and her help in developing the recipes. So, that was very helpful. But yeah, there was resistance, as well, in the church before that first year. There were some people who thought we were takin' on something that was too big and that we shouldn't do it. I'll never forget, even the week of, one of the

ladies in the church who . . . very active and had always cooked at all of the church dinners and meals and everything called my wife. This is the week of, after we've gotten everything done; all of the . . . "We don't need to do this. You need to tell your husband—" She said, my wife told her, she said, "Well, you can try to talk to him, but if you tell him not to do it at this point, that's only gonna drive him to do it more." [Laughter] I'll never forget that second day when it was obvious it was gonna be a huge success, she found me and she came up to me. And she said, "I was wrong. This is great. This is a great thing." So.

[00:42:45.26]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:42:47.09]

Paul B.: But yeah. There was no guarantee it was gonna be a success. There was a lot of anxiety that first year.

[00:42:52.06]

Michelle L.: Sure. I mean, how did you balance that? Working for partner here, or were you just not sleeping? [Laughter] Or what?

[00:43:01.24]

Paul B.: It's like—this is how my wife would say, she'd say, "You know, after you have that first child, if you think about it, you would never have another one. But God gives you

amnesia so you don't remember." All I can say is, I really don't remember how I did it, but you just do what you have to do. We did it. But yes, there were lots of long days and long nights. Especially the weekends, because that first year just to cook everything, it took so long. We didn't have all of the equipment that makes it much easier, even though we were making a lot more food. So, we would cook all day Saturday, go to church, and then come back afterwards and package it because it wouldn't be cool enough until then to package and freeze. [Laughter] Now, we're done on most days by one o'clock, and we're making five or six times what we made that first year because we have the right equipment and we have more help.

[00:43:50.19]

Michelle L.: So, do you primarily help with cooking the chicken now? Is that your . . .

[00:43:55.29]

Paul B.: No, no. That's the one thing I really don't do. I still am there every Saturday, and I still am the taster for the spinach pies, the meat pies, and the grape leaves. Not a single bowl goes out without me testing it and approving it, and there's one other lady, Ziza, who's usually there who will also taste and approve. If the two of us say it's good, it's good to go. Because again, even though we have really good recipes and really good amounts that we've developed over the years, you have to taste it because, depending on the spinach, depending on the quality of the salt you're using, depending on the quality of . . . it can vary from year to year, even from bowl to bowl. So, to get that, our whole thing is we will not serve it unless we think it is exceptional. One year, even though I'd always

ordered the same olive oil through Sam's and it was the same lot number, same everything, one of our cooks opened one of the bottles and said, "This is not—we can't. We won't use this." We sent it all back. And this was the day before the festival, because they were gonna make the *tabouleh* and the beans and they use olive oil in both of those. We had to get someone to go back, who's gonna take it all back and buy all new olive oil because it wasn't good enough. And one year, the parsley came in the week of the festival, and the quality of the parsley was not, it was not good enough, and it was all sent back. We couldn't find, I mean, we needed twenty cases of parsley for our salads and *tabouleh*. So, we had to actually have someone drive to Atlanta to get the parsley to have it for the festival, because there was no more parsley in the city of Birmingham that they would accept. [Laughter]

[00:45:41.18]

Michelle L.: So, when you're tasting a grape leaf, for example—

[00:45:43.10]

Paul B.: Yes.

[00:45:44.25]

Michelle L.: What are you lookin' for? What makes a really great grape leaf?

[00:45:48.28]

Paul B.: Well, see, everybody's gonna say something different. [Laughter]

[00:45:51.16]

Michelle L.: But you're the—

[00:45:54.25]

Paul B.: But for our festival, see, I'm tasting the meat mixture that goes into the grape leaves. That's what we make. So, what I'm looking for is, it has to . . . we have salt, cinnamon, pepper, mint, parsley, and tomatoes in ours. So, you have to have the right acidity and the right seasonings to make it—to have the right taste. I can't tell you what that right taste is verbally, but when I taste it, I know it. Ziza even says this, and over the years, I have learned this as well: you can smell the mixture and know if it's right or not. So, when you really cook a lot, you can smell; if you've done it enough times, you can smell it and know by the smell if it's gonna be right or not.

[00:46:45.09]

Michelle L.: Do you feel like your grandmother or your mother helped?

[00:46:49.23]

Paul B.: Oh, no doubt, both.

[00:46:49.23]

Michelle L.: Or do you think you're just kinda born with the ability?

