

Leslie Barker and Elijah Townsend
Caritas Village – Memphis, TN

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Delorme: Okay. So today is Tuesday, July 25th, 2017, and this is Simone Delorme with the Southern Foodways Alliance, and today we're going to talk a little bit more about—am I pronouncing it right—Caritas Village.

[0:00:42.8]

Barker: Car-i-tas, mm-hmm.

[0:00:43.7]

Delorme: Okay. Caritas Village. So just to start, would each of you say your name and just your occupation, what you do for the organization?

[0:00:50.5]

Townsend: Ladies first.

[0:00:52.5]

Barker: My name is Leslie Barker, and I'm the executive director of the Caritas Village.

[0:00:56.1]

Townsend: I am Eli Townsend, and I am the chef and restaurant manager of Caritas Village.

[0:01:01.8]

Delorme: Okay. So can you tell me a little bit more about the actual organization, your mission, the type of programs that you have?

[0:01:08.8]

Barker: So we are a restaurant, a community center, and a cultural arts center in the Binghampton community in Memphis, Tennessee, and our mission is—it's kind of a long way, but it's a—

[0:01:20.3]

Townsend: You got it? [laughter]

[0:01:21.0]

Barker: Yeah, I think so, I think so. To break down the walls of diversity between the cultures and build bridges of love and trust between the rich and those made poor, and to provide an alternative to the street corners for the neighborhood children.

[0:01:32.8]

Townsend: That's it. [laughter]

[0:01:33.8]

Delerme: Okay. And how about the restaurant? How does that play into the organization?

[0:01:40.5]

Barker: You tell about that.

[0:01:40.9]

Barker: Well, our founder, Onie Johns, had this vision of having a café in a neighborhood that was a meeting spot for the community, so that everyone could build bridges and connect, and her ideal was that she wanted the prices of this place to be conducive to the conditions of the neighborhood so that the neighborhood people could afford them as well. Also in that vision, she wanted people to be able to have the opportunity to eat a well-balanced meal, if they could pay or not, and so that's kind of the premise of how Caritas started.

We offer a free meal daily, as well as soup. The daily special is open to anyone who—I use the word “free,” but I like to change that lingo. We offer a meal to those who can't afford to feed themselves, because it's definitely not free. And the ideal is that people can come in and not have to lose their dignity to ask for something to eat, so there's no questions asked. You can walk up to the restaurant, say, “Hey, I would like the special,” or, “I would like the soup,” and we serve you just like any regular customer, just like when the mayor of Germantown stops in.

[0:02:50.0]

Delorme: What do you charge for those that are able to—

[0:02:52.6]

Townsend: On the menu, the special is \$7. It's underpriced, but, you know, God provides. [laughter] So it's usually a meat, a starch, and a veggie, and a dessert. And so what I've tried to do since being the chef at Caritas is really focused on the diversity of the neighborhood, and, as much as possible, incorporate that into the daily special, so that not only are we giving away good, quality food, we're learning something in the process about our neighbors.

[0:03:26.1]

Delorme: Okay. And who are the actual people you find that go to the restaurant?

[0:03:30.4]

Townsend: Well, gosh, that's an eclectic thing. We actually have a menu as well. So we have regular paying patrons that come in on a daily basis, and it can be anywhere from someone who heard about us who lives further down in Midtown or some of our neighborhood people. Like I said, the mayor of Germantown, he may stop in and get a meal. Joe Birch from Channel 5 News may stop in—

[0:03:55.2]

Barker: Yeah, he comes in a lot.

[0:03:55.9]

Townsend: —and have a meal. A C Wharton was there a couple of months ago with a group celebrating someone's birthday. So you get a very eclectic group of people that eat there, and what's beautiful is the energy that that brings with so many different people on so many different levels, social, economical, culturally, and it's just one big melting pot of Memphis, and where people just comingle, and you really get to see the heart of people at Caritas.

[0:04:29.8]

Barker: We have a lot of groups come in to—whether it's for lunch or, like, meetings at night, but a lot of activist groups, Bible studies, book clubs, a lot of social justice groups, so there's a lot of, like, regular meeting groups that come there. The ROMEOs. *(laughs)* There's a group of older men called the ROMEOs. They call themselves that, the Retired Old Men Eating Out. They come every Wednesday. *(laughs)*

[0:04:56.0]

Townsend: I never knew that.

