



Jim Betts

Blue Grass Baking – Lexington, KY

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Rosie Moosnick: Okay. I am Rosie Moosnick, and it is August 21st, 2023. And we are in my home at 274 South Hanover in Lexington, Kentucky. And I'm here with–

Sarah Jane Webb: Sarah Jane Webb.

Rosie Moosnick: –and–

Jim Betts: –Jim Betts, who was born on August 4th, 1959.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, your birthday not long ago.

Jim Betts: Well, 64 years ago–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –not long ago, but yes.

Rosie Moosnick: August 4th.

Jim Betts: Correct.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Ten days, more than ten days. Okay. So why don't you start? Just tell me about the community you were raised in.

Jim Betts: I was raised in small town Iowa. I'd say it's like growing up in Norman Rockwell's America. It was very Americana, very small town, baseball, and swimming pools in the summertime. My dad taught at the college there. So there was the influence of the intellectua...intelligentsia.

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But I was just a little kid in a neighborhood where if you had a bike, you owned the town. And we would, yeah, we traveled a lot when I was young. We lived in Africa for six months when I was seven. We lived in France after that trip to Africa. We were a year abroad, and that opened my eyes to the world. I mean, I went from Iowa, where there may have been a Black person, but I don't recall it. And then we went to Africa, where my brother and I were the only white people that went to the school we were in. So the world, I didn't feel in any way uncomfortable by this, but it was a dramatic shift. And I remember crying desperately, not wanting to go to Africa before we left, and then as we're leaving Africa, crying desperately, not wanting to leave there. So I had a great experience–

Rosie Moosnick: Where in Africa was it?

Jim Betts: Dakar, Senegal.

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My dad was a French historian, so that's why we went to France afterwards. He was on a sabbatical. He wrote a book out of this, and he was doing research, and so we lived in– basically, we became community members in a big city. Dakar at that point, I don't know how big it was, but it was a lot bigger than the 9,000-person town that I grew up in.

Sarah Jane Webb: And how old were you?

Jim Betts: Seven.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh wow.

Jim Betts: And then we moved to France, and I turned eight in France.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh wow.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: This is just my own question. Was there malaria in—?

Jim Betts: Malaria? Yeah, we had to take pills. My brother used to palm 'em 'cause he didn't like taking 'em. I ate 'em.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: He's still alive.

Rosie Moosnick: That's a big deal in Senegal.

Jim Betts: It was, yeah. Just to quickly touch on bread in my life, we would go down to the local boulangerie every morning, my brother and I, and we would grab a baguette hot out of the oven before school, seven, eight o'clock in the morning, whatever.

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And then we'd come running home, having it wrapped up in our little blanket, ah, coat. And we would have it with beurre et confiture every morning. I can't say that that led to my business.

[unrelated conversation]

Rosie Moosnick: So Ted knew your dad, didn't you, Ted (Rosie's husband who, like Jim's dad, is a professor at the University of Kentucky)?

Ted: Uh-huh, yeah.

Jim Betts: Yeah. My dad was sort of an institution [laughter] at the university.

0:04:00

[unrelated conversation]

Rosie Moosnick: So did you all speak French in your household?

Jim Betts: I honestly don't know that, but I did speak French, and I spoke French at school, and I had French friends. I learned to speak in Africa, 'cause we were in French-speaking Africa. And we also, I don't remember this, but we also picked up Wolof, which is the local language there. And my parents used to speak French when they wanted to hide from the kids, talk about whatever they wanted. And then we, as children, you pick this stuff up quickly, so we were quickly speaking French. And they would slip into French to conceal whatever, and we'd be like–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah, exactly, we'd be grinning and all that.

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And then we picked up Wolof, and we could talk in front of them, and they wouldn't be able to understand what we were talking about. But I don't recall any of that. This is stuff that I've heard. I don't recall speaking the language. But we spoke French. I spoke French like an eight-year-old, so I was fluent in French at that level, and I never spoke it again. And I can understand a little bit of it, and my accent is okay, but I don't speak French.

Rosie Moosnick: So what memory from Dakar stays with you, that you carry with you?

Jim Betts: School. It was very simple. We had, every one of us had a little slate board and chalk pencils. They weren't the dusty chalk. It was like, I don't know, it was like a stone. And

you would write on these boards to practice because paper was so valuable that you would only do your assign...you didn't do your– there was no such thing as scratch paper there.

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You would do your work on these boards, and then eventually you'd get your cahier out, your little notebook, and you would do your penmanship. We had dip pens and blotters so that you wouldn't smudge it and all that. I remember there was– a punishment was if you were smarting– or for any transgression, they would take a– and they would have you– there's an expression, *tendre la main*, which means put your hand out here. And they'd take this stick, and to me, it's this fucking baseball bat.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: But it was just a stick, and they'd slap you on the palm with this thing to get you to– you know. I mean, here in Kentucky, we used to get paddled in– what's it called? Corporal? No.

Rosie Moosnick: Corporal punishment.

Jim Betts: Corporal punishment, yeah.

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And actually one of the– my homeroom teacher for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade was this football-playing, large African-American teacher, a math teacher, who would wander the hallways with a paddle with holes drilled in it so that he would get better action, less wind resistance, and he'd just be grinning and walking around like that. I don't think anyone ever got

paddled by him 'cause we were terrified. This guy was six-five and 250, and I was this little [laughter] white guy. I was like, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: But, anyway, those are the punishments that I was privy to, though I was always a good boy, and did not get in trouble.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: I knew how to avoid that shit.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: I would've had no interest in that. So, yeah, school was a big one. My friends, we played football, soccer out in the streets, so just that kind of stuff and just the very– I mean, in a certain way, I wished I'd gone 10 years later so that I could have something to compare it to.

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But, at the same time, I know I am a product of that, 'cause at those very formative years, I was viewing a whole new world. We drove around some of Africa, drove to Tunisia, which was amazing. A very white city, a whitewashed city. And Morocco and the Sahara Desert. We stumbled across a Roman coliseum in the middle of the desert, right? Not we, I mean, people knew it was there, and my dad probably took us there. But, to me, it just appeared out of the desert. And we got to run all over and play everywhere, and we thought this was the grandest thing. And then we went to Rome on that trip, European trip, and we went to the Roman one, and it's in much worse shape, and you couldn't go anywhere. I was like, damn, I wanna go back to Africa. It's a much cooler environment. So those kind of things, the kind of things that a kid

would be interested in. We would go– school was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday.

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You had Thursday and Sunday off, right. And you would go to school from 8:00 to noon, and from 3:00 to 5:00. In the hot part of the day, you'd take that off, and people went to the beach, because it was an ocean. I mean, it was a beach coastal community, and so– yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: So what was it like for you when you went back to Iowa?

Jim Betts: Well, it was– I don't remember it. I settled right in. I had friends, all that kind of stuff. But I got massively ridiculed. I was a little pudgy kid. I had that nice little fat belly.

Rosie Moosnick: It's hard to believe that now.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: I understand. But I was like this tall and this wide. And the first time we went swimming at the indoor pool there, my friends did not like my European bikini.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: They thought... I was the cat's freaking meow in this thing, and I got so hammered by people. Ugh. It was terrible. I never wore the thing again.

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[Laughter]

Jim Betts: Never wore it again. But over there, that was what, I mean, that's the style. But anyway, I felt it. I didn't feel any particular consequences of it. I don't– I've never even thought

that. We traveled a lot. My parents were both teachers, so almost every summer, I was used to making and losing friends easily. I still do it. I'll bond with people quickly, and then when they're gone, I'm rolling on. I don't hold on too tight. And, yeah, so I didn't notice. I didn't really notice. A year's time didn't seem to make that big a difference in my little world.

Rosie Moosnick: What was food like in your family?

Jim Betts: There or always?

Rosie Moosnick: Always.

Jim Betts: Yeah, we weren't rich. We were sort of a struggling young academic family.

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Iowa was a farming community. We ate well. I remember having a garden. I don't remember it being all that productive, but I remember growing pumpkins, and my mom had a rhubarb. And I remember walking around with a bowl of sugar and a stalk of rhubarb.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Oh my God, so good.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Wow.

