



Ouita Michel

Midway Baking – Lexington, KY

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Interviewer: Rosie Moosnick

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[unrelated conversation]

Rosie Moosnick: Okay. So I am Rosie Moosnick, and it's August 23 on 2023, and we are at Midway Bakery, Midway School Bakery. And I am with--

Ouita Michel: My name is Ouita Michel, and I was born--

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: --I was born August of 1964, so August 15th, to be exact, 1964. And is that what I'm supposed to say?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, you did a good job.

Ouita Michel: Ouita Michel.

Rosie Moosnick: Perfect. And--

Sarah Jane Webb: Sarah Jane Webb.

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Rosie Moosnick: So, Ouita, we've known each other a long time now.

Ouita Michel: Yes. I think [laughter] we started-- we probably met one another in the seventh grade.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Rosie Moosnick: I think in the seventh grade, yeah.

Ouita Michel: Yeah. We both went to Morton--

Rosie Moosnick: --Middle School.

Ouita Michel: --Junior High School [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, junior high.

Ouita Michel: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: So you may not remember, but I remember, I think it was in the '90s, I was in Special Collections at UK, and I was looking up newspaper clippings about race at UK. And you were looking at cookbooks.

Ouita Michel: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I don't know if you were even living in Lexington at the time.

Ouita Michel: I moved back to Lexington in 1993, yes, early in the year. But prior to that, no, I was living in New York City for, I mean, I went to UK.

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And then after UK, I moved to New York City, and stayed there for four or five years, and then came home.

Rosie Moosnick: So my question to you is, where did all this come from?

Ouita Michel: All the food stuff?

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-hmm.

Ouita Michel: I honestly went through sort of a midlife crisis at age 21 because as a student at UK, I was an intensely competitive inter-collegiate debater, and that is a serious law school track. And then I worked in law firms over the summer and I just-- I was really successful at it. And I love-- I started cooking with friends who were on other debate programs. That's really how it all started. So we would teach these debate camps like at University of Michigan, Dartmouth.

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You'd go around, and you'd teach at least two camps a summer, and that's kind of how I made my money to live during my academic year. And during that time, we just started cooking together as friends, and there just became a big food and wine passion among all of us. And then I started cooking, catering little things [laughter] at debate tournaments at UK. I know this is so goofy. But my mother was a fabulous cook, and then I just-- then we went from that to like I would have these New Year's Eve parties with all my debate friends [laughter], and we'd make like eight courses in my mother's kitchen. She loved that, I'm sure. But it all started there, and I sort of decided that instead of going to law school, I really wanted to try working in a restaurant. And so in 1987, I moved to New York City, and opened up the *New York Times* and got a job.

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I had two friends who--

Rosie Moosnick: What? Wait, you opened at the *New York Times*?

Ouita Michel: I opened up the *New York Times*--

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, and got a job.

Ouita Michel: --and just went through the classified ads, and I got this amazing job. It was this sweet little restaurant that was macrobiotic called the Health Pub on 22nd and 2nd. And it was owned by one of the producers of Woody Allen's films, and the guy that owned the Republic Bank. They were a couple. They served no animal products or alcohol of any kind, and everything was made from scratch according to this macrobiotic philosophy. And the kitchen was just filled with the most caring, nice, amazing humans. And they shepherded me [laughter] through New York.

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And I got to meet people like, you know, I'd be in the kitchen, and Bill Murray would come in. So I was just swept off my feet by the whole restaurant culture, I think, from that experience. And I followed that chef, his-- the chef of that little restaurant also ran the summer concession for *Shakespeare in the Park* in Central Park. He ended up leaving to pursue that, and I cooked in Central Park for an entire summer. And when you're 22 years old, and you get to see Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates and Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, and you get to watch Shakespeare every night, and so we would work during the day, making all the stuff. And we worked in the theater, like outside [laughter] prepping, and then we'd sell the concession, and we'd get to watch the play, and then run back and run the concession during the intermission. It was pretty amazing.

Rosie Moosnick: That is amazing.

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Ouita Michel: So I did, I lived in New York before applying to the Culinary Institute of America just for a few year...like two years I think. I had great roommates who were in law [laughter]

school, who debated for Dartmouth, and the three of us-- in those days, you could still have an apartment. We had an apartment on 87th Street on the East End near Gracie Mansion, and we each paid \$500 a month. Pretty great. It doesn't happen that way anymore. Thank God we got in right on the tail end.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: What was the call up home then, because that's a very enticing life?

Ouita Michel: Oh, it was. It was great. Well, I initially-- I've told these stories a lot-- but I initially just came home to get married. I had met my then boyfriend the first day of culinary school in New York, and his family is-- they're the kind of New Yorkers that were the poster.

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They don't see anything beyond that [laughter]. It's like empty. His great grandfather was one of the guys that started the Queensboro Bridge. I mean, they're very vested in that. So my mom was really worried I was gonna get married in New York, and she was just-- so my stepdad called me up one night and said, "Please, you have to come home just to do the wedding, and then you can go right back to New York," and so I did. But when I got back here, there's one thing that Kentucky has that's-- well, besides the pull of your family, which is really important in a person's life. I really enjoyed the adult relationship I had with my mother in a way that I didn't enjoy [laughter] my adolescent relationship with her.

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And I feel so lucky I had that, like, it wasn't long-distance. It was down the street. And I really enjoyed that process of getting to know her. She had just gone back to UK as a student when I

returned. And she was a really good writer and a poet. And it was wonderful to get to know her, and also we just had a lot of fun together. So I'm very grateful for that time. But that was a big pull, and also the accessibility of everything. I mean, when Chris and I were trying to figure out a life in New York City, are we going gonna buy property? No. You can't even afford to pay the taxes. I mean, how do you establish a business? We always had a dream of opening a little restaurant together. And so he came down to Lexington 'cause he missed me, essentially. And then we just started building a life together.

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And then we realized that we had the capacity to build the life we wanted here, which isn't really about money, necessarily. I mean, it's more about the process of doing what engages you. And that's very accessible in Kentucky.

Sarah Jane Webb: How old were you when you moved back to Kentucky?

Ouita Michel: I was like twenty eight, I think-- twenty seven, twenty eight. Yeah. It must've been twenty eight; twenty eight years old. Is that right?

Rosie Moosnick: Twenty six. Weren't we twenty six then?

Ouita Michel: In 1993, yes. Well, yeah, we were born--

Rosie Moosnick: We're the same age.

Ouita Michel: --in 1964. Yeah, twenty six.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Is that right?

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I started grad school then.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Yeah, twenty six. I would've been twenty six going into my twenty seventh birthday. That's right, yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: And your family doesn't have long roots in Kentucky, do you?

Ouita Michel: No. My mom and dad moved here in 1972 from Thermopolis, Wyoming.

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My dad was a young professor at UK Med School. It was his first job after getting his PhD. And my dad and mom divorced when I was in high school, and he went on-- he lives here now, but he went on to go to University of Oklahoma and some other places before returning. But my mom was just a connector, and she just loved it here, and she never wanted to leave.