[00:46:54.01]

Paul B.: Oh, no, no doubt. The fact that I did it as a kid and learned from them some of the tricks and things . . . you know, my grandmother never, ever measured anything. I started off not measuring things. When I would cook, I would not measure. That's one of things, is when you're not measuring, you have to taste because you don't know until you taste it. I think a lot of really good cooks don't measure when they're cooking, because they know by the smell and the taste whether it's the right seasonings and right stuff in it. But yeah, definitely my grandmother was one. My mother was always a nervous cook. She was a really good cook, but I would say she was a nervous cook because she couldn't watch me cook. So, when I would make pies and stuff, it would always be when she was not at home, and she could not believe that I could make pies as well as I could. She was always worried that it wouldn't come out right and all the ingredients would be wasted and that sort of thing. Of course, my parents grew up through the Depression and so, you never wasted anything. So, she couldn't bear the thought of wasting all those ingredients. For me to try it on my own, it was always something that she would be afraid of. But she was a very good cook and did certainly help me, as well. But my grandmother is the one I really learned from.

[00:48:07.02]

Michelle L.: So, where do you all source most of these ingred—I mean, you mentioned all that parsley. Where . . . ?

[00:48:12.28]

Paul B.: So, now, we have the walk-in freezer and a walk-in fridge. We didn't have either one when we first started the festival, so we don't have any problems with storage; we have plenty of space now. That was something that we didn't get till after about ten years of the festival.

[00:48:26.24]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:48:26.24]

Paul B.: Yeah. But that makes all the difference in the world; it's very easy now. We used to have to have a truck, a refrigerated truck, and we would make sure it was regulated correctly. It would have to be plugged in and all that sort of thing. And we don't have any of those issues anymore, so, it's much easier now.

[00:48:42.14]

Michelle L.: And are you able to get most things here in Birmingham? Or do you have to—where do you buy all the . . . ?

[00:48:50.20]

Paul B.: So, we use . . . we have a couple of different sources, but yeah, we have to order it ahead of time. We can get it in Birmingham. We don't have to drive somewhere else to get it. But the quantities that we're talkin' about, I mean like for the grape leaves, we'll need ten to twelve thousand grape leaves. They come in huge pails. We used to open jars

because that's how they—if you go to the store and just buy them, they're in jars. That's how we used to do it. Just having to open all those jars took forever. Well, we learned that you can buy 'em at the wholesale, through the wholesale place, and there's almost a thousand grape leaves to a pail. So, you don't have to—all you have to do is open the pail and you're good. But even then, the leaves have to be rinsed, they have to be washed, because they're in the brine and you don't want that brine taste in your mixture. So, you have to rinse. We have a whole crew that comes the day before we're cooking that rinses them all, and then the stems have to be cut off the end of them, and then they have to be sorted because you want them in certain sizes. So that when they sit down to roll grape leaves, they can just start rolling; you don't want the people to have to roll the grape leaves . . . so, there's a whole process, even before you get—I don't think a lot of people realize the work that goes into it before you start the cooking day. It's almost true for everything. The dough people have to get there at 7 in the morning, even though we're not gonna start rollin' till about 9:30 or 10. In order to make the dough, let it rest and rise, so that then we can start cutting the dough for the . . . both the spinach pies and the meat pies that we make.

[00:50:23.12]

Michelle L.: Now I'm thinkin' about rolling all those . . . I'm sure there's a very specific art to getting that . . . [Laughter] I mean, you have to hand-roll them.

[00:50:33.08]

Paul B.: Yes. You have to hand-roll every grape leaf, so, all twelve thousand that we'll make will be hand-rolled. But, you know, it becomes—it has become a fun event. People actually look forward to it. A lot of people are sad when the festival is over because everybody gets together, they get to talk and visit. We have enough help now, so it's not too much on any one person. Everybody can sit across from each other while they're rollin' grape leaves and talk. And they're rollin' the grape leaves. And then we all have lunch together, that's one of the things. We always provide lunch for all the workers, so everybody gets to have lunch. Usually by then, we can package everything, 'cause it's cool enough, 'cause we kinda got it down that we can cook everything before lunch, eat lunch, then package, and we're done by one or two o'clock. So, it's really not a bad day, and people look forward to it. It's become a social gathering thing, so it's actually a lot of fun.

[00:51:30.05]

Michelle L.: Okay. You're hitting on it, but I was wondering how hard it is to get—or easy—to get the church community to come in and volunteer for all this.

[00:51:42.10]

Michelle L.: Yes. So, again, that first year, it was very difficult. [Laughter] It was difficult to get people; we tried to get people to lead up different things, so like, in fact, one of the ladies, Janice Toner—I thank her to this day—she may be the reason why we actually have the festival, because there was a lot of resistance. You had two men who were tryin' to head up a festival and tell women what to do, who had always been the cooks of the church.