Jim Betts: Yeah. Have you ever had– have you ever done that?

Rosie Moosnick: Uh-uh.

Jim Betts: Well, you need to do that, because rhubarb is the most sour thing you've ever eaten, and you put the sugar on it. It's the opposite of one of those Atomic Warheads or whatever,

those really sour candies that are just super sour at first, and then they turn sweet. Well, this was the opposite. So, I mean, we ate well. Mom liked to cook, and everything was homemade. There was no fast food. That's not true. There was an A&W, and that was the only fast food in in Grinnell.

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And once a month we'd get in the Chevy, and drive out there, and the carhops would come out and hang the tray on the side of the window. And you would get these frosted mugs of root beer, and you could leave with this heavy-duty mug. Oh man, big time.

Rosie Moosnick: What kind of food did your mom make?

Jim Betts: Meat and potatoes. In fact, when I went away to college, I was wanting to be a hippie. I was a Frisbee nerd and a stoner, and so being able to hang out with all these cool New York hippie types, I was like, man, this is awesome, the Grateful Dead and all this. And I joined a food co-op, where the students ran it, and were the cooks, and all this kind of stuff. And I remember going to the first meeting there, and that's when you get together and decide as a group, as a family, what are the meals gonna look like? Are you gonna be a vegetarian place? You gonna have what? And I remember "vegetarian," I might've heard the word, but I had no idea what this thing was.

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And I remember them saying, "How many meat meals do you wanna have a week? Two or three?"

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: It's like, what are we gonna do the rest of the time?

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: 'Cause vegetables were what you had with the meat, you know what I mean? That was the way it was. But actually that's funny. That co-op is what led me to my career as a baker, 'cause you would get jobs there. You could be a cook, you could be a dishwasher, or you could be the granola maker. You could be the yogurt maker. You could be the tofu maker. All these were like one-session jobs, and you had to have two a week. And I had been a dishwasher in Lexington before I went there, and I'm good at it. I don't mind it. I like doing a lot of dishes. I don't wanna do a few.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: But if I'm gonna get in that suds, I wanna go for it.

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So one of my jobs was being a dishwasher, and the other was being a bread baker, which I'd never heard of before, but that seemed kind of cool. It seemed like a neat thing to do. And we would bake bread, 10 to 12 loaves maybe at the end of the– and when we baked, it was in the evening. I don't know that it had to be this way. But my shift was we would bake it, it would go down there like nine o'clock at night or something, and fire up the stove, and make the dough. And then I'd sit around. It was an all-women's dorm, but a coed eating facility. It was a house on the edge of town.

Rosie Moosnick: Where was this?

Jim Betts: Oberlin, which by the way is Grinnell in Ohio. It's the same– when I– about my second year there–

Rosie Moosnick: What year was this?

Jim Betts: Well, I went to school in '77. In my second year there, I was like, why am I so comfortable in this town?

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: It really is. I mean, it is a flat– well, you know this. It's 30 miles from where you grew up, right?

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You grew up in Cleveland.

Sarah Jane Webb: Cleveland.

Jim Betts: We're 30 miles west of Cleveland. And I went there once in the four years I was at Oberlin.

Rosie Moosnick: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Had an amazing Chinese meal there.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, interesting.

Jim Betts: But, yeah, we just didn't– I didn't– actually, I went twice. I also saw Joe Jackson at the– I'll remember it. It was a club.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh yeah?

Jim: Yeah, not a big music venue, but a little club like Wolfgang's but not. It had that kind of name to it. Yeah, pretty famous little venues for hip up-and-coming bands, all that. Anyway, so, but, yeah, it was the same thing as–

Rosie Moosnick: So no wonder you had this sort of hippie co-op experience and things.

Jim Betts: Why?

Rosie Moosnick: Because that's how Oberlin–

Jim Betts: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Did you realize that when you chose to go there?

Jim Betts: Well, I wanted to go to Dartmouth but they didn't want me, so–

Rosie Moosnick: So?

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Jim Betts: –I looked other places. And at Oberlin, I walked around. The school was fine. It was nice. I don't know. What do you do? I don't know. It's a bunch of buildings, and they got classes. And then I went into the gym facilities there, and I saw a whole bunch of Frisbees flying all over the place. And at this point, I was an avid amateur at Frisbee. Every day before school, I'd go out with my friend, and we'd play for 20, 30 minutes, snow, sunshine, it didn't matter, right in front of the school. And so I was very– I was burning for a desire to play Frisbee. And I saw these Frisbees. I said, "What the hell is this? What's going on here?" And they said, "Oh, that's an EXCO." Experimental college, extra college? I'm not sure what the EX was. And these were classes taught by students for students. You had to demonstrate some kind of expertise in an area,

whatever it was, and then you would get one college credit for this. And this was a class in Frisbee. I was like–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter] Yes.

0:17:00

Jim Betts: –"I can get college credit for playing Frisbee?" And that's why I went there. So, yeah, there was definitely some hippie leanings at that time in my youngness.

Rosie Moosnick: Were you hippie-leaning in high school?

Jim Betts: No. I don't know. It was Lexington, Kentucky. I don't think there were any hippies here. We were– I was a–

Rosie Moosnick: Paul Bacdayan (mutual friend).

Jim Betts: What?

Rosie Moosnick: Paul Bacdayan, did you know him?

Jim Betts: No.

Rosie Moosnick: Which high school did you go to?

Jim Betts: Bryan Station.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, interesting. Did you all live on the north side of town?

Jim Betts: Yeah, I walked to school every day. We lived two blocks from–

Rosie Moosnick: Did you live in Deepwood then?

Jim Betts: Right next to Deepwood; Mariemont, which you can't get to Deepwood. You have to go the long way around. But, yeah, I was right there. We actually just moved there to our new house now. Our family lived there for 50 years.

Rosie Moosnick: In north?

Jim Betts: On Mariemont, yeah, same house.

Rosie Moosnick: Wow.

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So, wait, you were living in that same house?

Jim Betts: When my parents got old, and didn't wanna deal with the steps and the aging house, we basically took it over. We bought it from them, and they took the money we gave them, and bought a place in Griffin Gate.

Rosie Moosnick: So what was your transition from Iowa to the north side of Lexington?

Jim Betts: What was that like?

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-hmm.

Jim Betts: The transition from Iowa to Kentucky was a bit rough. I don't know that the north side was any different than anything else. It was just a whole different world. I remember I was—the educational system was not as advanced as it was in Iowa, so I was rocking it in the seventh grade. I was way ahead or at least advanced. And I remember the first snowstorm we had here in Lexington, they called off school, and there was like a quarter-inch dust on—

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Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: It's like I like this place.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Because in Iowa, if the axles didn't get stuck in the snow, you went. And it was a small town. I don't even know if there were school buses in my town. I don't know, 'cause I walked to my other– I had two different elementary schools. Why? I don't know. Like, first through third, and fourth through sixth. I'm not sure why, but we did. And one was like two blocks away, and one was three blocks away. But, yeah, I walked everywhere. It was a big city. Lexington was a big city.

Rosie Moosnick: It felt like a big city after Iowa?

Jim Betts: Oh yeah. It was I don't know how much bigger, but dramatically bigger.

Rosie Moosnick: And were you involved in theater?

Jim Betts: My parents' best friend and our next door neighbor was the director of the Grinnell College Theater, and a man of some repute. And his children were theater nerds, and so we would, like, as entertainment, we would put on plays.

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We would write and direct plays like *Rumpelstiltskin*, or we would just kind of put on plays as pla...because back then, there was, I mean, there were three channels on television.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yes [laughter].

Jim Betts: You had an hour a day, and get outside, you know, sort of thing. So the theater was in my world, but I don't recall ever doing anything in Iowa. But when I came to Lexington, I remember we were in seventh grade English, and we were reading Fagan, *Oliver*. We were reading *Oliver Twist*, and the teacher said– and I heard somewhere that there were auditions, so I auditioned for it. And then when she said, "We're all gonna go see it at some point," I was like, "Ha-ha-ha, I'm in it."

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: So that was the beginning of the children's theater. I spent a lot of time in the children's theater. And, in fact, I was gonna be a theater major when I went to Oberlin. That was my intention.