Rosie Moosnick: Where was she from originally?

Ouita Michel: She was from Thermopolis, from Wyoming, both of my parents, and my stepmother too. And I still have a lot of extended family in the West. They grew up in the Wind River Canyon.

Rosie Moosnick: How do you feel yourself to be a Kentuckian?

Ouita Michel: Well, I've lived here, I mean, with very short interruptions, for more than fifty years now, and I-- which I can't believe I've even been alive fifty years.

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Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I'm gonna beat you up.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I know. I don't know what it is, 'cause it's Willa's birthday, Rosie.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I'm like, oh God, today, nineteen years ago, I was blah, blah, blah, giving birth.

Rosie Moosnick: I'm gonna beat you up.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Well, I mean, I deeply identify with, you know, what really I think made me, I mean, there are parts of Kentucky that I have always loved: the landscape, the pace of life. I think it's the beauty of it all. I really-- and I felt really lucky to grow up in Lexington when it was of a size where you had a lot of independence and freedom. And there were a lot of negatives too. But I've always loved that part of it. There are other parts that are harder to love and be integrated with that are more complicated, the politics being one of 'em, and the lack of diversity being one of 'em, and sort of the way the society is skewed being one of them, and accessibility.

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All of that stuff is hard and requires work. But that can be something that unites people and kind of builds a community as well. But one of the things that I think really got me was just becoming, through my mom, more aware of the literature of Kentucky, and the Literary Society of Kentucky, and reading the poetry. Honestly, the poetry of Kentucky, it really spoke to me, and through that process and through the process, that all kind of happened. I think probably when

you saw me in Special Collections, I was working on the Emmett's menu, is my guess, because I wanted that menu. It was a big restaurant that was opening up in Lexington, and I wanted to design a menu, 'cause at that time you didn't see a lot on menus that was locally raised but all about like sort of the food culture of Kentucky.

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And at that time, to me, that was historic. So that's where I was going, was looking at what was so that I could figure out what could be. And all of that started noodling around in my head, along with all the poetry, and reading a lot of Wendell Berry, and thinking about the farmers market, and working with Debbie Long at Dudley's, and Sue Harkins, and meeting all these people through her that were involved in the small farming movement in Kentucky, Community Farm Alliance, the Burley Tobacco Cooperative. I became just very involved in all of that, and in the process of opening Emmett's, became even more involved with the University of Kentucky Department of Agricultural Economics, and how you can match small producers with small markets, and how this could make an impact in Kentucky.

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All that came together along with buying the Holly Hill Inn in 2000. So that was all like, I would say, a five- or six-year melting pot for me, and really drew me into this whole idea that really what I wanna express in my culture truly is a part of Kentucky's food culture. And I feel that way too about everyone who comes here, not just-- it's not-- I'm not a native. I feel firmly rooted. But I think our food culture is very elastic and super dynamic, and needs to be constantly changing, as long as it's not tied to corporate food production.

Sarah Jane Webb: Where do you think that comes from? What makes that Kentucky food culture so unique and elastic?

Ouita Michel: Honestly, it's a farming tradition that helped in the past.

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Oh, why is it elastic? Why do we have so many-- I think in Lexington, I was just asked this by somebody recently, I honestly feel like the University of Kentucky really helped Lexington since I was a kid. It's not Manhattan. I'm not saying that.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: But be very international for a city of its location and size. And remember, there was an organization called the International Women's Club that was affiliated with the University of Kentucky Women's Club, and they always had a little cookbook. And I have all of those, and my mom had all of those. I'm sure the ones I have are from her. And so they had all these international recipes that came from all the families that were-- it's a fabulous book because it's all providence, just like a normal community cookbook would be. But it's gado-gado [laughter] and all these-- and I've always felt like that was such an amazing gift that the university gave to the city of Lexington.

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And then I think that aspect of that community, although really underrepresented in a lot of ways, also created sort of an international, you know, that we had the Mashni family and the Mashni markets. Now, we had a little bit of an international restaurant scene. But restaurants in the '70s and '80s were really-- it wasn't a thing. But there was a very strong international food culture in

and around Lexington, and I think has been, you know, it's given rise to some of the international restaurants that you see right now, at least to the, I feel, to the acceptance, although we're widely more accepting nationally. But it's been interesting. I think that's part of what makes Kentucky's food culture really elastic. Part of it has been the horse industry. Part of it's been the automotive industry.

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So like the Japanese influence, the Mexican and Latinx influence, all of that has come to play. But Lexington was also sort of the center of fast food development. And when we were growing up--

Rosie Moosnick: With Jerrico.

Ouita Michel: --in the '80s with Jerrico and Fazoli's, and Long John Silver's. And so they always-- it was said many, many times that, oh, Lexington, because it's the center of the Eastern Seaboard, it's like the perfect testing ground for all these fast-food concepts. And the community took great pride in that [laughter].

Sarah Jane Webb: That's true.

Ouita Michel: And that's part of our food culture too, and part of-- it didn't take, I mean, I don't know that people would still say that or even think that about Lexington, which is great with-- fine with me.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I'm happy for that.

[unrelated conversation]

Rosie Moosnick: We went to Louisville to interview some bakers yesterday, and I brought a former student with me.

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Ouita Michel: Oh yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: And she's interested in eventually opening a restaurant. And her question, which I thought was a good one, was, what made you feel you could be successful at this? Where does that confidence come? You have to have a certain amount of confidence to believe it's gonna work.

Ouita Michel: Well, yes. I can't help it [laughter], I was raised that way.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: That's the Lady Gaga song I love. But, I mean, I won the national debate tournament in college in a very male-dominated field, and I won coming from a state school and, you know, beat Harvard, beat Georgetown, beat Northwestern. That was pretty formative for me. So I just always assumed I was a world-beater and could do that.

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And I'm not saying it was justified or even realistic, but that's what you're supposed to be in your 20s. You're supposed to be ultra-confident of everything you're doing. It helps. It's not always-- you need to learn humility but maybe not until you're a little older.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: When are we going to the nursing home again?

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Isn't there one here in town?

Ouita Michel: Now there is, oh my God.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: But I don't know where I got that, except I-- and I haven't-- I'm not successful by a lot of standards. You should tell your students that. Like, if it's a bottom-line standard where it's just about money, then I'm not really very successful, I'm not. I'm not wealthy. I drive like a 2013 Ford Fusion that needs [laughter] an oil change. I mean, I made different choices in my life. I don't-- I worked really hard, but I just love what I do so much, and I love-- and so, for me, I'm really happy where I am.