[0:04:57.8]

Barker: Did you not know that?

[0:04:59.2]

Townsend: No, I just got it. *(laughs)*

[0:04:59.8]

Barker: Well, there you go. You didn't know why they call themselves ROMEOs?

[0:05:02.0]

Townsend: I didn't.

[0:05:02.6]

Barker: That's what it is. So they have their table. It is their table on Wednesdays. So there's definitely a lot of regulars. We have a lot of regulars. Yeah, it's not a place you come and go quickly. Like if you come to the Village, you're going to be there for a while.

[0:05:20.0]

Townsend: Yeah, most people are. It's like home away from home.

[0:05:23.8]

Barker: People do treat it like their living room.

[0:05:24.9]

Townsend: Yeah.

[0:05:25.1]

Barker: They really do. (*laughs*)

[0:05:26.5]

Delorme: With such an eclectic, culturally diverse group, how do you come up with the menu items and decide what to serve?

[0:05:32.7]

Townsend: Well, fortunately, I've had the privilege to live in an array of different places and experience different cultures across the country, and so what I like to do is be inspired by my environment and my surroundings, and what that challenges me to do, it challenges me to do my research and my homework and to ask questions about different things. Like I said, we have a lot of different people in the neighborhood. One of my favorite go-to people, which I just learned how to pronounce her real name, is Ipsy.

[0:06:04.3]

Barker: Ipsy, yeah.

[0:06:05.5]

Townsend: She is one of our food entrepreneurs in the neighborhood, and she's great with sharing her recipes, and we work together. Last summer, I had the opportunity to have a junior chef internship with four young ladies from Africa, and it was a great experience, and I thought I was teaching them some things, but they definitely taught me some things about their native country and the cuisine. And so I think really working with the neighborhood and seeing what different people have to offer inspires me to create some of our meals and things that we have on a daily basis.

[0:06:45.9]

Deleme: What is your culinary background?

[0:06:47.6]

Townsend: I went to L'École Culinaire. It's here in Memphis, Tennessee. I also, I've been working in food—I started teaching myself to cook at the age of eight. There was this—I lived in some apartments, and my mom was a single mom, and my motivation for cooking was so that I could possibly take some of the burden off of her. She went to school; she worked two jobs; she had four kids.

So the Bookmobile, which is a mobile library, came around to the apartment complex in which we lived in, and they had a contest to see who could win the most books, and so my brother convinced me to join the contest because he wanted the bike. I couldn't even ride a bike, to be honest. I don't know why I did it, but I did it, and actually I read fifty cookbooks that summer, and I started cooking. And as they say, the

rest is history. And when I look back in retrospect, it was a part of who I was, because my family has a long history of service and hospitality, and so I just think it was me just coming into what I was destined to come into.

[0:07:50.9]

Delerme: Aside from the restaurant, what other types of activities or programs do you sponsor?

[0:07:57.2]

Barker: Like I mentioned a minute ago, we have a lot of groups that meet in our space, and I think that's a huge thing that we do as far as giving people a place that maybe couldn't afford a space to meet in. We have play rehearsals and just a lot of activists, neighborhood associations, just all sorts of things that happen, trainings, like know-your-rights trainings, like all sorts of things that happen in our neighborhood. And Eli kind of touched on this a little bit, like with Ipsy, but she's from Sudan, and we have a huge refugee population in the neighborhood and there's also a lot of immigrants, and so there's a lot of groups that use our space to meet about issues related to that, like, specifically right now. But like a lot of Bible studies, book clubs, and we also—

[0:08:46.3]

Townsend: Health clinic.

[0:00:00.0]

Barker: Oh, the health clinic. We have the Compassion Clinic is once a week, every Tuesday except for the first of the month, that offers healthcare to people without insurance, a group of doctors has been doing for years. We usually have after-school programming. It's up in the air right now because we are about to renovate, but we've been working with Brewster Elementary on a program called "Man Up" that a barber started, so he, like, cuts kids' hair and he mentors them. And we have an art gallery, the Hope Gallery, that we do monthly exhibits for emerging artists, and we have an artist-in-residence program, and my background's in the arts, so I'm really excited about, when we renovate, creating more art.