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I was morphing into the technical side of things. I was really into lighting. I worked– do you remember Diner's Playhouse, north end of town?

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-hmm.

Jim Betts: Well, I worked there. I was their go-to boy if they needed an actor, you know, a generic boy. And then I also was a busboy, which is where I did all my dishes learning there, and a lot of Frisbee too, because the great thing about dinner theater is when the show starts, you gotta be quiet. So you gotta be around there for intermission. So me and the rest of the busboys, my drug-dealing friends– am I gonna get in trouble for this kind thing?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Well, you didn't name them.

Jim Betts: I didn't. Anyway, we would go out, and that's where I learned about smoking pot was there, and I learned about– we really got good at parking lot Frisbee, which is a whole nother thing to playing Fri...because it tears up a Frisbee, and you have to worry about running into cars and things like that.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: But, yeah, it was a good experience there.

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And I was doing some– and then that, I kind of moved into doing technical stuff there at the theater, and I helped with some lighting things and all that, which I really liked. And I went to Oberlin with the intention of being a– I don't know if I was gonna be a theater major or like a lighting tech major. At that point, I was kind of done with acting, 'cause I always got burned by this guy named Jeff Moosnick (Rosie's cousin). He would always get the fucking good roles.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: And I–

Rosie Moosnick: He did get those starring roles.

Jim Betts: He got the good roles.

Rosie Moosnick: He did.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Son of a bitch.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: He did.

Jim Betts: And he was good looking. He got the girls too.

Rosie Moosnick: He did.

Jim Betts: And I was just like, Jesus.

Rosie Moosnick: He did. Yeah, he did. I'm sorry.

Jim Betts: I didn't like Jeff much.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: And the worst part was that he was good, and you had to give it to him, you know.

Rosie Moosnick: He was good.

Jim Betts: He was good.

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah.

Jim Betts: He was good.

Rosie Moosnick: May he rest in peace.

Jim Betts: Yeah. You know Jack Hickey?

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-mm.

Jim Betts: Jack Hickey was maybe a year or two older. I think Jeff was my age, pretty close.

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Rosie Moosnick: Sixty-five or something like that?

Jim Betts: Yes, I'm 64, so yeah. But Jack Hickey was this– he was a hippie. He had the ripped-up jeans with the peace sign patches on 'em.

Rosie Moosnick: Who, Jeff or Jack?

Jim Betts: No, Jack, Jack Hickey. He smoked cigarettes, and he had like kinda John Lennon shady glasses and all that. He was very cool.

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, I didn't know him. So, wait, what happened in college? Did baking bread come your way, and theater–

Jim Betts: Bill–

Rosie Moosnick: –theater went by the wayside?

Jim Betts: Bill somebody was the first-year lighting instructor, and he was probably the absolute worst professor I've ever had in my life. And he cured me of any interest of doing theater–

Rosie Moosnick: Wow.

Jim Betts: –in one class, which just goes to show you–

Sarah Jane Webb: It's powerful.

Jim Betts: Yeah, it is powerful. It is powerful. It is as powerful as the opposite of the inspiration and all that.

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And then I became a geology major but got defeated by chemistry, so then I became an anthropology major.

Rosie Moosnick: And so the whole time through college, you were baking in this co-op, you think?

Jim Betts: I started, that would've been my– probably my junior year. Yeah. And I was still living in the dorms then, so I would do that and then go back to my dorm. But then my senior year, in the summer of my– between my junior and senior year, I went to Alaska for fun, and fell in love with the West, the whole of it. And I was gonna live in Alaska for– I was never gonna come home. I was gonna live in Alaska. And then, all of a sudden, the days got much shorter and much colder.

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And I'm like, you know, maybe not.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: So I hit the West Coast, and I took a semester off from school, and just hitchhiked around the West Coast, and backpacked on all the amazing national and state parks out there. And when I came back, I was living off campus in housing, and I was not in school at that time. No, I finished school, but then I stayed at school for another three months afterwards, and so I didn't have anything to do. All my friends were in school, and so I started baking. I would bake every day. At this point, I was baking loaf breads, very yeasted, very loaf bread, you know? And we were six college-age kids who just ate nonstop. So I would bake three, like, two, three loaves of bread a day, and it'd be gone, and I'd bake more the next day. So I had an incredible– and I had this great bread book, the *Baker's Almanac*.

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And I think that was just a clever frame for the thing, 'cause it didn't really pay attention to the seasons. But it sort of had a bunch of different recipes, and I would try this, I'd try that. And so that really solidified my love of bread baking. And then I graduated, and came back to Lexington, not really sure what to do. Didn't wanna be an anthropology major, ah, teacher. Didn't feel teaching in my blood. And Le Matin had an opening. It's a French pastry shop here in town. And they had an opening, and I applied, and got a job there. And the French pastry chef was outstanding. He might've been younger than me but by a month or two. He was basically my age, and super talented. I don't know that he won the Golden Plume, whatever the award is for the best pastry person in France.

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But he either was or could have been in the running for it. And he and I just bonded, and I was eager and had a very fertile mind at that point. I was loving baking, and I was like, "Teach me everything." And so I worked there for about a year, and it was just he and I, and we pumped out, I mean, just a ton of stuff. I don't think Lexington had anything like that at that– and we just made a bunch of stuff. And that really lit a fire under me for pastries, and I stopped– we might bake a loaf of bread or two at the house, but it was all about pastries then. Should I keep rambling?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, please [laughter].

Jim Betts: Then and I was ba...

Rosie Moosnick: I had no idea, yeah.

Jim Betts: That would've been '82. And through Christmas, which he's the one who told me that in the baking world, you don't count how many years you've been in business; you count how many Christmases–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –'cause they are ridiculous.

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You double production, and you're probably already busy. And so all of a sudden, for a month, you have to be– so you gotta have, you know, you gotta either be super strong or you have to get some staff who wants to work for a month and then go away. So it's a tough gig. But, anyway, I worked with him for about a year, and then he basically said, "Okay, get outta here." In France, you do an apprenticeship here, and then you get sent out, and you do– they're called stages, which is stages, which I didn't know anything about at the time. But basically this is– you're going out, and working with three, four, five different people, different– to get your own– to get a sense of the breadth of the thing, and then you kind of design who you are. So he said, "Get outta here." And my girlfriend at the time was going to San Francisco for fun. She was a year behind me in school, and so she graduated. I was in Lexington working while she was at school, finishing.

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And then I went out to San Francisco with her, and lived there for about seven years, just doing pastries in a bunch of different places. San Francisco, which was one of the bread meccas of the world at that time, now it's everywhere. It's ubiquitous. But back then, bread wasn't a thing.

Great Harvest helped bring about the fresh bread revolution, they really did. But out there, bread everywhere, and I did pastries. I didn't do a thing with bread out there.

Rosie Moosnick: Was this the '80s then?

Jim Betts: Yes, it would've been '82, probably '82 to end of '80s, yeah. You could still afford to live in San Francisco. It was, yeah, it was great for a young man out there. It was awesome. I loved it.

Rosie Moosnick: Is there a baking memory that stays with you from San Francisco?

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You could write your own *Kitchen Confidential*. *Pastry Confidential*.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: No. No. But I did, I actually– if I have a name to drop, it was– there's a restaurant out there called Stars. Alice Waters, Chez Panisse, one of the peop...she claims to have invented the California cuisine, which was basically French ba...cooking light, like, with fresh ingredients and all this kinda stuff, and the sauces were not these heavy blah, blah, blah. They were light and quick and all this kinda– she claims to have invented– one of her partners, a very regal English architect by the name of Jeremiah Tower also claims to have invented it. And they had a falling out, and she went– he went to San Francisco, and opened a restaurant called Stars. And I worked there as a pastry– I was not the chef. I was the second there.

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Back in the day, he was one of the top 10 or 20 restaurants in the country. It was a thing. And I loved working there. It was very elegant. It was the most prestigious thing I'd ever done at that

point. And it was restaurant baking, which is very different than bakery baking, 'cause you're plating desserts. You're not selling someone a loaf of bread. I don't think we did bread. I'm sure we bought it. And so we would do ice creams, and we would do souffles, which was– no, we didn't do those, but we prepped the base, and the guy, the night guy who basically was a line cook for pastries, would do that. And we would set 'em up with cakes and tarts and things like that. And he would– and he or she, I think there were multiple people who did it– would send the dessert out with like never less than three sauces on it and all this kind of stuff.