She was the first one, then. She came and she said, "I will do the salad, and I will do it all. And you won't have to worry about it at all. I'll order all the supplies; I'll have the people to make it; you don't even have to worry about it. It will be done." So, that was like, check, one thing off the list. For literally fifteen, twenty years, she now helps with the doughnuts, the *zlaybah*, she's kinda turned the salad over to a committee. But she literally took care of that for us for . . . more than a decade. That just made it very easy. So, she was the first one to break out of the ranks and say, "Yes, we will help." Like I said, it wasn't until after we started cooking the spinach pies, which is the first thing we make every year because they actually freeze very well, so we make the spinach pies first. It wasn't until after we were done with the spinach pies that we finally convinced the ladies to even do the *kibbie*, so we didn't even know who was going to do the *kibbie* or how we were going to get the *kibbie* made that first year, because they were resisting to do it because they weren't really supporting the idea of the festival.

[00:53:06.22]

Michelle L.: And for anyone that's listening to this that doesn't know, what is *kibbie*? What all is in *kibbie*?

[00:53:11.25]

Paul B.: Yes. So, that's a great . . . it's the main Lebanese, I mean if you go to Lebanon, there will be *kibbie*. There's different types of *kibbie*: there's baked *kibbie*, there's fried *kibbie*, and there's raw *kibbie*. At the festival, we only serve baked *kibbie*. In Lebanon, you would get all three, for sure, and in most homes, you can get all three. But certainly, you

can get the baked *kibbie* and the raw *kibbie*. Raw *kibbie* is a really big deal amongst the community. We don't do the raw *kibbie* because of all the regulations that would be required and the need to make sure it's kept at the right temperature and everything, just too difficult for that many people during a festival, so we don't do the raw *kibbie*. The baked *kibbie* is made of ground round, and usually when I say ground round, I'm talkin' about steak that's ground, 93-7 beef. So, 93%, only 7% fat, so it's very lean, ground beef. In Lebanon, they'll do it with beef but they'll also do it with lamb. But here, we do it with the beef. Onions, salt, pepper, cinnamon, and wheat. It's mixed together, and then it's layered with one layer and then pine nuts in the middle, and then another layer. Then it's cut into diamond shapes, because that's just the traditional way in which to cut it amongst our people in Lebanon. It's diamond-shaped, so it's cut into diamonds, just like the *baklawa* is, same design. We actually now have a press that's made that will press it over the pan to get the right cut so that we don't lose any of it at all. 'Cause we used to do it all by hand, but it wouldn't always be exactly the same. So, now we have a press that actually imprints on the pan the design, so then it's actually cut through from the press. But yeah, that's what *kibbie*—and then it's cooked with butter and a lil' olive oil. So, a lot of people call it a Lebanese meat loaf, so kind of . . . a variation of meat loaf, you could say. But it's very good, and it's one of our best—the chicken and the *kibbie* are our two best sellers at the festival.

[00:55:19.10]

Michelle L.: And did you go to Lebanon before you started the festival? Or . . . ?

[00:55:23.08]

Paul B.: After.

[00:55:23.08]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:55:23.08]

Paul B.: Yeah. And it was really, I don't know if I would have gone had it not been for the festival. Because I was so involved with the festival and everything, there were some people in the church that really encouraged me to go; you need to go, you need to see it for yourself, you need to do this. We're gonna be there this summer, we'll pick you up at the airport, we'll show you around. After—my father had already been deceased—and after my mother died, I just felt a need to reconnect. So, one summer, my sister and I—my wife was like, "I'm not going." So, my sister and I went, and our friends were there. They took us around and we had the best time. Our friends—they're from our church—and they were very smart, because they were like, "Well, we need to find your wife's family and connect with them." So, they did. We went to their house one night and just knocked on the door. They were talkin' in Arabic and finally you could see the bells went off about who I was and who my wife was, and so they insisted we come back the next night for dinner, and we did. So, they taped a message. I had a video recorder, and they taped a message for my wife. So, I come back and I play the message and my wife's like, "Okay, so, when are we going?" [Laughter] So, two years later, the entire—my wife and I and our four kids all went, and we had the best time. So.

[00:56:38.17]

Michelle L.: Wow. So, what were some of her hesitations about going initially? I mean, she just didn't want to go on the first trip or what were . . . ?