[0:09:33.0]

Delorme: And how long has the organization been in existence?

[0:09:36.8]

Barker: Eleven years.

[0:09:37.9]

Townsend: The Village has been there eleven years. Caritas as a community has existed for sixteen years. So it started off as Caritas Community, which we have a property here at 2532 Everett, and that was their original Caritas, where people met weekly. They had a monthly potluck, which we still have the tradition. We have a community potluck the

first Thursday of every month, and everyone gets together, and we fellowship and we talk about building a stronger community. And so it started sixteen years ago when Onie Johns, the founder, moved into the neighborhood. She sold her home in Germantown, and what led her here was she went to a servant leadership class—I'm going to assume it was at The Commons—and so that led her to want to do something greater than herself. And so that's how Caritas derived.

[0:10:32.5]

Delorme: That's fascinating. Are there any other organizations you partner with on a regular basis?

[0:10:39.1]

Townsend: Yes, all the time.

[0:10:41.2]

Barker: Yeah. [laughter]

[0:10:41.9]

Townsend: All the time. We have an amazing relationship with Little Bird, which is a group that helps entrepreneur refugees and immigrants, and a lot of it is based around foods, clothing, things that they specialize in from their native country and they bring

here to try to create some kind of social enterprise and entrepreneurship for themselves, and so we work with them.

We just had, maybe a couple of months ago, a food festival called Kaleidoscope at Wiseacre, and I was fortunate enough to work with some of the entrepreneurs just to help guide them and give them some small skillsets to help them better prepare for serving food to the public.

We work with—you know, that group just switched my mind. Oh, Christ Resurrection, which is a group of missionary doctors who they have a monthly meeting at our facility, where we prepare food for them, and they talk about their voyages and things of that nature. Who else?

[0:11:54.0]

Barker: And the Binghamton Development Corporation is really involved in the food entrepreneur thing, and they're actually creating a kitchen called Kaleidoscope Kitchen, where food refugees can cook things there. And we are about to get a food truck, and we have a meeting next week about how we're going to partner with all that. So there's the Binghamton Development Corporation.

There's SOS, which is Service Over Self, which is right down the road across Poplar, and they help—it's kind of like Habit for Humanity. They build houses, they repair houses. We feed them a lot. *(laughs)* There's a refugee empowerment program, which is right down the road. We feed a lot of people in the neighborhood, and then we partner a lot with the Center for Transforming Communities on our monthly potluck. It's

their monthly Shalom meeting and it's our potluck. And we actually just wrote a grant with them to do a neighborhood storytelling project. So it's going to be a yearlong cycle of performances based on stories from people from the neighborhood.

[0:12:54.8]

Townsend: And we have a great partnership with Rhodes College.

[0:12:57.1]

Barker: Oh, yeah, we partner with Rhodes a lot.

[0:12:58.5]

Townsend: A lot of their students volunteer at the Village, as well as they use us for a lot of their catering needs. So does Memphis College of Art. I just had the opportunity to become a part of a great organization which is called ArtUp, and it helps us to create social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in the neighborhood as well. Leslie is a fellow ArtsUp fellow. And so we just have a lot of great and strong relationships with people in the community and outside of the community that help support Caritas.

[0:13:30.9]

Delorme: What's the ArtsUp fellowship?

[0:13:33.6]

Barker: So ArtUp is—when I went through the program the first year, three years ago, or 2014, yeah, it was through ArtsMemphis, and the goal was to help arts organizations—because I used to work at Theatre Memphis—help arts organizations know how to work with communities, and it’s actually since then become its own organization. ArtUp is its, like, freestanding—and this year it’s really focusing on creative entrepreneurship. And so Eli’s a fellow and I’m a mentor for the fellows, so we’re both really involved in it, and there are people from all different neighborhoods in the city about how to use—how do we use the arts to help our neighborhoods. I have a meeting with that later today.

(laughs)

[0:14:21.2]

Delerme: And how long have the two of you been living in this community?