0:32:00

So that was cool. All of it was just fascinating. And the town loves to eat, so you could, you know, you'd get a burger on a piece of half a loaf of sourdough bread. I mean, there was so much bread with this burger, you know? Yeah. It was fun. Elegant chocolate makers out there. Some guy would do vases out of chocolate, and colors, and just amazing. It was big, big, big city, very metropol...international, and a lot of the– out on the West Coast, in San Francisco particularly, I think, a lot of Asian influence. And so you get a lot of that sort of– and I love that artistic aesthetic. I think that is just– to me, that is– I can see why the Europeans went gaga over it in the 1800s when they discovered it. It just–

0:33:00

Rosie Moosnick: And the French in particular.

Jim Betts: Yeah, French in particular, impressionists, so, yes, absolutely. I totally get it, because I think it's honest. I think it is lyrical and honest at the same time. Anyway, that whole– that just being part of that wine country, you go on wine country tours. Go to the grocery store, 40 different kind of plums. Are you kidding me? I mean, you know, just like fresh flowers. I

lived just off Haight Street, and I would walk– I worked on Haight Street, three blocks up. And on my way home, I'd stop, I'd get fresh produce from the open-air, right, thing. And I'd pick that up, and then I'd buy some flowers for my girlfriend, and a loaf of like almond croi...a pain aux raisins from the pastry shop on the corner. Oh, it was–

Sarah Jane Webb: So good [laughter].

Jim Betts: Yeah, so good. It was won...and I think one thing that really helps big cities over places like us is walking.

0:33:59

Walking makes such a difference, 'cause you walk by. I mean, people in our shopping center walk by the bakery, and they'll come in because they said it smelled so good. Well, you're not gonna get that in a car, or if you do, you're not gonna hit the brakes. It's only by– there's that intimacy that you get from being a part of walking around.

Rosie Moosnick: That's really true. I'm shifting a little, just out of my own curiosity. That was also when AIDS hit.

Jim Betts: Yes. That was a big deal. And there was also when there was a real pride in being gay, so it was a big deal.

Rosie Moosnick: So how did you interface with that?

Jim Betts: Very little. I don't think I had– I did not have many gay friends, and we did not– so it didn't seem, I mean, it was a conversation in the community. But I didn't have much interaction with it.

0:34:59

A lot of protests and community activity, but not– I had not much–

Rosie Moosnick: So who were your clientele at like Stars or something? Who were the people who came?

Jim Betts: Well, that's interesting that you bring that up. I also stumbled across– my girlfriend found a– there was a lot of– I don't even know how to describe it now– self-help groups out on the West Coast at that time. One was called EST. I don't know if you've heard of this. Werner Erhard, he was kind of a big deal, because their technique and training was they basically would not let you sleep. They would not give you the freedom that you think are your God-given right or you're American-given right. You couldn't go to the bathroom when you wanted, all these kind of things. You would stay in the classroom, and they talked to you about stuff. And then that was the first week.

0:35:59

Then the second weekend– and they kind of beat you down, not actually but sort of over time. And then the next weekend, they build you up, and you see that basically you can do anything you want. So this was that kind of organization. And my girlfriend went to one of their trainings, and she saw value in it. And I was like, man, he's got a bunch of fucking cults and brainwashers. I want no part of it. But eventually I started watching, and she was more balanced. She was more energetic. She was more getting what she wanted in the world. And I was like, oh, maybe I'll try this. So I tried that out, and that fed in with my sort of socialistic leanings, and my humanistic "why don't we all get together, and live in peace and harmony?" you know, 22-year-old vision of the world. And I started looking around at the people who come in the bakery. The pastry shops I hung out were the good ones. These are the people who do not need to be taken care of.

0:37:00

These are the people who have everything, and they just want– they're gonna– in fact, I remember at one pastry shop I worked in, there was this one young woman who would come in, and she'd buy two or three pasties, and she'd inhale. This woman was thin as a rail. She would inhale these things, and then she'd go to the bathroom. And I was like, well, that's kind of odd. And someone said, "She's probably throwing 'em up right now." So this person would come in, inhale \$15 worth of pastries, or whatever it was, and then just throw 'em up, and walk out the door. These were the people– and we had wonderful customers. Not everyone did that. But I became– I got to the point where I realized that this was the kind of clientele I didn't really wanna– I did not wanna serve this community. It did not need my help. I got a job at a Montessori preschool for a while, being a teacher's aide. I was basically the guy. Everyone there was a woman, except me, and I was the roughouser outside. I'd play, and that was great.

0:38:00

And then I actually went on staff with Werner Erhard and Associates for a while, and I was one of these brainwashers helping put this program on. And I absolutely believed in it. I still see it as valuable, but I'm not sure it wasn't a cult. And then I moved to New York to be part of this organization, and that's how I met Francine (his future wife). She volunteered with the organization, and my job was to coordinate volunteers. So we talked on the phone a lot, and she had this very sexy French accent.

Rosie Moosnick: This is your now wife?

Jim Betts: My now wife. So my job was to–

Rosie Moosnick: So the girlfriend was gone at that point?

Jim Betts: Long gone. She decided that she didn't wanna hang out with a good Catholic boy any longer. She wanted to return to her Jewish roots, and move back, and married a lawyer. I was not an NJB (not Jewish boy) so–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –she got rid of me.

0:38:59

I actually almost asked her to marry me, and I didn't. And then like shortly thereafter, she split. It was probably right, but it wasn't fun. But, anyway, so I was involved in this organization, moved to New York, working there, coaching Francine on the phone, and then we started dating. And she came and worked on the site with me there in Poughkeepsie, near Upstate New York. And then when I left there, I was actually fired from there.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Scratch that.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: And we–

Rosie Moosnick: From this organization?

Jim Betts: Mm-hmm. You had to produce results. It was all about results. And there were times when I didn't get the job done, and they got rid of me, and we moved ba...

Rosie Moosnick: I don't know what results mean in that situation. Bringing in more people?

Sarah Jane Webb: Numbers?

0:39:59

Jim Betts: Hit numbers, whether at– where I was, I had to get a certain number of volunteers to assist in a week-long program. There was kind of a falling out. It was a very high-pressure environment to work in, and I don't think long-term I was cut out for it. It was very valuable. It led to us opening the bakery, because basically the program was– the purpose of the program was to empower you to pursue the dreams that you want, and make them reality. And so the business grew out of that. We moved to Lexington. We got engaged on [sight 0:40:45], Francine and I, and then we moved to Lexington because we didn't really have anywhere else to go.

Rosie Moosnick: In what year was this that you moved?

Jim Betts: '90?

0:41:02

We had a neighbor who was a businessman, and my dad said, "Why don't you"– we wanted to– Francie and I decided that we really like bed and breakfasts, and we wanted to open a bed and breakfast. And my dad encouraged me, saying, "That's cool, but how do you go about it? How does one open a bed and breakfast?" And so he had me go talk to our neighbor, who was a businessman, and we talked at great length. And he said, "Well, you can go to culinary school or you can go to hotel management or whatever and all that. But isn't there anything you know how to do now? Isn't there"– and I said, "Well, I used to do pastries all the time. I'm pretty good at pastries." He said, "Well, you might think about doing that. Nothing teaches you business like business." And so I was like, "Okay." And at that point, I was needing a job, so I went and applied at a place in the Gardenside Shopping Center on Alexandria Drive.

0:41:57

And it was a place called the Heart's Desire Bakery, and it was probably the worst bakery I have ever seen in my life.

Rosie Moosnick: I don't remember.

Jim Betts: Yeah. And I might've been there for 15 minutes, I don't know. But, anyway, I applied for the job, and the woman said, "Oh yeah, maybe. But would you like to buy a bakery?" [Laughter] And in probably one of the better and worst moves I ever did was I basically said yes. And I spent way too much money and they– I was so green in business that I'd spent too much money, and I signed a no-compete with them. A no-compete is for me as the new business owner to not be run outta business by the person I bought the business from. Basically I say, "I'm not, as the experienced business owner, I'm not going to use my influence and my skill to put you out of business. I am not gonna compete with you." They had me sign this thing so that I wouldn't compete with them, the new guy. I mean, I know nothing about business. So we bought this thing, wide-eyed and eager.