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But I'm not a wealthy person. I've never pursued-- wealth was not the end result of my restaurant pursuit. And every time that it was [laughter], it's been like a massive failure. Like, every time I listen to anyone that says, "Oh, this is gonna do great financially," it's tanked financially.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: But if I listen to my own instincts, and work on my own gut, it's worked out really well. So that's been a hard, painful lesson for me [laughter] that I'm still learning and doing. But, yeah, and just the ability to start really small. That's what's so great about the restaurant industry. You can start really small, and you can build your success as you go. But there's not a lot of money in it. I don't recommend it if that's-- if the financial bottom line is where-- is what

someone's really looking to invest in, I would just stick with the stock market or like some other easier-- if you don't have a passion for like food or people, then you shouldn't do it.

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As a financial investment, it's just not a good-- I've lost way more money than I've ever made, way more, like five times more--

Sarah Jane Webb: How would you--

Ouita Michel: --[laughter] at least more. I mean, I'm talking big numbers.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: So, with that being said, how would you define success? Like, what does that mean to you?

Ouita Michel: [Laughter] So there are days when-- I have that thing taped to my fridge. Is it Thoreau that said, "Making one child laugh [laughter], making one place better"? There are days when I look at that and go, that's it, that's all I gotta do.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I think the older I get, the more I am interested in the sustainability of the businesses from a long-term perspective so that the people who work in them can have good, happy, productive working lives, and that the jobs that they have add to their lives that they have.

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That's really important to me. That's like my number one concern. And it's definitely built a life that I'm really grateful for, and that I love, and I wouldn't trade, and I'm really happy in. On a

daily basis, really-- I'm not-- this isn't Instagram. I'm not trying to make it sound like I'm always happy.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Like, oh, it's great, you know. But, I mean, there are tough days, for sure. There are days where lots of things go wrong. But the older you get, the better you get at solving problems, and the more interesting it all becomes. It doesn't have to be like perfect. And the less you panic, and the more you realize like, oh, I'm sorry you had a shitty experience [laughter], and it's so bad, you know, we're still gonna open for business tomorrow. We're still going to be there.

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And then it's this constant renewal of your commitment to making people feel good, and this constant renewal of quality. And so you set these values up for your business, and then it's just this daily practice of communicating those, bringing new people into it, and then bringing people back to it all the time. That can get very, very challenging. I'm not saying it doesn't. But it's also part of what I like about it. Does that make sense?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: I don't know. I'm still in the nursing home.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Oh my God. I don't feel that. I feel really young.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: You've brought up your age a million and one times in this interview.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I'm just trying to like get my head around that number. I need to quit focusing on it, 'cause actually I feel like super good. I mean, I love what I do. I work hard.

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I'm engaged in every...and my-- I'm doing new projects. I mean, I love all of what I do, really, honestly. I'm not [laughter] super obsessed about how old I am; just mildly so [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: What causes you stress at this point?

Ouita Michel: Oh, there's a lot of financial stress always, you know, for your student. I've always said there needs to be medication for those of us who are self-employed. It can be-- it's really tough to learn how to manage cash flow, and that just means, you know, the money comes in and immediately goes out. It's not like when you get a paycheck, your money goes into your bank account, and you control how fast it goes out. That's not really true in business. Money comes in, and it's meant to flow through the business, right, and then hopefully you live nicely, as nice, you know, you live a good life. But you don't-- in these small businesses, it's not like they're accumulating profits. I remember a banker one time said to me-- I was trying to open Wallace Station.

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And I went to the bank for a loan, last time [laughter] I ever did that 20 years ago. And he's like, "Well, we'd really like to see you accumulate a lot more profit at Holly Hill." And I'm like, "How? It's a 150-year-old restaurant."

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I mean, it's like the goddamn thing is a money pit.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: It's like this old restaurant, I mean, and I love it dearly. I'd never given it up. So I was like okay. But at the meantime, the opportunity for Wallace Station, which I thought was gonna be huge, existed, and like how do I navigate that? So I just had to find private capital. It's our most famous restaurant. It's not quite the most profitable, but it's like second. And people thought I was crazy for doing it 'cause there's nothing around it, and blah, blah, blah. So you don't always get to choose when your opportunities come to you.

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And, you know, the other thing that really bums me out is our society is so skewed toward big business. We give so much charity to like big tech, big corporations, big banks. They get bought out. They get propped up. Their investors, bless their hearts, lose millions and millions of dollars, and small business gets yada. That's one thing about COVID that was great. Small business got some money from the government, finally. But people acted like-- it shouldn't just be the pandemic that does that. There should be more support for small business so young people can go into business if they want to--

Rosie Moosnick: And feel confident.

Ouita Michel: --and feel confident, and not have to be-- you know. And we also rely on-- I remember when the Affordable Healthcare enacted in 2013, I was really, really scared 'cause I didn't know how we were gonna pay for all the health insurance. 'Cause we pay like \$200,000 annually in health insurance bills, and that is a great investment. I'm not complaining about that.

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But I just didn't know how that was gonna-- how are we gonna make that happen? 'Cause we didn't [laughter] see it on the bottom line, laying there. So it involved-- it was just a process of kind of like just jumping in, losing money, and then just trying to-- then you kind of get your rhythm back into it. But I remember a guy on Facebook. I think Chris had posted something like, well, small businesses, you know, the government should actually-- healthcare should be universal, not tied to your goddamn job, and we shouldn't-- and if that work-- and I've never understood why the Chambers of Commerce are against that because it'd be the best business incentive ever given to small businesses. So he made some kind of comment like that, and somebody on Facebook said, "Well, maybe if your business can't afford the health insurance for your employees, you're not worth-- you shouldn't be open. You're not worth it to be a business."

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And I'm like, well, buddy, you do it. You run it, you know. But here I--

Rosie Moosnick: Boy, that comment stayed with you.

Quitita Michel: It did, ten years ago, because ten-- but here we are, ten years later, our employees all have health-- I love the Affordable Healthcare Act. I thought it was great. I used the connectors, and our people have health insurance, and I could never go away from it. In the past, we only had health insurance for like management. But, yeah, it's--

Rosie Moosnick: How many employees do you have?

Quitita Michel: We have 200. They're not all full-time. So that includes, you know, every employee, about 200, 220. About sixty or so full-time, sixty or seventy. Yeah, it's a lot.

Rosie Moosnick: I remember several years ago seeing your mom in my neighborhood, and I said to her, "You must be so proud of Ouita."

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And she said, "Well, I'm most proud that she really cares about her employees, and people don't know that about. Her."

Ouita Michel: Oh, that's so sweet.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I do, I do really feel like-- I think my employees know that though. They understand that. And as we've gotten bigger, and as I've gotten older, I have a man...I have a, you know, I have a culinary director now that kind of oversees a lot, and I have a director of operations 'cause as you-- the company became too big for just me and Chris. So as you lean a little bit more on those people, you don't-- you're not quite as in it as you were at one time, like, every day in the restaurant, which is nice. That's great, honestly, for me.

Rosie Moosnick: What did it look like for your family?

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Ouita Michel: My little family?

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, like--

Ouita Michel: Willa?

Rosie Moosnick: --day-to-day, yeah, when you're raising a child, and have all these businesses.