[0:14:25.4]

Barker: Two and a half years.

[0:14:27.2]

Townsend: Almost two years, October.

[0:14:29.5]

Delerme: What do you know about the community in terms of the residential population, any historic changes you’ve seen or know about?

[0:14:38.0]

Townsend: For me, I lived in the neighborhood probably—it's ironic. I lived in the neighborhood the start of Caritas ten years ago, the Village. I lived right over on Everett right down the street from Onie, never knew who she was. I always wondered who lived in the big house on the corner. And so it was really—it was refreshing and a little amazing to come back to the neighborhood and see the growth that had happened in the ten years from which I left. I could definitely change that there was a presence and a stronger sense of community, and I could tell there was some cleanliness that existed that didn't exist ten years prior. I could also tell that, you know, people actually were engaging with each other. This is my first time as an adult that I feel I personally belong to a part of a community, where I know my neighbors, they know me. If a strange car's in my driveway, Mr. B.'s going to drive by and tell me—

[0:15:42.0]

Barker: That's true. *(laughs)*

Townsend: —“Hey, who is this in your driveway?” And I'll be like, “It's okay, Mr. B.” So it's really a great feeling, because it makes you feel connected and a part of something greater than yourself. So I definitely can see the positive changes that have occurred since I think the Caritas community has been here in Binghampton, and working with

people like Leslie and Kenny from the CTC and one of my fellow ArtUp fellows, Lawrence Matthews, where now we're working on bridging the gap even more in our neighborhood, where we connect, you know, Binghampton with Broad Street and the other side of Binghampton so we can be one cohesive unit, because we all know that there's strength in numbers.

[0:16:25.2]

Delorme: And how would you describe, say, when you used to live here, what the community was like? Who lived here? What did it look like? How were people employed?

[0:16:34.4]

Townsend: I hate to loosely say this and sound like I was afraid, but I feel a little safer, and although there's things that go on everywhere, I don't think you can control crime, because people are going to do what they want to do, what I like most about it is just the sense of knowing the people that I live around, because before, I was that neighbor that I didn't speak to people. I went in my house and I closed my door, and if we happened to cross paths, "Oh, hello," you know, and that's because, again, I think growing up, for me, we moved a lot, so I never had the opportunity to gain a sense of community until I moved here about two years ago. And so that's what I like most about it, is the sense of community that I have that I didn't before.

[0:17:20.5]

Barker: Yeah. I mean, like what Onie always says about it, it's a real neighborhood. I mean, there's a man that comes to the Village all the time named Michael Anderson. He's amazing. He's a gun-violence survivor, just like literally lives his life, like, serving other people, and he always says that Binghampton is the next best thing to Mayberry. That's what he says all the time. [laughter] We certainly have our problems, but people knock on each other's doors, people know what's going on with each other.

I think I mentioned before, there is a huge refugee population. We have a very large Latino immigrant population, and there's a group of people in the neighborhood who are intentionally being allies for those people right now. Actually, ICE was here today, and there is a very, very strong network of people who, like, are on standby to, like, join [snaps fingers] and, like, support people and stand. I mean, that happened just today.

[0:18:19.2]

Delerme: Do you know more about the incident? Were people, certain complexes targeted?

[0:18:23.0]

Barker: I believe there was a specific house targeted because of someone they were looking for, and there's a family—and so, like, a group of allies, like, just messaged, like, went out quickly, like phone tree, like, “Hey, we're standing on the corner of Matthew by

the park,” you know. By the time I got down there, they were gone, but Joni Laney, who kind of heads it up, was, like, just going around, like, our Latino neighbors and giving them information and just trying to help them the best she could, I mean, just tirelessly does it.

And there’s a couple that lives in the neighborhood who are from Argentina, and they just, like, spend their lives trying to help people. That’s Christina and Mario. They spend their lives, like, helping people and helping, doing workshops so people know their rights and standing with people. They’re putting a vigil together for Mason, Tennessee, where people are detained, this Saturday. They help people get their kids to college. I mean, it’s just—it’s a very special place.