[00:56:47.09]

Paul B.: No. I think it's a little better now, but certainly at the time, it was a lot of people thought it was a violent place and that it wasn't safe. It's funny, perspective is different wherever you go in the world. I went to Lebanon and I'm there, never felt unsafe at all. Never had an issue or any problems at all. What our relatives would say, "I'm sorry, excuse me, we've had no murders in the last whatever? How many have there been in Birmingham in the last week, in the last month?" So, you know, that kind of gave me a, "Oh, well, perspective." It's all about perspective. They're like, "Yeah, there's bombings, but they're directed at political figures. You're not a political figure, you're not a—" And usually they're done at night, because it's a warning, not that they're trying to kill people. Again, it's all perspective. Yeah, so, went, had no issues, had no problems. Took the whole family and we went, had no issues, had no problems. It was great connecting with family. One of the things that I used to be teased about all the time when I was in school is, people would say, "Oh, you go to that church with the neon green cross at the top." And people would make fun of the neon. I never knew, understood, why we had a neon cross; I just knew we did have one at the top of our church, and I really didn't understand why. But if you go to Lebanon, you understand why our ancestors did that, because every Christian community has a cross at the top—either at the mountain or at the top of the

church or the highest point—to mark that it's a Christian area as opposed to a Muslim area. So, it's just a way to signify that it's a Christian area. So, it makes sense as to why—and it's always lit up at night. I mean, that's just how it is in Lebanon. So, it makes sense when you go to Lebanon and you see that. You're like, "Well, that's why we have a neon green cross at the top of our church."

[00:58:50.29]

Michelle L.: I'm glad you told me that. I drove by the other night and I did think, "That is a little different."

[00:58:55.15]

Paul B.: Yes! It is different. You don't see that anywhere else. [Laughter]

[00:58:57.24]

Michelle L.: You don't. I'm glad to know the story.

[00:59:01.12]

Paul B.: Yeah. And we also, a lot of people wonder why we have the Star of David on our church, which is often the Jewish star. But that's the House of David, is where Jesus came from. And so, that's why we have the Star of David, because our ancestors came from the Middle East, from the area in which Jesus was in.

[00:59:21.03]

Michelle L.: And . . . what does it mean to the church to have people from all over Birmingham come to the festival and be there for those couple'a days? I mean, can you talk a little bit about what impact that's had?

[00:59:37.04]

Paul B.: Yes. So, one of the reasons for starting the festival, I talked about the money, which of course is always an issue and important to the church. But for my brother and I, it was really never, ever about the money. It was about, we wanted to hand down, pass down, our customs and traditions, and promote them to the public at large. We thought it was important that people knew who we were about. A lot of people don't realize or understand that, in Lebanon, there's a lot of Christians in Lebanon. In fact, in the Middle East, it is the—or was the—bastion of the Christian religion. And it's where the religion of Jesus originated, from the Middle East. So, it's always been important to us for people to understand that and realize that. Well, there's no better way than people coming and seeing what you're about. So, that has been just a huge benefit to our church, to our people, to our parish, to our community. I think it helps for people to understand who we are and what we stand for. We welcome everyone, and every year, we have a lot of Muslims that come to our . . . our festival. And they're out there dancing under the tent with our band, and we welcome that and we love that and we want everybody to harmonize. That's one of the great things to show, that we can all live and be together. So, I think that's been a wonderful benefit. One of the things after 9/11 is, a lot of people said, "Should we even have the festival?" 'Cause there was a lot of backlash on Middle Eastern people because the hijackers were from the Middle East, and so there was a lot of

backlash. Our priest—and Norman and I were very definite that, well, this is one of the reasons we started the festival from the beginning. People know who we are; people are not gonna be afraid to come to our festival or upset with us. We've done way too much for the community and for everybody. Was one of our best years ever. Never had an issue, never had a problem, because people know who we are. So, I think that's been a great benefit. But it's also been a way for us to hand down our customs and traditions to our kids. My kids. You know, my kids grew up dancing at the festival, doing the Lebanese dances on-stage. They still talk about it fondly now, of having done that, and also the cooking sessions. A lot of people come and had never actually made spinach pies or had made grape leaves. They ate them all the time, but their mothers or grandparents had made them, and they hadn't actually done it. So, one of their first opportunities to see it was coming and doing it all together. We've always been—you don't need to have any skills. Come; we'll teach you. It's no problem. We'll show you. If somebody new comes, they sit them next to somebody who's an expert at it, and they show 'em. Eventually, they get the hang of it, and they've got it down. Like if at the end we have extra dough left over or somethin', then we always give it out to everybody, and people will go home and make it. So, it's just been a great benefit for the community. Then I talked about that 25% that we had—so, nobody knew we were gonna make the kinda money we were gonna make. So, when we got ready for the second year, the council was like, "Yeah, that was great, but 25% is probably a little too much. We think 10% would be great." My brother and I, who are very adamant about it, we said, "Well, that's great. So, who's gonna run the festival?" They're like, "Are you threatening us?" I'm like, "No, it’s not a threat at all. It's a fact, because we're not gonna do it unless the church is going to continue to give 25%."