Ouita Michel: I think that's one of the things that young people get the most worried about, like, especially young women. And so I was very lucky that at Holly Hill Inn, Chris and I were able to buy the house right next door to it. It became available when I was pregnant with Willa. And so when she was like five months old, we still lived upstairs at Holly Hill Inn. That's how we afforded to do it. We sold our house in Lexington, and we lived upstairs at Holly Hill when we first opened. And that was for four years.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Ouita Michel: Yeah, it was crazy. I can't think about that. I can't even remember that.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: But then [laughter] I can't even remember that, Rosie.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: Will you quit with the age!

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Ok, Southern Food Alliance I'm gonna kill her with the age thing!

[Laughter]

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Ouita Michel: But then we bought the house right next door, and so when Willa was a baby, we never had day care. So that was a positive thing, 'cause I worked at the restaurant. So Chris moved his office into our little dining room, and we had the whole other-- rest of the part of the

room was her play-- we still live there-- was her play area. So we had it like all guarded off. So it was like a giant playpen.

Rosie Moosnick: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: So he would watch her during the day-- or, no, I would be home during the day, and then he would be kinda like running around doing the stuff he needed to do. And then at night, if I needed to be in the kitchen, then he was at home. And we kind of threw her around like a football a little bit like that. But it was nice. And then she went to the local preschool here, which is just within walking distance of our house. So it was like that was one nice thing, is everything was right here. And as she got older, it got more challenging. When my mom got sick, it got very challenging. And when Bob was sick, it was challenging to how to care for your family members, and be there, and navigate the restaurants.

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And when my mom died, that year was the worst year. We thought we might go bankrupt because, for me, I just had to be there. I mean, there was no-- so we were opening Smithtown. So I remember I would be at Smithtown, and at 4 o'clock I would go to her house because she had friends who would stay with her till 4:00, and read to her and everything. And then I'd go to her, and then I'd make her-- it was very important for me that I would cook for her every day to try to help her nutrition. And so I would cook, and then her food had to sit out for a while so it didn't make her nauseous. Then we'd lay in her bed, and I'd rub her feet, and we'd watch television. And I just think, thank God. I mean, Smithtown did have a really rocky first start [laughter] because of that. It's doing great now. So they're just trade-offs, and you just try to figure out how to make it. I paid for a lot of stuff on credit cards.

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I have a fabulous credit score because I've--

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: --I've charged and paid down thousands and thousands of dollars in credit card bills. Like, I've used every possible financial support to sustain and grow the business over time. And now, thankfully, it kind of does that on its own. It took a long time.

Rosie Moosnick: So would you have that financial stress--?

Ouita Michel: All the time. And there's still some of that, and PTSD, I think [laughter]. There were acute-- there were times of acute financial stress, acute. It hasn't been that way for a minute.

Rosie Moosnick: How long's a minute?

Ouita Michel: Maybe five years; four or five years.

Rosie Moosnick: So Holly Hill's been in existence--

Ouita Michel: Twenty-three years.

Rosie Moosnick: Of stress--

Ouita Michel: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: --of financial stress?

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Ouita Michel: Well, the Holly Hill Inn is, itself, is a beautiful labor of love. It's not a profitable restaurant. We were two chefs who got into business, not two business people who got into the

restaurant industry. And so it was like our dream. And it is a dream when you go over there. It's dreamlike. I mean, it's incredible. And then we opened some of these other auxiliary restaurants to kind of prop the Holly Hill Inn up, which works when they're working. And then it was-- but getting it all in balance is really hard. But now it is, and it's still-- you always have a restaurant that you're working on that's like, I mean, COVID was very-- the last three years were very, very tough. If we hadn't had all that PPP money, we would've gone out of business. But we never closed any of our restaurants.

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We kept them all operating, and that did two things. One, it helped sustain the people who wanted to work, it helped sustain the business, and it also increased the amount of our credits, our tax credits that we got back on labor. So all of that money sustained our business, and actually bought a way-- bought down a lot of the debt that we had accumulated prior to that, and helped us create a more sustainable economic model. But that said, bringing all the restaurants that we have, especially the bigger ones like Honeywood and Zim's, it's been really challenging to bring them back online. I don't think people really understand when you run a restaurant that's built from the ground up, that's all about local food, there are multiple systems that get disrupted, like the farming system. We have fabulous local farmers, but they started selling direct to consumer. And so all of these things ripple through what you're doing, and it's just really-- it's a trick to get 'em all back going.

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The smaller casual restaurants, Windy was really hard to get. It was fits and starts, and also the personnel changes were intense, so it was fits and starts. But now this year, everybody's operating, and operating fairly smoothly. There's still personnel issues, but overall--

Rosie Moosnick: How many places do you have now?

Ouita Michel: We have eight locations. They're not all restaurants. So we have the bakery, and the bakery supplies all the restaurants, plus there's a little counter in there. And then we have, in restaurants, we have Holly Hill Inn. Well, I'll go in chronological order.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Okay.

Ouita Michel: Holly Hill Inn, Wallace Station, Windy Corner, Smithtown Seafood, Honeywood, and Zim's. And Zim's has a little bourbon bar that's across the hall from it.

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And then we have a big events area at Fasig-Tipton, which does all of the horse sales and all the weddings and all that kind of stuff. And they have a fabulous kitchen, which is like the size of the entire bakery. And then we just opened a little cooking studio in Versailles, where I'm teaching cooking classes. We have a website that we use to create content, or we create the content in our daily working lives in this company. So we create so much content, recipes, and food, and interactions with others, and the newsletter's meant to share that and the lives of our farming community. And then there's an online store, where we sell like the cookie boxes and things like that that the bakery produces. And all of that fulfillment happens out of the back engine of the cooking studio. So it's a lot. It's a big enterprise right now.

Rosie Moosnick: It's huge.

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Ouita Michel: [Laughter] Yeah, and it's very decentralized. It's flat, and sometimes that's a problem.

Sarah Jane Webb: And what fuels all these different projects, or what's the process of that? You have an idea, and then you run with it? Or could you talk a little bit about that?

Ouita Michel: Everything in terms of restaurant development happened organically.

Opportunities would present themselves, and we'd say, oh yeah, we think we should do that, until we got to COVID. I'm done opening restaurants. I feel really happy with the locations that we have, with the aspects of local food that we're trying to nurture and present to people, and I only want to improve upon the restaurants that we have. They are imperfect, they always will be, but they can improve a lot, and I want them to improve a lot, and I want us to be focused on that instead of opening other restaurants.

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So that is very clear in my mind. And the other part that I really wanted to do was to use the cooking classes as a way to connect with individual people again, and use my cooking, and be personally engaged in one-on-one cooking, kind of the way I started, which I haven't done for many years. Because when the company started to grow much bigger, I had to give up being a chef, and be more businesswoman. Which at the time made most sense for me because Willa was like fifth, sixth, you know, that time of life where they're really growing fast. You want all the time you can get with them, and I needed to be able to work during the day when she was at

school, work my butt off, and then plug in, and then with maybe just a couple nights a week instead of [laughter] a whole lot of nights a week.