As far as history, I have heard that originally—because there’s this side of Binghamton and there’s the east side of Binghamton, and there’s a really big divide. Like, we’re divided by a street called Tillman, and apparently, like a long time ago, this was the white neighborhood and that was the black neighborhood, which is not the case now. Like, it’s much more integrated, but they’re still very much—

[0:19:54.7]

Townsend: Divided.

[0:19:55.4]

Barker: A divide. And I know—I’m so bad at telling this story, but it was over eleven years ago where there was the shooting. Do you know what I’m talking about? There

was, like, a gang shooting, Latino—there was something that happened, and it was this—I'm so bad at this story, but there was something that happened, and it was, like, right out here, I believe, just near the Village, and it was before the Village was opened, and so the neighborhood banded together, and instead of people moving out or leaving, they, like, joined together and they did a peace walk, and it ended at the Village, and before it was even open or had permits. I'm sure we're past that statute of limitations now. Like the neighborhood had, like, a meal together, and it was like the first meal at the Village.

[0:20:46.1]

Delorme: Are there other challenges you find the residents in the community face?

[0:20:51.3]

Barker: Oh, I mean, absolutely. Like, I mean, poverty, you know, is huge. I mean, as much as we don't like to talk about it, we still deal with a lot of crime, and, you know, I think that—

[0:21:05.9]

Townsend: Which go hand-in-hand with poverty. I think a big issue is people feeling like they're being heard or they're being noticed and recognized as it pertains to our refugees and those of different ethnicities. For me, it was a struggle at first at the Village because there was a huge language barrier with some of my employees, and so what I committed to myself is not learning an entire language, but learning words that made us

communicate better. So I think a lot of their issues, as it pertains to poverty and things, is it's that cultural barrier that prohibits them from going out into the workforce and really obtaining a, quote, unquote, what we as Americans say is "a real job," versus they're accustomed to utilizing their skills and gifts that they've been given, and so that's why organizations like Little Bird and through ArtUp, we're going to try and create some social enterprise and social entrepreneurship so that we can probably help, you know, not necessarily eliminate that, but put a dent in it so that people are learning how to—we're teaching people how to fish versus just giving them fishes.

[0:22:30.6]

Delerme: Could you talk a little bit more about these entrepreneurship programs and where people are actually finding jobs in the labor market?

[0:22:37.0]

Townsend: Our circumstances are unique because we hire within the neighborhood because we believe the money stays here. We empower people hopefully to go out and seek better opportunities, but they can be very minimum in the city with people who have language barriers, have not necessarily a limited education, but a different education. But what I can say is there are a lot of people in the neighborhood who are very hard workers and who are always willing to step in when needed, and they do a great job. And so, like I said, our hope is to hopefully be able to create more opportunities for social enterprise

and social entrepreneurship, and therefore it'll strengthen the economy within our neighborhood, and hopefully that can spew out into other places.

[0:23:39.4]

Delerme: And what are some of the challenges that you face working with your organization?

[0:23:44.0]

Townsend: With Caritas?

[0:23:46.8]

Delerme: Mm-hmm.

[0:23:47.5]

Townsend: My biggest challenge starting out was I didn't know I was going to be a part social worker, too, so let's just keep it there. And so what happens is, you know, I come from a world where in the kitchen everything is intentional, and you're given instructions and people follow those instructions, and that's how it works. It's, "Yes, Chef. No, Chef," you know. But I come into Caritas, where there's love for all people, so everyone doesn't necessarily have the acquired skillset that I would like, and so I had to learn how to meet people where they were, and I had to learn how to accept people's circumstances and help them through those circumstances versus allowing that circumstance to be an

adversity, even as it pertained to just dealing with some of our clientele, because as I said, we have an array of different people. On this side, where we may have Joe Birch and the mayor of Germantown and this city councilman coming, we also have, let's just say, Joe Blow, who's a recovering addict, and he needs the same attention that Joe Birch needs.

And what I find fascinating is that regardless of wherever these people are from or their backgrounds or their social status, they all want to be noticed in some shape, form, or fashion. So it's more—I tell people all the time it's more than just cooking for me. Sometimes people want me to sit down and have a conversation with them, and they want to learn about who I am, and they want me to learn about who they are, and I think some days, it's probably the only point in some people's days where someone sees them, and they feel validated through that exchange and that experience. So that was a challenge for me at first.