0:42:59

I remember the first day we made \$100, and we were like, "Oh my God, we're gonna be famous."

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: And for the first year, we lived with my parents, and for the first year, Francine and I paid each other [laughter] \$25 a week, 1990 money. It might've been, what, \$75 in modern day money. I don't know. So we had this much money, and we would put in our little pocket. And on Saturday night when we closed the bakery, we would go to one of the wing shops in

town, I can't remember, over here, somewhere south. It's over here, anyway. And we would have a beer and a plate of wings, and sit there like our heads in our hands–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –watching sports on TV and drinking a beer. That was our big– that was it. That was what we could afford, and that was big living.

Rosie Moosnick: Was it only the two of you?

Jim Betts: Yes. We eventually did hire some people. But I think we had one employee at a time over, like, maybe three or four employees in that one spot.

0:44:02

I was always ambitious, and my parents were– I do have to say this, my parents were incredibly supportive. Mom threw a whole bunch of parties that year, and we catered most of 'em. We would do anything she wanted, and she would pay us. I mean, she basically bankrolled our business for the first year. She was half our income, and everybody else was the other half. So, from that time, like, after we made it through that year, I was like, "Well, you're never gonna pay for anything again," and she hasn't, I mean, from then on, anything they wanted. But they countersigned the loan, cosigned the loan. I was in front; my dad's name was behind it. And that was one of the proudest moments of my business career was when I paid off the last of that that I owed, and I brought it to my dad. I said, "Okay, you're out. You are not responsible for my business any longer." And that was huge. That was really–

Rosie Moosnick: How long did that take?

0:45:00

Jim Betts: Oh, five years or something. It was, yeah, it took a long time. We struggled for a long time, and we've recently kind of gotten over the hump, I think. We've been around so long that people know us. There's a certain momentum kind of gathering. COVID, the pandemic actually helped our business. And I think the fact that people started baking at home, and kind of fell in love with the idea of being a sourdough baker but not really [laughter] the reality of it, makes them come in and want sourdough, right? And the fact that businesses– and we've probably had three bakeries close in Lexington in the last year. Some of them, I mean, Magee's had been around forever.

Rosie Moosnick: My lifetime (59 years).

Jim Betts: Yeah, literally. And these places are closing, so I think people are sort of kind of gravitating and holding on. I mean, I have people come to the bakery all the time. "You can't leave. You can't close." I said, "Why do you hate me so much?"

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

0:46:00

Jim Betts: But, I mean, it's very– it's a wonderful honor and acknowledgement of us that they're saying things like that.

Rosie Moosnick: So what do you think changed for you after five years that made sort of momentum go your way?

Jim Betts: Well, it wasn't five years. It was 20, 22 years. I mean, we struggled. There were times when I was running to the bank. I was praying the mailman would walk in the door– this might've been while you were there or after you were there (speaking to Sarah who worked at the

bakery)– praying that the mailman would come soon enough that I could take the check that I was expecting, and run to the bank before the checks I'd written had bounced. And once you start bouncing checks, you are in such trouble because you get charged every time, so you don't have money, and they're taking more. It is such a downward cycle. And I remember one time, I was sitting on the edge of the curb, right outside the bakery, and I was just shellshocked.

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I was like, I can't, I cannot, I'm– there's no more magical money going to appear. I can't pull anything else out. And I'm just sitting there at wit's end and shocked. And at that [laughter] point, my mom drove up, and she looked at me, she's like, "What's going on?" And she bailed me out. She gave me a loan of enough money to cover my current debts and a little bit so that I wouldn't– and from then on, we haven't had that problem, and we've been building ever since then to the point now we're pretty comfortable. But, yeah, it's tough. And I'm not a businessman, I am not. And [laughter] this one here, I used a– this a workout program called P90X where for 90 days, you work out, and you do this intense workout, and you do it over and over again, and you get in good shape– and you do, you get strong. You get in good shape.

0:47:59

And I remember Sarah saying, "Okay, great, but why don't you do B90X? Why don't you spend an hour a day on the bakery?" And I'm like, "Ah."

Rosie Moosnick: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah, 'cause Sarah's a businesswoman. I am not a businessman. She is– she's– yes.

Rosie Moosnick: So it wasn't until 22 years in that you became lucrative, that you–

Jim Betts: We were paying our bills. We would end the year clean, probably starting 10 or 15 years in. Well, the other thing is we bounced around Lexington quite a lot. Our first bakery was in that Gardenside Shopping Center. Then my ambition was such that I wanted to take over the world. So I had read in one of the magazines that something you can do if you wanna grow your business is you take over a grocery store bus...bakery, and you run that, and you basically run it as an independent contractor inside the bakery. So I went and talked to Walter Barbour right there or there or something, right here.

0:49:01

And I said, "Hey, I wanna run your bakery," 'cause I was like, what's the best grocery store in town? Chevy Cha...

Rosie Moosnick: Randalls.

Jim Betts: Randalls in Chevy Chase. And so I went and talked to him. He's like, "That is a great idea. We should do that." So he talked to his boss, and they said, "Listen, Randalls– that Chevy Chase Randalls is the flagship of our company. We're not gonna turn that bakery over to some"– I'd been in business for a year at this point, and I had no track record. And he said, "But we can turn– it's a good idea. Why don't we try 'em in County Market?" Do you remember County Market? It was about as wretched a discount grocery store–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –as you could– We moved in there, and I'm like, okay, I'm gonna teach these lowlifes about what baking's about. And they taught me about what business was about.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: And we started doing donuts and cake mixes. And I said for 10 years after that, I was buying my soul back because we did the absolute worst type of American baking you can do there.

0:50:04

I learned how to make a ton of stuff. I mean, I can– production no longer scares me. We can pump stuff out. And you learn to do that in a grocery store, 'cause you gotta make a bunch of stuff, and you gotta make it all the time, 'cause they were open 24/7 and you just made stuff. You made sure they had stuff to sell. And I learned how to decorate cakes there because the entire staff quit the day we moved in. So Francine, me and our one employee were standing in the middle of this grocery store bakery. And if you ever seen those things, they're as big as your house. They're huge. And there were orders for cakes to be served that day. And we had signed a contract, and I'm like, well, there's nobody here but me. So, I mean, I had decorated cakes before, but I didn't know how to do 'em fast. I didn't know how to do the writing on cakes, and balloon, all that crap.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: That sounds so stressful [laughter].

0:51:00

Jim Betts: Oh my God, you have no idea.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah. There are much better ways to go about running a business than the way I do it.

Rosie Moosnick: What kept you going? Ten years is a long time–

Jim Betts: Well–

Rosie Moosnick: –and panic.

Jim Betts: –panic, you know, and the fact is you actually– you have this sense that you're actually gonna– that you should get somewhere, that there should be the pot of rain, ah, gold– a pot of rain–

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: –at the end of the rainbow. That was what I kept finding.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: A pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But we were, in a sense, trapped. We weren't– we didn't have money to do anything else, but we also didn't have money to not do what we were doing. So, yeah, you just kind of keep trucking. And that was when I was desperate on the side of the curb, and I didn't know how to not do it. I couldn't just– what am I gonna do is close?

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At this point, we had two children, and we were committed, you know, we were committed. And I didn't know– I don't know. Why we kept going was 'cause that's what there was to do.

Rosie Moosnick: And where did you go after County Market?

Jim Betts: Well, County Market sold to Kroger in anticipation of Meyer coming into town. Kroger wanted to own the town before Meyer got here. Kroger was terrified of Meyer moving in. And I offered to buy all the equipment in that grocery store 'cause they didn't need it. They were gonna close that store. They didn't, I mean, it's now Home Depot, sort of. And they offered to– I offered to buy all the equipment. They said no. I gave 'em what I considered to be a good price for me, and they laughed at it, and then they put it all on– and so I was out of a job, and I had no equipment because I had thrown all our equipment. We had a little bit of equipment at our first bakery but nothing major.