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But also I wasn't doing it-- I wasn't being effective, so I needed to focus and edit what I was doing. Then when COVID came, I did start cooking again, just initially during shutdown, and it was wonderful. At the Holly Hill kitchen, we had a bubble of four people, and we cooked, and all the food was to-go, and people were sitting on the front lawns, and it was very inspiring. Then when we started to get all the restaurants, and try to keep 'em on a reopen schedule, on an open/close, depending on COVID positivity and all this stuff, I had to really spin, and be at all the different restaurants, and getting 'em back up online. So I sort of lost that connection to cooking and to people-- cooking for individual people, except for Chris and Willa, which I cook for them almost every day. So all of that is to say this was more strategic, the redevelopment of our corporate brand. It used to be loosely called Ouita Michel's Family of Restaurants.

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I never loved that. I feel like some people feel like family isn't a great way to think about business, because families can be so messed up. So I read a lot about that, and I'm like, well, we really shouldn't be using that term. Let's call-- and so we involved as many people in our company as we could, and we decided on Holly Hill & Co. because Holly Hill is sort of the anchor-- or not Holly Hill Inn but Holly Hill & Co. And we rebranded, we built the website, we put an online store up, and we're gonna populate a YouTube channel out of the-- and all of that's around marketing the restaurants that we have, sharing what we know about Kentucky's food culture, including recipes and stories and all that stuff, and hopefully seeing where that can go as

a way of bringing the whole group together. I also thought it was a recruiting device for getting people to work in our restaurants.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Media is so important to young people.

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It was to me too, but it was more about like getting into *Bon Appétit* or something like that. It's less that now. So giving them a platform is very important.

Rosie Moosnick: How do you have time? You seem really deliberate.

Ouita Michel: Oh, good, thank God [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: You know, well, I mean–

Ouita Michel: Are you getting some-- are you okay?

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh no, I'm good. I'm good.

Rosie Moosnick: There's so much day-to-day work here.

Ouita Michel: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: But you have a larger sort of notion of yourself and the business in the larger food world and all that.

Ouita Michel: Oh yeah. Well, I think I was in the weeds for a long, long time, many years, and I still am at times. So when you're not, you gotta--

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter] Yeah, celebrate.

Ouita Michel: --celebrate.

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Rosie Moosnick: So one thing that we haven't-- that Sarah was really interested in, and she alerted me to it because she's a food photographer, is just the food waste in restaurants.

Ouita Michel: Oh, it's so astounding, isn't it? Yeah. I feel like I started looking at the food waste, actually, I think it was in 2015 with the James Beard Foundation. They did a boot camp, and they had a goal of reducing food waste by 20% in 2020 or something. And it all got kind of disrupted by COVID. But, yeah, it's all kinds of waste. I've been following these dumpster divers on Instagram.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: They're pulling like all this brand-- I'm like, who is throwing this stuff away? Why is it going into our landfills? The amount of waste is insane, like Coach bags and like--

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, I'd love it if you became a dumpster diver.

[Laughter]

0:44:00

Ouita Michel: It's tempting

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: You'd come back in--

Rosie Moosnick: I really like my friend at the nursing home. She's dumpster diving--

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I pull up in a little wagon, like, an old pickup truck.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: What'd you bring today, Ouita?

Ouita Michel: Rosie.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Come out here and look what I found.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: I'll just brush that off.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Did you find some bagels?

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Yeah, bagels is what we need. Gosh.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Yes. No, I am so interested in food waste. I mean, there's no good answer for it.

We compost [laughter]. But there's no great answer for it. Keep your businesses small, and close

to the ground [laughter]. That's the only answer I really have for it. But like at Honeywood, I

think I told you, we compost into a 50-gallon drum. But that's not really the food that gets

scraped off plates to go in the dishwasher. That's food that's like, you know, you're chopping

onions, and it's the peel, and things like that, or the eggshells.

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But it's really-- yeah. And there's, you know, there's a lot of what-- there's a lot of food waste in America, obviously from the restaurant industry, but most of it comes from residential refrigerators, which it's just getting people to buy what they want to eat. And I think there are accessibility issues that would have to be addressed, but like increasing the quality of what we buy, and a little bit the price is probably okay in the United States for many people, because it could focus you on what you really needed, and not--

Sarah Jane Webb: Like being more intentional about your purchases?

Ouita Michel: It doesn't work for everybody though. We have to figure out an accessibility in food justice pathway forward for that to happen. But just like, and I thought for a minute that it might help because-- that COVID might help because like all the snack foods are super expensive [laughter], like astronomically expensive.

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But I don't think it's really reduced the consumption of snack foods [laughter]. It's just cost 'em more.

Sarah Jane Webb: What about in bakeries? Is there much food waste in bakeries?

Ouita Michel: Well, one of the things-- that would be something for you to talk to Sandy about, 'cause that's I think one of her superpowers. So, yes, we used to have a donut machine here, and when we first opened the bakery, it was 2012, and we wanted to serve donuts. Well, that was the dumbest damn idea I ever had.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Number one, the donut fryer is scarier than hell. It's huge. It's the size of this table.

Rosie Moosnick: They were yummy donuts though.

Ouita Michel: They were good.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: But also you had to make-- you make a huge amount of 'em, and they're not really good the next day. So we wouldn't sell 'em all, and then people would complain. And so it would be like, okay. And then these poor people that lived here, they probably got heart disease from how much donuts [laughter] we were putting in the mail room--

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: --because this is all senior citizen.

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So we were-- so right now, that's one reason we have-- so we work on a dough basis. We spend a lot of time making doughs and refrigerating doughs, and then they get sliced, baked, and packaged. And so Sandy has reduced our food waste considerably, at least coming out of this little bakery. I feel like it's the most efficient kitchen that we have. The least efficient is probably the events business. That's the thing that kills me, is to try to get to a zero waste event. We do these-- so after you do a big wedding or whatever it is, you have to make sure you have enough food for everyone to go through the buffet line, and even though you put pen to paper, invariably there are pans left. So the Hope Center takes pans, so that's great, if it's a full pan. But if it's not a full pan, then we kind of try to get people to take their food home.

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We're right now going through a thing where we're-- I wanna work with the-- I just got a little letter in the mail last week, which is so great. The Sierra Club, local Sierra Club is starting a restaurant reduced plastics program, which was one of our goals, I think I told you, in 2023. We've had this little company goal of reducing our plastics. But they set up a whole little website. So I'm sending that out to all of our chefs and managers on little tips that you can do. So we're trying to get our staff at the events team, it's like you can take every bite of food home that you want. You just have to bring your own Tupperware [laughter]. You need to use multi-use stuff so you're not taking this stuff, and packaging it, and throwing it away, 'cause it's not good for the waste stream and all of that kind of thing. So it's kind of cool. But I think you and I talked. One of the, I think, worst things for the food industry, whether it's grocery or in restaurants, is the Food Code. The modernized Food Code does not allow you to multi-use previously used plastic containers, which when I was a young chef, they did.