Here in recent challenges is someplace I never thought I'd be, is really working with children of this magnitude. So my current challenge is, you know, how to better the child and develop a better relationship parent to child, parent to village, because it literally—not to be cliché, it does take a village, and we have to build relationships with the parents. And so far this year, together I think we have built some stronger relationships with parents as well as the kids, and so hopefully we continue to go in that direction, because they are the sole purpose of why we exist, so that, you know, they can become better citizens and they can use their talents and potential, and hopefully there somewhere in that mix is someone who is going to take over what it is that we do and

empower other people through what they've learned through us. So that was pretty challenging for me, but I'm getting in there. What do you think? *(laughs)*

[0:26:54.0]

Barker: No, I mean, absolutely. I mean, I think that, like, everything he said, yeah. I started in January. I'm really new. So six months ago, I came from educational theatre to—I used to run the after-school program at the Village, so I had an idea of what happened, but not—it's different to live it every day. But I had to very, very quickly put aside, like, my idea of what a productive day was, because, like, I have the board to answer to and this to-do list and all this stuff to do, but really why we exist is for relationships and for people, and just like he said, I mean, people need to be heard. They need somebody to be, you know, witness to whatever problem they're dealing with. So I just had to learn to be like, "All right. I'm going to be present with this, no matter what else is going on," I mean, and that might be listening to somebody talk about their health problems or helping someone who can't speak English, like, fax their insurance company, or having three kids around me while I'm trying to type, whatever it is. It really is—you just never know what a day is going to be. Like, it's never what you planned. It's never what you expect.

[0:28:12.8]

Townsend: I jokingly say it would make the best reality show in the world. *(laughs)*

[0:28:15.6]

Barker: Oh, totally. I mean, it really would. And I think, too, like along those lines, we talk about, oh, we live in the neighborhood and everything, but that is really one of the hardest things, I think, about our job, because just because—I mean, my house is literally a block away. Eli's is right across the street. So when we're not there, we're still—

[0:28:35.2]

Townsend: At work.

[0:28:35.9]

Barker: We're still at work. I mean, we're still—you know, our door gets knocked on, you know. I mean, this is a neighborhood of door-knockers, for sure, and it's great, but, like, it is—I've learned a lot about, like, what the difference between—you know, I think the idea of, like, service and the idea of community and, like, what it really means to live in community with people, because it's not on the schedule you want it to be on. It's not on your time. It's not the way that you would choose it to be. It's not who you would choose it to be. *(laughs)* I mean, it's just kind of putting yourself out there and saying—yeah.

[0:29:10.9]

Townsend: Yeah, because we have an ongoing joke that when we get time away, we're like, "Hey, I'm out of the neighborhood today." *(laughs)*

[0:29:15.7]

Barker: “I’m out of the neighborhood.” Yeah, yeah.

[0:29:17.4]

Townsend: It’s a 24/7 thing, because people look to us to withstand a certain, I think, character and presence, and so, you know, I may be at home, but, you know, I’m still on if someone knocks on the door. Just like I was at home Sunday sitting in my chair, indulging on some food that I shouldn’t be eating, and I get a knock at the door, and somebody needed something simple as toilet paper, and so I went and got toilet paper and gave them toilet paper. But it’s just things of that nature, and at first, it was an adjustment—

[0:29:58.2]

Barker: It’s definitely an adjustment.

[0:29:59.3]

Townsend: —but as Onie and Sandra Ferrell says, I definitely have drank the Kool-Aid, and I’m there. And it’s no longer a thought; it’s just an action. And so I’ve accepted that I’m supposed to be in this place, in this moment, in this experience, and I want to give it my best that I can do.

[0:30:22.8]

Delorme: And when people stop by to see you, what types of things are they inquiring about or asking you?

[0:30:27.6]

Barker: Popsicle—the kids. *(laughs)*

[0:30:29.9]

Townsend: The kids love her.

[0:30:30.9]

Barker: *(laughs)* I used to teach.

[0:30:33.2]

Townsend: They love her.