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And we got access to a whole lot of equipment at County Market. And so I got a job at Common Grounds Coffee Shop. They used to do their own pastries. They may still. I don't know. Up in the upstairs, they had a little kitchen, and I did that for a while, all the while keeping an eye on the County Market equipment. And then they had an auction, and I went and bought– in fact, it's still the stuff we use at the bakery. But we didn't have that bakery. That's where Great Harvest was. I rented a place on Seventh Street. I've made such [laughter] bad moves. This warehouse space that is now a transmission repair place or something. Seventh Street is not an attractive type neighborhood for walk-up.

0:54:00

But I put a wholesale bakery in there, and I just went around town, and hustled to get accounts. Stanley J's in–

Rosie Moosnick: Stonewall.

Jim Betts: –Stonewall was one of them. Actually, it's funny how these things work. Stanley walked into the bakery, our very first bakery. He was my oldest wholesale account. And Stanley Tarnofsky was Stanley J's owner, and he was one of the waiters at Diner's Playhouse when I was a busboy there, and I knew him there. And, God rest his soul, he was an asshole. We did not like him. The busboys thought he was the worst waiter. He was demanding and snotty and all this kinda stuff. But, anyway, I remembered him when he walked into the bakery, you know, like an old folks' home kind of thing. This was probably 15 years, maybe 20, I don't know how long after. And we made his rye bread for him at my very first bakery.

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He was the only wholesale account we had. And I used to slice his bread by hand with a bread knife because we didn't have a bread slicer or anything like that. When we moved to County Market, he still bought bread from us. And when County Market closed, I probably told him that we were in trouble, and I couldn't supply him with bread any longer, whatever. And when Great Harvest moved out of the Stonewall Center, the owners of the shopping center wanted to have a bakery in there 'cause they liked the vibe, and the neighborhood liked the bakery. And so they approached us, and asked us if we wanted to move in there. And that's how we ended up there. So that was our third bakery, whew, fourth bakery.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: And what year was this?

Jim Betts: It was about 25 years ago, so whatever it is, like, '70. No, '80– '98.

Rosie Moosnick: '98.

Jim Betts: '98-ish, yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Wow.

0:55:58

Jim Betts: Yeah. We just signed our fifth– our sixth lease there. We've had five 5-year leases, and we never quite signed them right when they were due. There was always some dithering or whatever. So it's probably six month...we probably moved in in February of '98 or something, and we're now on our sixth lease. Three owners of the shopping center since we've been there.

Sarah Jane Webb: Was there–?

Rosie Moosnick: You're wearing me out.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah, and I haven't even told you what we did at the new bakery. I mean, that's all just getting there.

Sarah Jane Webb: Did you learn anything between that moment when you were sitting on the curb and your mom helped you in like different business practices or different motivation that has led to where you are now?

0:57:00

Jim Betts: I don't think so. I would like to say I wised up or whatever, but I don't really think so. Francine is a pit bull for finances. She grew up very poor, and money is an issue for her. For me, there was always money if we needed it when I was growing up. We weren't rich, but we did not suffer. And if you needed something, if something went wrong, somehow, though we had no money, money would appear and it would– so, for me, money was never– it was always around

the corner. Whereas for Francine, she had zero security with it. So she– I don't know if this happened then, but not long after, maybe in the next 5–10 years after that moment, she took over doing the finances.

0:58:04

And, I mean, there was no shenanigans. It was like we paid our bills, and we did not squander money. From the beginning of our business relationship, and she's been my partner ever since, and she's the hardest working person I know. And I work pretty hard. Her title is Dr. No.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: So annoying but probably very smart, I mean, because you can't be– when we moved into our first place, anyone walked in the door, they'd say, "Do you do blah, blah, blah?" And I'd be like, "You know, I was just gonna do those tomorrow." And I would do anything anyone wanted, all kinds of stuff. And when we moved into the new place, the last place, where we are now, I decided to steal a page from Great Harvest's– they were very successful, Great Harvest was– a page from their playbook, and that was do a limited number of things, and do them really well.

0:59:07

So I started saying no. I would say no to things. We did donuts at County Market. I vowed never to do donuts again. I would frequently say, if I wanted to make money, I'd do donuts, but we don't do donuts, and we don't do this, and we don't do that. And visually, I kept saying, no, narrow it, narrow it, narrow it. So we would limit what we would do. That helped. But that was sort of from the beginning. But I would say a large reason why we're as successful as we are now financially is because Francine has been running the books for a very long time. Yeah, I mean, I

don't know how to answer that question. I would say no. I don't know that I had an epiphany. It was just another time that I got bailed out.

0:59:56

And I was thinking, you were talking about how these things sort of have an arc in spirituality, I would say family is this bakery, 'cause that's the way it is now. The employees, I mean, Sarah and I go way back, and I feel comfortable with her the way I would a family member. Our customers are friends. I frequently liken it to the *Cheers* TV show, where everyone knows your name, I mean, and I watch– we have some employees these days who are kind of awkward and gawkish. And within six months, they're customer-oriented. They're friendly. Everyone takes care of customers. Everyone engages with our– it's an open-air. I don't know what to say. It's an open– there's not walls separating the customer from the production. So everyone who's working can shout across the bakery to anyone who comes in. So there's a real sort of give-and-take in the place. Very, very familiar, so very familial in that place.

1:01:02

So if there's a– that– which is not at all what you were asking. But if there's an overarching theme to the bakery, it's that it's a community center that disguises itself as a bakery or as a bakery, whatever.

Rosie Moosnick: I'm still sort of stuck on it. You went from this like fancy French bakery in San Francisco to County Market.

Jim Betts: Yeah, I'm still–

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: You're still processing that?

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: I'm still traumatized by that, yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: But, anyway, I'll move on to what do your customers look like? Who are they? What's the—

Jim Betts: Now?

Rosie Moosnick: Do you have a typical customer?

Jim Betts: I'd say, well, we're in sort of a middle-class neighborhood of elderly people. I would say, they're all— a lot of— so I'd say our age demographic is 50 to 60 years old, disposable income, and exposed to the good life.

1:02:05

They've traveled. They've experienced European baking and that kind of thing. So I would say that's our typical customer. But one thing that really surprised me when we opened was the number of Europeans that are in Lexington. There is a vast quantity of people here that are of European origin. And that's partially Lexmark, which was IBM back in the day, and it's also the university. And both those things draw that client, those people to Lexington. Horses too but not quite so much. And this hair is amazing.

[Laughter]

1:02:59

Jim Betts: But, yeah, we have a large Euro clientele, and a lot of that is a customer...

[unrelated conversation]

Jim Betts: ...from the university.

Rosie Moosnick: Who appreciate your bakers?

Jim Betts: Are used to this, whether they're from a different city or from a different country, you know, a large Ukrainian population here, Russian, although those people don't tend to tell you that they're Russian any longer. They're like, "Oh." Germans, a lot of Germans here, Czech, and they all kind of find their way into our bakery.

Rosie Moosnick: So, at this point, what keeps you going after 24 years in this location?

Jim Betts: Not really knowing how to end it is part of it. We're looking to sell. I don't know what I should be telling you here. We're looking to sell the business.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

1:04:00

Jim Betts: So—

Sarah Jane Webb: Are you really?

Jim Betts: Yeah, oh yeah. And we've been talking to people. We've not had much luck with it. And part of the problem in running a bakery that is as community and familially organized is that it doesn't transfer well, 'cause it's somewhat personality driven. So what's keeping me there is, I mean, this is money coming in, and I have no retirement plan. The money, the plan was sell the business, and take that money, and we're done. And that's not materializing, so we're just, again, it's like, well, go to work. I don't really know what to do, other than that. I mean, Stanley J's, they just closed, but maybe they had some money tucked away. We never did that.

1:04:58

And we were never successful enough to stash away money, or intelligent enough. I'm not sure. We just didn't. And so now we're doing it because this is our income, and we–

Rosie Moosnick: Do you enjoy it?