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So, like, back in the old days at Dudley's, every sour cream container, we probably used it 10 times until the damn thing fell apart, or oysters or oyster buckets or whatever they were, 'cause they're packaged in one-quart, two-quart, and gallon packages. So they make perfect sense. But they outlawed all that, and you get written up by the Health Department for keeping 'em now. So they just go straight to the waste stream. And you can think about how much gets used in the United States on a daily basis. It's sick. So I feel-- I'm writing to the Sierra Club later. I'm gonna say, "If you wanna make a big difference, you call that Health Department up, and find out why that's the case." We sanitize the plates and the silverware fine for everybody to use. Why can't we use a plastic container? But it might be maybe--

Sarah Jane Webb: I wonder if it's the material.

Ouita Michel: --unstable plastics.

Sarah Jane Webb: Right.

Ouita Michel: But then maybe that should--

Sarah Jane Webb: A harder plastic.

Ouita Michel: --be addressed legislatively.

Sarah Jane Webb: Right. You need to go back many steps.

Ouita Michel: Yeah, so we don't create this throwaway society.

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Well, we've already created that-- so we don't contribute to it. Because it would just make financial sense for everybody.

Rosie Moosnick: You can lead the effort.

Ouita Michel: Yeah? Well, I'm gonna work with Sierra Club here locally. I think that'll be fun.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's interesting.

Ouita Michel: But you need to contact Ed Lee. Don't forget about him and that project that he's working on.

Sarah Jane Webb: In Washing...in D.C.?

Ouita Michel: Yeah, well, he owns restaurants in Louisville. And if you go on Instagram, and direct message him, he'll probably email you back. I have his email address. I'll send it to you.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, okay.

Ouita Michel: So he's working on the zero waste restaurant concept in D.C., and he's gonna publish the findings. The LEE Initiative is doing it. But it'd be kind of neat for you to get in with him early so you could get a good look at what he's grappling with as he builds it out, and what he's doing. 'Cause I'm hopeful that the lessons that he learns in big and little ways can go to inform a lot of our practices, and change the industry a little bit.

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Rosie Moosnick: Do you have a conversation in Kentucky with other bakers and restaurant owners about these sorts of things, about food waste?

Ouita Michel: Not really, no. I mean, I have friends in bakeries, and Martine. But, no, [laughter] usually it's not about food waste. We're like, oh God, what the hell? What are you doing? I can't believe that bastard quit.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Do you have anybody I could hire that's not \$5,000 an hour?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: A lot of women-- I do have a lot of contact with women in the industry and--

Rosie Moosnick: In Kentucky?

Ouita Michel: --in Kentucky, and a lot of those conversations are just about me sharing whatever I know, and just saying yeah. No, believe me, everybody's really stressed out [laughter], and nobody ever has any money. Even though they make it look like they have a lot of money, they don't really have a lot of money, unless they're Jeff Ruby's apparently or--

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Rosie Moosnick: Tony.

Ouita Michel: --Tony's. But those big steak houses, that's not sustainable.

Rosie Moosnick: No.

Ouita Michel: And that drives me insane.

Sarah Jane Webb: Can you talk more about that? What is it that makes them not--?

Rosie Moosnick: [Inaudible]

Ouita Michel: The biggest restaurants in Lexington are not sustainably built restaurants.

Bluegrass Hospitality, who I love as a company, actually, I love Brian, and it's locally grown, and they do an incredible amount for the company, for the community. And they hire, they employ a lot of people, and they're good people. But still steak houses are just not sustainable for us in the current environmental climate.

Sarah Jane Webb: Because of that, yes.

Ouita Michel: It's mainly all about beef, that and like the use of Chilean sea bass on Tony's menu. I mean, that's just not right. But you're just gonna turn a blind eye that it's endangered?

You don't care? You don't give a shit? And then the public assumes, like, if it's on a menu, it must be fine. It's not fine.

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Rosie Moosnick: How do you educate people about that?

Ouita Michel: I don't know. I've been trying for 23 years. I don't know. And it seems they'll pay any amount of money for it [laughter]. I don't know how to educate. I feel like that's what I spend most of my time doing right now, and that's this newsletter. We're just trying to explain who we are without throwing lightning bolts at who other people are. But it is really concerning for the restaurant industry that the people going into the restaurant business are either opening taco stands, coffee shops, or pizza houses, or giant steak houses. And where's the in-between? And that's kind of the space I'm occupying, and it's not always comfortable. It's a little, you know, I don't know. I don't know what's gonna happen with that. But it seems there's an unquenchable thirst for it.

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I mean, I can't tell--

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Ouita Michel: Yeah, as we go through maybe this generational shift away from--

Rosie Moosnick: Meat eating.

Ouita Michel: --meat eating. I'm not vegan or even vegetarian, but like in our company, we tried to take-- one thing we did do very intentionally was we opened casual restaurants so that we could sell hamburgers so that then at Honeywood and Holly Hill, we could sell steaks. And now Zim's has a steak. But we sell thousands, hundreds of thousands of pounds of ground beef in order to-- with a local farmer or a little group of local farmers that Patrick Kennedy aggregates. And so we're able to pull the primer parts off for steak consumption because we're selling chili and hamburgers and all that stuff. So that's always what I was trying to get to, and I feel really good that we're finally there. But we don't have a lot of steak.

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Like, there's no steak on the menu right now at Holly Hill. Well, there is one. You can-- there's a lot. There's lamb and other meats. And there's a lot of people who that just doesn't appeal to. It's kind of gotten-- it's weird. Food's gotten kind of like divided along political lines [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: So who would think that food is a political marker?

Quitita Michel: [Laughter] That like what you eat? It's very weird.

Rosie Moosnick: Or identity politics or--

Quitita Michel: Yeah. Very strange.

Sarah Jane Webb: You've also mentioned that you, as far as education goes, is that you really help your employees by putting on workshops, right?

Quitita Michel: We started something this year, and it's called Holly Hill University [laughter]. We're a little behind at this point. I'd hoped-- but we have, in the first quarter, we had a bunch, and so it's probably gonna be a first quarter thing for us. We were hoping it would be first and third,

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Maybe next year, but not this year. But one of the workshops that's ongoing throughout the year is a little workshop we call DirtWorks, which is our gardening team. And so they have-- all of our patios are edible right now. So at Honeywood and at Zim's and at Thirsty Fox, and even outside, you'll see some of their plantings outside the staff door at the bakery, there are big planters, and the DirtWorks team keeps those up. So there's members of the DirtWorks team on

at every location, and then at Holly Hills, where our big gardening things are going on. And David does classes and all-- anybody can sign up-- how to plant, how to sow seeds--

Sarah Jane Webb: Anybody in the community?