[0:30:34.7]

Barker: The kids come by. It's for popsicles, but it's also, like, because they just want to talk, you know, and, like, I literally think they knocked on my door five times yesterday, I mean, and the fifth time was like 8:30 last night. I was like, "I'm just not—I'm just not going right now. I'm tired."

And I heard one of them go, "Leslie!" [laughter]

It was just like, “Oh.” And then I could hear them all chattering, you know.

But a lot of times, it’s like, “Can I mow your yard? Do you have anything I can do for a few extra dollars?”

There is one person in the neighborhood who has some pretty severe mental issues and some, like, extreme PTSD, who is very much like, “I just need to talk right now. I’m having a rough day.” People need rides places. They’re used to be a man in the neighborhood who’s schizophrenic, but he’ll tell you, he’s like, “I’m a—.” What did he say? “I’m like a nonviolent schizophrenic.” He had, like, his whole—but he’s in a nursing home now, but he would just stop by and be like, “Can I have some tea?” and just hang out on your porch. He was brilliant, and he would, like, tell you all these, like, things about physics and theology.

So sometimes it’s just to talk. I’ve had people knock on my door, like Ann Fo, she used to live in the neighborhood, used to bring me strawberries. I mean, sometimes it’s something really cool, but a lot of times it really is someone who needs, like, “Is there anything I can do for a few dollars?”

[0:31:55.7]

Delerme: How about some of the most memorable, most rewarding, positive experiences?

[0:32:03.7]

Townsend: Super Soul Brunch.

[0:32:05.6]

Barker: Oh, yeah. That's one of our favorite things.

[0:32:07.1]

Delerme: Tell me about Super Soul Brunch.

[0:32:09.6]

Barker: So one day I walked into the Village on a Saturday morning, and the lady that cleans for us, Joyce, and then a man, Mr. B. that you mentioned, they were all, like, sitting around listening to soul music. They were just, like, super fun, and I was like, "We should do this like as a thing," and so we decided to try it out, and we had—

[0:32:32.5]

Townsend: I was completely against it.

[0:32:33.8]

Barker: You were not completely.

[0:32:35.0]

Townsend: I was.

[0:32:35.5]

Barker: Were you? You just didn't tell me.

[0:32:36.7]

Townsend: I was completely against it because that made me have a six-day-a-week—that was six days a week, which I generally work anyway, but it just made more of the day.

[0:32:44.2]

Barker: That's another hard thing, the hours.

[0:32:45.2]

Townsend: And so I was against it, but it was a success. It was a *huge* success.

[0:32:52.2]

Barker: He said, "I'll try it. I'll try it." (*laughs*)

[0:32:55.2]

Townsend: "I'll try it." And it was a success, and so I couldn't turn down a success. And so we have a live band every Super Soul Brunch. We have a DJ. We have a wonderful spread of food.

[0:33:09.8]

Barker: It's like a buffet, brunch buffet.

[0:33:11.2]

Townsend: The biggest thing to take away is, oh, it's just such a great energy at Super Soul Brunch. It's just like—

[0:33:20.0]

Barker: People dance, and like—

[0:33:21.4]

Townsend: People dance, people sitting with people they don't even know, eating together, fellowshiping. It's just one of the best three hours you could possibly spend on a Saturday. It's three hours, right?

[0:33:32.3]

Barker: Yeah, and some people stay that long. Like, some people literally stay the whole time.

[0:33:35.9]

Townsend: Some people show up from the beginning, and they're there till we're shutting everything down. But it's really a great experience.

[0:33:41.4]

Delorme: And is this every Saturday?

[0:33:42.9]

Townsend: No.

[0:33:43.5]

Barker: We do it once a month. No, we do it once a month. [laughter]

[0:33:46.0]

Townsend: Once a month. It's generally the first Saturday of every month. We haven't had it, of course, since we've been closed for renovations, but we still have people who are ready for Super Soul Brunch to return, and so it's just a very positive thing, and I think it's one of our great—

[0:34:05.6]

Barker: It's fun.

[0:34:06.7]

Townsend: —woo-hoo stories.

[0:34:08.7]

Barker: Yeah.

[0:34:09.2]

Townsend: One of our another great stories is this young man who, he would—

[0:34:13.6]

Barker: Ty?