Jim Betts: I enjoy the people. I'm good at it. I can do it with my eyes closed. But the thrill is not so great. So, I mean, I can– I'm a pretty excitable guy. I can get excited about new things. One thing I want do is I want to do– I've wanted to open a diner forever. That was my next business was a diner. But I'm not gonna do that because–

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: –I don't want– right? But I could, I mean, food truck city, I could get a grill, and put it out on the deck, and I could do breakfast sandwiches all day long. So I'm trying to figure out how to make that happen. And that excites me, that kind of thing. But I've done so many croissants in my day.

1:06:01

If I never made another one, I'd be okay with that.

Rosie Moosnick: So you're really kind of ready to let go of the bakery at this point?

Jim Betts: Without a doubt. You want a bakery?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: No, thank you.

Jim Betts: I haven't inspired you to–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: –want to take on the joys of running a bakery?

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: Bakeries are tough. Bakeries are tough. The food business is tough. And I think the bakeries have the worst hours because you gotta get up early. Restaurant work, you stay up late. But that's– we kind of do that anyway. But bakeries, you gotta get up early. And our type of baking, which is sourdough baking, is starter-based, and it's like milking the cows. You have to do it. There is no– if you let this thing die, you have no product. Whereas if you're just doing a yeast-based product– yeah, so.

Rosie Moosnick: What will you do if you don't find a–

Jim Betts: I don't know.

1:07:00

Rosie Moosnick: –buyer?

Jim Betts: Dunno. We'll figure something out. I vowed not to sign this latest lease. I vowed that five years ago. And for the last year and a half, I've been working on not signing that lease. But the great thing about running a business when you don't own the building is that you've got nothing if that thing's not– if that business is not actually producing, there is no business. And so we have to stay open or we have given up trying to sell it. And you're not gonna sell it– you're not gonna sell equipment. Equipment, you'd get 15 cents. So what you're selling is an operating bakery, and so it has to be operating. So I signed the lease, and we are committed to another period of time.

1:08:03

Rosie Moosnick: How long's your lease?

Jim Betts: A three-year lease now.

Rosie Moosnick: And when did you sign it?

Jim Betts: A month ago.

Rosie Moosnick: Wow. Whew.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Your resilience is pretty incredible, Jim.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, I'm curious to know like where that hard work ethic was born.

Jim Betts: I have no idea.

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Jim Betts: Yeah. No, because I was– I remember my dad saying this to me. He says, "I don't care what you do, just do something." I was a– one of my favorite pins that I had back in the day when pins were everywhere, "I like work. I can watch all day." But, yeah, I was kind of a slough off, I really was.

1:08:59

I didn't work hard in college. I played a lot. I don't know why. I don't know where it came from. I guess I'm kind of an intense guy, and if I have something, like, I was very intense about Frisbee, and I was very intense about baking. I did like– there was something, I don't know what it was, but there was something that definitely called me. It was a satisfaction that I got out of it that was

very nurturing. Backpacking, I did that like nonstop. I mean, I get into things, and this one I've kinda– I remember my mom saying, "We'll support you, but you gotta commit to three to five years in opening the business," and that was 30 years ago, 'cause they knew me. I was very flighty. I would– and Francine helps a lot too. Francine is very stable.

1:09:59

She's very– and committed. She says she's gonna do something, it will be done, and she– it may be her, honestly. She has an incredible work ethic, and will not take, you know, "I don't want to" for an answer. Like, tough luck, it's work. And we both– so we both live that way now. Maybe it comes from her, very possibly. I don't know why. If I look back historically, it's unlikely.

Rosie Moosnick: What would you have done if you hadn't baked, you hadn't opened the bakery?

Jim Betts: I don't know. I don't know. I kind of wish I'd got into academia. I think it's a better gig. You get time off, get retirement.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Do you feel like this has been a calling?

Jim Betts: Yeah.

1:10:59

I got a problem with what I think you're asking, 'cause I don't think it– I don't think there, you know, like the heavens parted, and this finger came down, and said, you know, wrote on the pages of my life that I was gonna be a baker, no. But it is a passion. And when during COVID, when we closed the bakery, we closed the bakery for three weeks, and then said, "Screw it. We're

bored. Let's go back to work. Let's see what happens." I think a lot of what I've done in running the business is that I find loopholes or wiggle room or ask for forgiveness rather than permission kind of thing. And Beshear (KY's governor) said, you know, any essential business, and I was like, we're essential. So we just opened [laughter] back up again, and nobody said we couldn't, so we just kept doing it. But I had a point.

1:11:58

During that time that we were closed, that three-week time period, I baked bread at home.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: So there's something about it. It's very satisfying. Do you bake bread? Have you ever baked bread?

Rosie Moosnick: I have, but I don't bake currently.

Jim Betts: Yeah. It is a very satisfying thing to do. I find it meditative in the mixing process, and then there's a sort of kind of anticipation of the thing, and you can see it's alive. And then you bake it, and your house smells amazing, and then you have fresh bread. I mean, even if you're not good at it, it's good. You can be great at it, but if you're just a piker at it, you can still produce something worth eating. Yeah, it's just– I don't know if it's a calling. It's definitely something that I enjoy doing. My new passion is composting–

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, cool.

Jim Betts: –which is–

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, Sarah would be into that.

Jim Betts: Yeah. It's like sourdough.

1:12:58

You take, and you put these things in, and you nurture it, and it becomes alive. And you have to manage it and all. It's not unlike making bread.

Sarah Jane Webb: Is there any overlap with that concept of composting? Are you able to use it within the bakery at all, or is it just not the right–?

Jim Betts: No, but it's the other way around actually. I'd say that that informs the com– But it has given me in a certain sense– yeah, no, I don't think so. I wouldn't say that. But in terms of my life, yeah, there's a lot of– it has freed me up greatly, and I'm actually much more at peace because of composting because the circle of life, you are– it is right there. And if I cut down some plant in my yard, and I feel guilty about killing that plant, I'm no longer guilty 'cause I'm just gonna throw it on that compost pile, I'm gonna stir that bastard in, and it'll be a tomato in a year's time.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: And I don't have a problem with that.

1:13:59

And that's the way– if you look around, that's all there is. That's all that happens is this cyclical nature of things. And we are in that same– we like to think that we're somehow above or beyond whatever it is. We are part of that same cycle of things. And so I say that composting saved my soul. I'm quite at peace with many things because of this regeneration, and how the old becomes the new and all that. So, yeah, it's not baking but–

Sarah Jane Webb: But isn't that interesting? I think of a starter, and you're constantly adding to the old to create that. So it is a very interesting cycle.

Jim Betts: Yeah. Oh, I find there's definitely connec...I wouldn't say that composting is informing my baking, but I see the parallel, yeah. And remember making streusel–

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-hmm.

1:14:58

Jim Betts: –right, that sort of real– a properly tossed compost is that same kind of thing, where you got that very light and airy and vibrant– yeah. So I definitely get crossover, but I don't think one's– I don't think it's informing it.

Rosie Moosnick: Do you have a garden at home then?

Jim Betts: Mm-hmm, and I started gardening because I was composting. I was just composting for the heck of it. I'm like, what am I gonna do with all this?

Sarah Jane Webb: Interesting, really.

Jim Betts: Yeah [laughter], 'cause I feel guilty about throwing all this stuff away. I felt guilty about, you know, I'd mow the lawn, and then throw it in the garbage can. Are you kidding me? What are you– so I'd throw it in a big pile, and then it would rot. It wouldn't compost. It would just like [blurts].

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: It's really gross. Lawn clippings are gross, you know, six weeks in. But if you add a little bit of dried leaf, a little bit of straw, and you toss it a little bit, and all of a sudden you got this magic going on, and bugs and earthworms, and it heats up. [Laughter] Over the wintertime, I

was very interested in composting because it's the only gardening you can really do in wintertime is making compost.

1:15:59

So I would do it, and there would be a little dusting of snow on it. I'd put my little thermometer in there, and 150 degrees, woo.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: So I was like, man, that's a whole lot of energy, 150 degrees is, I mean, that's something. So I was like, I bet I could cook something on this. So I–

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Jim Betts: –took raw eggs, and I [laughter] buried it in the compost pile. And then the next day, I came, and I pulled it out, and I brought it to the shop. I'm like, okay. And it was in a plastic bag, so it wasn't like, I mean, right? And so I pulled out, I opened it up the plastic bag, and I was like, let's see what happens. And I cracked it on the table, and it was a hard-boiled egg. It was a hard-boiled egg out of the compost.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's so cool [laughter].