Ouita Michel: --plant identification. No, just in our--

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, just your--?

Ouita Michel: --just our employees.

Sarah Jane Webb: Just employees, yeah, okay.

Ouita Michel: It's been great. And I went to Zim's yesterday, and Junie, one of our chefs in the kitchen, was outside watering all the planters.

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And then they learn how to care for all of the planters, and then also the herb identification, and using the herbs, picking, harvesting, all of that kind of thing. I hope to get 'em here. We had our big company picnic, and we had great attendance from our teams. And I wasn't sure how it would go, but it was at Happy Jack's Pumpkin Patch out on 421. And so we had people going on canoe rides in Elkhorn Creek, and hay rides and--

Sarah Jane Webb: That's so cool.

Ouita Michel: You know, looking around, the thing that made me so happy was it was a truly diverse group of people. It was great. It was really good. It was like one of the first times in a long time I've gotten the entire-- or it wasn't every single person working for us, but there were a lot. There were more than 100 people. There were like 150 people. So it was very close to--

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Sarah Jane Webb: And to know they're invested in the business like you're invested in their lives?

Ouita Michel: It was great. And Chris and I were looking around, and it was just so nice to see all the different faces and all the different walks of life. Yeah, it was good, really.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's beautiful.

Ouita Michel: It was beautiful. And that's what I'm trying, I mean, that's-- I'm not-- I am in business. I'm not a nonprofit. But I wanna operate businesses that reflect the community that I wanna live in. That would be the other thing I would tell your young students. [Laughter] But sometimes that feels a little othering [laughter], I guess, if that'd be the new term, 'cause it's like sometimes you wonder if like Lexington is just all about Malone's and the bottomless Lexi...

Rosie Moosnick: Suburbia?

Ouita Michel: Yeah, [laughter] the bottomless Lexington salad and the baked potato, and you're like, am I making any difference at all?

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

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Ouita Michel: Probably not, but I'm making a difference in the people's lives who I know and care about.

Rosie Moosnick: How do you take care of yourself?

Ouita Michel: Today is a day of beauty for me. I am going to get my pedicure, my manicure, and a facial with Willa for her birthday. That's what she wanted.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, sweet.

Ouita Michel: But I am-- one of the things I do is every Sunday, I go to church here at Midway Christian Church. You know Mary Gannon's mom?

Rosie Moosnick: I saw you there at Phil's--

Ouita Michel: Yeah. You came and talked at Phil's funeral.

Rosie Moosnick: --funeral.

Ouita Michel: Yeah. So actually Phil and Sharon are really good friends of mine. I really enjoy them, and they're so different as people. And Phil Burchell was one really special man.

Rosie Moosnick: He was incredible.

Ouita Michel: He was incredible.

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And now that little church is, you know, Phil was like one of five of the members of the congregation who passed away last year, and so it's a struggle. But I sing every Wednesday in the choir. And then we just had a little concert on Saturday with some jazz musicians [laughter] and stuff. It was really fun. And then I go to church on Sunday, and that is a-- has helped me sort of feel grateful, you know, pray, all of that stuff. I have mixed feel...I have very ambivalent feelings about Christianity right now, honestly, after the last few days. I have a friend who's chair of the library board in Bourbon County who's gay, and there's a crazy fanatical kind of response to the

library going on right now, and they're putting really nasty signs across from the library. And so I don't know. We'll see where it all goes.

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Rosie Moosnick: And these are church people, you mean?

Ouita Michel: Oh yeah, Jesus says fags burn, that kind of group. And it just feels a little like that, not just in Bourbon County, but it feels a little weaponized everywhere. So our little church isn't that way, but it's hard to counsel people who have that experience, and make them feel comfortable [laughter]. I don't know. It's hard. It's hard as hell. I'm glad I'm not a minister. I don't know. I heard on NPR one minister saying that he was very worried because he was preaching the attitudes, you know. And a person in his congregation came up to him afterwards, and said, "That was really weak, that sermon." And he said, "Well, that was Jesus himself saying that stuff." And he's like, "That's just not gonna fly anymore," [laughter] or something like that. It's like, oh my gosh.

[Laughter]

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Ouita Michel: He was like, "I think"--

Rosie Moosnick: It's time to get out of the business.

Ouita Michel: --"I think maybe it's time for me to retire."

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: It's like, ah, okay, love thy neighbor. That's really not gonna fly anymore.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: That's dated right now–

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I kind love that you–

Sarah Jane Webb: So are you around many pe...or like is there political diversity in--?

Ouita Michel: In our business? Yes, there is. I did feel bad because one of our, yes, we have some conservative, yes, we've had some extremely politically conservative people working for us, but polite, and very conservative religious people we have had working for us, and can still do. But they are-- we try to keep religion and politics outta the work environment. That takes a lot.

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Ouita Michel: We just focus on professionalism and professional courtesy so that everyone has a safe space to work in, and that's really important. But I'll say [laughter] that my GM at Wendy Corner, who I dearly love, she had a Trump sticker on her car in 2016. And she said, she told me [laughter] in confidence-- and I'm telling you-- that she did feel like she had to take it off her car. And I'm like, "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm a big believer in the First Amendment, so you support-- I'm not-- the last I checked, it was a secret ballot. You vote for you-- you vote your conscience in who you're gonna vote for. Just vote. Just make sure you have a vote." And she never talked to me about it again. And some of my more conservative religious employees, they invited me to their service one time, and I went to show support for their culture, and it was interesting.

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And I don't think they ever felt discriminated against, but it wasn't the kind of hatefulness that we're talking about right now. It's more-- I'm not sure I'd want to be a young woman in that congregation, 'cause it's more-- it's about patriarchy and all of that stuff, but interesting. It's fascinating. It's all really interesting.

Rosie Moosnick: That's the truth.

Ouita Michel: Yeah. But, I mean, I do fundraisers for Democratic candidates at Holly, mainly just at Holly Hill Inn because that's more affiliated with who I am and where I am, and I would-- I don't force that onto my employees who work in the other restaurants. I don't want them to feel like they have to have a particular political perspective. That's hard though.

Rosie Moosnick: It's hard. You probably need to get going. I'll just ask a couple more questions. So how do you think your debate background speaks to you now, or how does it?

1:05:03

Ouita Michel: I just read this interesting thing. I think what debate trains you to do is understand the perspective of the person that you're talking to, and then assimilate those views, and see how you can create a different path together, because you always have to be able to debate both sides of an issue. It's not just about debating the things that you only believe in from your own perspective. It's about learning other perspectives to the point where you can defend them against opposition, and win, and also taking something from that, and seeing if your own perspective stands up to that same kind of challenge, and then potentially coming together on a whole different path.