So, they agreed, and this has not been a—but it's been such a wonderful thing. Now, we have given—through our festival—over $550,000 to other charities. Not our church. Other outside charities. We now have a race that we've started six years ago, and all of the proceeds from the race—we call it our impact charity from the festival, 'cause it's the Saturday morning of the festival. So, for the last two years, it's been the Exceptional Foundation here in Birmingham, which is for kids who have special needs. We have somebody in our church who has gone to the Exceptional Foundation for most of his life, and we thought that was a great way to give back to such a great organization that helped somebody in our church. So, that's been a great thing. We gave them $12,000 just from the race this last year. So, it's just been . . . it really has been, the community has supported us and we've given back to the community. I think it works hands in hand. It's just been a great thing for everybody.

[01:04:34.05]

Michelle L.: That's great. Thank you. Well, is there anything I did not ask that you wish people knew about the festival or your church or the Lebanese community?

[01:04:44.10]

Paul B.: Well, there's a lot. [Laughter] But one thing about the festival that I want everybody to know is, that it's free. You do not have to spend a single penny if you come. If you buy food, that's great. We hope you do, but you're not—you do not have to. You can learn a lot about our church. We have church tours. You learn about the history of Birmingham as well, 'cause our church has grown up with Birmingham, and we talk about that during

our church tours. You can see our stained-glass windows, which are some of [the] largest ones in the state. We have the only—I'm told the oldest bell and clock tower in the state. I'm told that by the people who service it. So, I don't know that as a fact, but I'm told that, so I believe it to be true. We have dancing, and you can watch the children dance. Again, there's no charge for that. At night, we have a band from New York that actually plays traditional Lebanese music and people dance. You can do all that for free. So, you don't have to spend anything. We encourage people to come. One of the things that we've resisted and I'm sure, over time, it will eventually change, is we don't have a drive-thru service. We often, both the Greek church and the Melkite church do, and we could have one. But our whole thing is that, well, we started this because we want people to experience who we are and what we are about. If they don't come in and see us, they won't learn about us. So, again, it's not just about serving food and making the most money, it's about, we want people to learn who we are. We think you'll have fun and enjoy doing that. We encourage you to come in. So, we have a takeout window and a lot of people do that, but at least you're on our property and you can see what it's about. It's next to the tents, so there's usually music playin' and people dancin' and that sort of thing, as well. So, we've resisted that because, for that very reason, we want people to come in and experience it. If you're never had Lebanese food, get the chicken plate. It's chicken; it's grilled. It has seasonings that are Middle Eastern spices. It's not barbecue, but it's very popular. Who doesn't like chicken? It has beans and rice on it and bread. I encourage people who come as a family the first time to get a Beirut Classic and a chicken plate and split it, 'cause you can feed four people with it. You really can, it's enough food. We use to-go containers to serve the food in because, one, it keeps the food hotter, and two, it's

more food than most people can eat in one setting, so you can take it home that way. [Laughter] A lot of people do that. We have some of our ladies, Adele Boohaker actually makes bread live on a *saj*, which is what you would see if you go to Lebanon. It's the thin bread that you really can't buy anywhere else. You can buy it at some stories in Birmingham, but it's made by either Adele or another lady from our church. So, you get to see them make it live and you get to have it hot, which—until the festival started, I had never had the thin bread hot. I'd always had it 'cause we bought it from those ladies in our church who make it, but having it hot is a whole different experience. We usually have a line of people waiting to buy the bread. We also have the doughnuts, *zlaybah* , that are made hot on the premises. My aunt actually did that for years herself. She's now turned it over to a crew that does it. She refused to give her recipe, but she finally shared it with the ones who are doing it. [Laughter] 'Cause it was handed down in her family for years. It's special. I really can't describe it, but if you like doughnuts, you'll love this one. It's really good, it has butter honey that they put on top of it and it just melts in your mouth. So, it's really good. Just come and experience it, because I think it would be—a lot of people resist, I think they don't know what it's about or what our community's about. They look at a flyer and we're not inexpensive. It's not cheap food, because like I said, our ingredients are only the best and we're only gonna serve the best. But you don't have to spend anything to come and experience it. We'd love to have y'all. I think you'd have a fun time if you come.

[01:08:56.00]

Michelle L.: Well, thank you.

[01:08:56.01]

Paul B.: Sure.

[01:08:57.07]

Michelle L.: Thanks.

[*End of interview*]