Jim Betts: That's so freaking cool, right?

Rosie Moosnick: That is so cool.

Jim Betts: And everyone's like, "Yeah?" I was like, "It was in a shell in a plastic bag, whatever." Rachel was the only one who tried it.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: I'm like, fuck, yeah, Rachel. But it was actually a really well–

Rosie Moosnick: That's so cool.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, beautiful.

Jim Betts: Right? Free. You could– and I'll bet you could run a sauna on top of a compost pile.

1:17:01

I bet you could heat a house on top of a compost pile.

Sarah Jane Webb: Interesting.

Jim Betts: It's–

Rosie Moosnick: How large is your compost pile?

Jim Betts: I took– it's so easy to do. I took three pallets. So this table's about the right size.

So I've got a U shape, and I have an open front, and so it's three-feet tall-ish, and three-feet wide and all that. And I just throw stuff in there, and I keep throwing it in, and tossing it. Yeah, I've actually [laughter] got four of them now. I'm kind of going overboard.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Wow.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: What's in your garden?

Jim Betts: Tomatoes mostly. I'm pretty good at growing tomatoes, lettuces. Right now, I've got squash growing. I just planted some broccoli for the fall. Cucumbers. But tomatoes are what I'm most successful at, and I love tomatoes, so I planted like 20 tomato plants.

1:18:02

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Jim Betts: [Laughter] Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Are you canning them?

Jim Betts: No [laughter], I don't know how to can. I don't have time to can. So I'm just chopping 'em up, and cooking 'em, and turning 'em into spaghetti sauce, pasta sauce, and I'm freezing it, which is a way of preserving it. It's not as good. Luckily, I have a bakery with lots of freezer space because, yeah, I've run out freezer space at the house.

Rosie Moosnick: Jim, you have a lot of energy.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Is there something you'd like to add that we– I know you've had a long day.

Jim Betts: I have. I do wanna say this. We talked a lot about me, and how I got to where I am. And it is, I mean, I'm the one who's here, but– and a lot of things led to us opening a bakery. But upon opening the bakery, I've had an incredibly loyal and honorable partner in my wife, Francine.

1:18:57

And she could tell you stories as rich and as diverse as what I have. She's not here. But I don't know how anyone can do this without a committed team and specifically a committed partner. I don't know that everyone needs to work with their own– with their spouse, and that's its own layers of effort, because there's no escaping. There's no going to work, and coming home, and sharing with your partner about what you did. They were there. And when things go wrong, they're an easy person to blame. But Francine has been an incredible– she's carried every bit of the weight that I have in doing this, and she still is. And so, if anything, I would say that this conversation could be doubled with her inclusion of the pieces of her life, and her perspective on the bakery.

1:20:02

So that would be the only thing.

Rosie Moosnick: That's funny you say that, 'cause Sarah and I were saying you're the third baker we've interviewed that it's really not one person.

Sarah Jane Webb: It's not one person.

Jim Betts: I mean, you can do it, but only for– not if you're gonna run a bakery. You can– one person can bake bread, and I could produce 20, 30 loaves a day, no problem, and I could sell it at a farmers market, whatever. And that's not a bad way to go, and I actually am envious of people who do that. I think it's a pretty cool thing. It's a really good way. They don't have a lease. They don't have a responsibilities of mortgages– well, maybe. But to do a bakery, you definitely need– you need some people you can count on. We've had great employees, great employees, and people who are passionate about whatever they're doing.

1:21:00

Sarah, I think, discovered photography or at least nurtured her photography at the bakery, and ran off with that. But while she was baking, she was awesome. She was dedicated to it. She wanted to– she did everything that she could to learn everything there. You have people, the arts, I think the arts, no, the artisanal activities draw a certain kind of person, and they tend to have a certain passion about 'em. Anyone who comes in, and people come and apply for a job, but people who come to bake, that's a different story. And those people properly nurtured can really provide. They give and take in equal measure, and it's great.

Rosie Moosnick: What– and I'll just ask. I know I keep going, but what do you– at this point, what do you worry about daily when you're walking?

Jim Betts: Energy.

Rosie Moosnick: Your own energy?

Jim Betts: I mean, I got a lot of things.

1:22:00

I am older. I am tired-er. I'm not worried about the business. It's funny. Really COVID, whatever happened to the world benefited us, and so I'm not worried about the business any longer. And the fact that I'm trying to sell it makes me even less worried about it. I'm ready to call it quits. I have greatly enjoyed the bakery, and it has given me a lot, and taken a lot, but it has given me a lot. But I'm not worried about the bakery. I'm worried about Francine's strength. She's a little bit older than me, and she is– and we're both just tired. I'm, yeah, just kinda, I guess I'm– it's kinda the growing older concerns. My mom, I'm worried about her.

1:22:59

If something goes south with her, we're in trouble. We're in trouble. So we're– things like that. But the business is great. It's really doing well.

Rosie Moosnick: And what do you enjoy when you go in the bakery every day?

Jim Betts: People. It is, it's almost always people. The employees, I've always enjoyed– I hire people I like. I used to say [laughter], with only a slightly tongue in cheek, that I hired my friend...when I need friends, I hire them. You know what I mean? I didn't hire my friends; I hired people to have friends, which is pathetic but somewhat true.

[Laughter]

Jim Betts: But also the customers, I love the customers. I love the customers. I love the– and one thing, I don't worry about it, but that is a stressor in my life, is the amount of work I have to do keeps me from the kind of interactions I want to have with the customers.

1:24:02

I have things that require my attention as opposed to taking care of that person who walked in the door that I either like or, no, I would like if I had a chance to talk with them.

Rosie Moosnick: Is there anything you wanna add?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: No?

Jim Betts: No. I can keep going.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: But, no, not really. I'm thankful for everything. I'm thankful for the community's support of us for over all the years. We've got an incredibly loyal customer base, and they share with– we've never advertised. We don't do that. And so anything that we get is word-of-mouth, which everyone says is the best, but it's slow going. The word on the street is if you disappoint or upset a customer, they'll tell 10 people. But if they like what they get, they'll tell one. So you can kill a business really fast.

1:24:59

Building it is a lot longer. It takes a lot longer.

Rosie Moosnick: Well, your goods are really good.

Jim Betts: Well, that doesn't hurt.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah [laughter].

Jim Betts: That doesn't hurt. Yeah. And I say we make what we like to eat, and I think that's kinda true. We don't really– I don't eat a lot of sweets. It's never been something that I do. I'm a bread guy. But any one of them, I would eat. They're good. We make good stuff.

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, you do.

Jim Betts: We do, and I think people recognize that.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah. Well, that alongside of your ability to bring groups of people together, whether it be the space or the option of working there, like you're constantly bringing people together. I think those things coupled with each other is where a lot of success has been going.

Jim Betts: Yeah. That is one thing, as I look at my life, I see that I'm a community builder.

1:26:03

That's kind of what I do. It took the form of being a bakery, but it could have been anything.

Sarah Jane Webb: Right. So that passion or that drive that we talk about that seems more like it's the people.

Jim Betts: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's what keeps you moving.

Jim Betts: Oh, now, for sure, absolutely. Yeah. I like having– I like regarding it as a community center. I like introducing customers to other customers. You guys would know each– you guys should know each other, and that kind of thing.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah, I like it. It's kind like yenta.

Sarah Jane Webb: For sure.

Jim Betts: Yeah. I haven't married anyone. I haven't, I don't think.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Well, actually, you and Dane (Sarah's now husband whom she met at Bluegrass Baking Co) sort of, but you all were on that trajectory–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

1:26:59

Jim Betts: –anyway, long before.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Jim Betts: Yeah, so, no.

Rosie Moosnick: Well, thanks for doing this–

Jim Betts: Absolutely.

Rosie Moosnick: –after a long day. I'm supposed to let this sit for 30 seconds so they get the ambient sound. So we'll just be quiet for–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

[End]