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And I do think I am good at that when it comes to problem-solving. Well, I don't know if it's called really thinking outside the box, 'cause what I do is pretty traditional [laughter], so I'm not really an outside the bo...I'm no Elon Musk, for example [laughter]. But, at the same time, it's like, oh, well have you tried this? What about-- this person quit, and I was really pissed off at 'em. Well, I think I may have been wrong, and I think they're actually really talented. I think I better call them up, and apologize, and see if they wanna come back to work for me. It's more that kind of, oh, and then I think the young people that work with me go, "Oh, you would do that?" I'm like, "Well, hell yeah, I would do that," you know, instead of being so this is the path, I only see this path and, you know, it's just trying to-- so I think debate really helped with that. And it's super critical thinking, great reading comprehension, good speaking skills, all of that kind of thing, the basics, yeah.

1:06:56

Rosie Moosnick: That sounds almost like a blending of your religious gratefulness and debate, to have grace, and contact someone, and admit when you're wrong.

Ouita Michel: A spiritual path in life, no matter what it is, helps you understand mercy and forgiveness, and to forgive yourself and those around you. And forgiving those around you allows you to forgive yourself for all the transgressions you feel like you've had in your life. And that's one thing that I think is sad about-- it doesn't really matter. I've always said if it was a mosque that I could walk to, I'd probably be Muslim. You know? Like, for me, it was about-- I never grew up with a religious tradition at all. My parents were very anti-religion. So I never went to church. And it was more for me finding this space, and realizing, and then understanding

the metaphors of this spiritual walk. And for some people, it's not metaphorical, and I'm fine with that.

1:07:53

But for me, it's about an unknowable spirit that brings us all together...that's all the best of us, and getting as close as I can to that spirit, and your intuition tells you when you're doing that and when you're not doing that. And extending mercy and grace to others is really important, and I don't know young people if they know how to do that if they're not shown that, if they don't have a way to learn that. And where do you learn it? On social media, you're not learning that. And we're just, you know, it's so vitriolic, everything that we do with one another right now online. That's a big part of the website for me too, is just like finding these common grounds, and making sure we're putting 'em out there, although it's a small little thing. But, gosh, I appreciate you saying that. That makes me feel happy.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Well, you see it in your eyes, and you're modeling it to your employees--

Sarah Jane Webb: Absolutely, yes.

Rosie Moosnick: --if you're going to someone, "I was wrong."

1:09:01

Ouita Michel: Oh, yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: Even in the space itself, these are sanctuaries for some people to-- safe places to be.

Ouita Michel: Well, that was what work was always for me. One thing that I loved about cooking from the very beginning, and this is one thing that doesn't exist anymore for people, so when I started cooking in kitchens in New York, and then when I came to Lexington, I worked at the old Dudley's, which I dearly love Debbie. She's a character. And there were no phones allowed, and there was only landlines. There was no cell phone, and you couldn't be on the phone, so you would go to work for like 10 hours, and it was just 10 hours, 8 to 10 hours of just being, just cooking. Even if it's really fast and furious line cooking, or if it was prepping, or if it was baking, whatever it was, you were just fully engaged with what you were doing. That was my career for decades, you know, for a decade anyway. And then when you got the cell phone, it's this constant interruption of all the drama in your life.

1:10:00

You're never away from it. I feel bad for them, like, how they-- or the review, the criticism, the community need to review people on Google and all of that stuff, this constant need for criticism. Like, where did that come from? Our parents? Did we-- were we, I mean, would your mother--?

Rosie Moosnick: I came from a critical home, but it wasn't on Google.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: No, my mom was super critical of me too.

Rosie Moosnick: I mean, we came from like academic homes.

Ouita Michel: Yes.

Rosie Moosnick: They're critical people.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: They are. Oh my God, yes, they're very critical. But it isn't on Google, right.

Rosie Moosnick: But it stayed in the house.

[Laughter]

Ouita Michel: We had a strict rule about that, actually.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: Are you the only child?

Ouita Michel: No. I have a brother and a sister who are both much younger than I am. My sister lives across from the Holly Hill Inn.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, really?

Ouita Michel: Yeah. My brother has a little farm out in Montgomery County.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, okay, I didn't know that.

Rosie Moosnick: And you have half-sisters.

1:11:01

Ouita Michel: And I have Rebecca Sexton, who is my stepsister, and her brother Robert, and she lives in Chicago. And Robert is doing a 500-mile bike ride through France right now. But he lives--

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow, that's so cool.

Ouita Michel: Yeah, he lives in Tennessee, but he works for Apple.

Rosie Moosnick: Well, I'll just ask one, since I knew your mommy, when do you think about your ancestors in this work, or those who've passed?

Ouita Michel: All the time. Have you read Crystal Wilkinson's-- she's got this new book coming out-- *Kitchen Ghosts*?

Rosie Moosnick: Mm-mm.

Ouita Michel: Oh my God.

Rosie Moosnick: That's such a great title.

Ouita Michel: It's a great title, and there's an essay that's in *Emergence Magazine* where you can google it and see. And Crystal and I cooked together at *Dumplings & Dancing at Hindman*, and she did her mother's chicken and dumplings. And the food and memory are so integral in how we think about people.

1:11:53

And for me, the menu that symbolizes it the most for me is our Thanksgiving dinner, 'cause it's my mother and my grandmother and my great-grandmother. And I teach Willa and Wyatt, and we cook together every dish, and my nieces and nephew, whoever I can get from the next generation to come over and cook with me in the Holly Hill kitchen. And then our whole family comes to Holly Hill--

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, so that's really beautiful.

Ouita Michel: --so because that way we can have enough space for everyone. Yeah, it's great.

And we make-- we do not change the menu. It's a true ritual, so the menu never changes. It's all the way, exactly the way, as I remember my mom making it. It's pretty cool. I think about her all

the time. I mean, she's with me all the time. But when you're cooking, you really do, and not just your relatives but like I sometimes tell people it's like walking through a civil war battlefield where you are walking in the steps of those soldiers. That's what's so moving, or any battlefield or any living museum experience. And with food, you can say, "I'm gonna make pasta."

1:12:59

Well, you're making pasta in this way that we've made it for thousands of years, and like think of the thousands and thousands of hands who have made pasta before around the world in all these different cultures, or just all the different-- cooking is one of those activities that ties us together, all of us together around the world. I love that aspect of it, 'cause it's the human experience. And sometimes restaurant cooking or bakery cooking isn't exactly that, but there are aspects of it that really are. And if you can get the folks who are doing it to connect with the lineage of a dish, it gives so much meaning to their work, and an understanding and a feeling for it that comes across in the final product. That's kind of cool. Like, they make all the cookie recipes. The sugar cookies are from my great, great, great grandmother.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Ouita Michel: Yeah. So there's a lot of family recipes in there. It's kind of cool.

Rosie Moosnick: That's totally cool.

1:14:00

Anything you wanna add or--?

Ouita Michel: Oh my God, I've told you my whole life story.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: No, you haven't. I'll meet in the nursing home, honey.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Ouita Michel: Thank you all so much.

Rosie Moosnick: Ten years.

Sarah Jane Webb: Thank you for being here.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh wait, let me do the silence. They want 30-second silence.

[End]