[0:34:13.9]

Townsend: Yes.

[0:34:14.4]

Barker: I know. I was thinking about Ty too.

[0:34:15.3]

Townsend: He would come to the Village. He's been coming there for maybe about a year, and he originally came to volunteer for some community service, and he and I developed a relationship. He was very into music. I can sing, and so we started having conversations, and he was just really, looking back in retrospect— *(laughs)*. You know what I'm thinking, right? The nickname that you all had—well, I can't say it. Well, he was nicknamed "Creepy." I'll just say that, but—

[0:34:46.6]

Barker: Now, we don't call him that anymore.

[0:34:48.0]

Townsend: We don't call him that now.

[0:34:48.8]

Barker: And he knows, too, so Creepy knows.

[0:34:50.4]

Townsend: But he's one of those—yeah, it's a running joke.

[0:34:52.0]

Barker: He knows.

[0:34:53.0]

Townsend: So he was very closed off, but I had the opportunity to personally hear his story and his background and where he came from, and so that kind of gave me a little more insight into why he was the way he was. And one day, you know, he just came to me and he was like he just wanted to do better with his life, and he talked with Leslie, and he wanted to get back in school, and Leslie helped him with his transcripts and things

of that nature. And then he was looking for work, so I had some extra things that I needed to help him just make some money, and so he did those things for me. And then he began to volunteer in the carpenter gardens, and he just began to go through this metamorphosis of change for positive change. And today, I mean, to see him, I mean, the smile on his face is so genuine. He didn't have a car. He has a car now. He's been working on the job for about the last four months, and he's just really making some positive changes for his life, and I think that's one of our—

[0:35:57.8]

Barker: Yeah, Ty's definitely one of, like—because I didn't like him, you know. And we've talked about this, but, like, one day he came to me for help, and I was just kind of like, “Oh, I'm busy,” but, like, we started talking, and I was like, “He's really trying,” you know. He wanted to go back to school. He's a landscaper, and I was like, “You know we have community gardens?” There's a McMurden Gardens down by The Commons, and there's some really great people that work down in the gardens, and I was like, “You should go volunteer.”

And he kind of looked at me like, “Am I going to get paid?” you know. *(laughs)*

And I was like, “No, really.”

So he comes in one day, and I was having lunch with somebody, and he, like, was bursting to talk to me, like so much that my friend was like, “You want to come sit with us and hang out?” Because he was just, like, literally sitting there waiting to talk to me.

And finally he goes, “I went and volunteered in the gardens. It was amazing.” I mean, he was just like—and he, like, loved all the people, and he was like—I mean, he was beaming, and he was like, “I just—.” He’s like, “I never thought I’d want to work without getting paid, but I did get paid, because it was amazing.” And it was just this thing, like change in him, and he’s just—I don’t know. It’s been really cool to watch. Like, he went from being like very kind of almost cynical and bitter to just beaming, and, like, it was like watching someone, like, come back to life, you know. Ty, yeah.

[0:37:20.1]

Delorme: You mentioned a lot of immigrants, refugees that you work with. Do you know their background stories? Is it a certain refugee population that you find is coming here from a certain country or place?

[0:37:30.0]

Townsend: I wouldn’t say that I know anyone’s individual story. One that I probably know most would be Ipsy, and I know that she’s from Sudan. She previously worked at the Village, but she has her own catering service now. And so Ipsy would probably be the closest. We had the opportunity last year to get to know some of our neighbors a little more, because we did a series of cultural dinners. Inside of those, we focused on six countries, their cuisine, décor, music, all of those things, and tried to incorporate those into one evening for everyone in the neighborhood to attend. And so I got to learn a little more about individual people.

I do think my biggest, I think, barrier would have to be language, because it's hard sometimes to, like we have a young lady by the name of Nadine. Who sometimes when I want food from different places she actually cooks it for us. She's from Sudan.

[00:38:38]

Townsend: Tanzania. And so, she cooks it for us. Her mom is the lady who actually designs and makes my Dashiki chef coats, but I've never had a conversation with her mom because she doesn't speak English and so, Nadine is our connection. I think that has a lot to do with some of the barriers in the neighborhood. My hope through Art Up is that we can begin to bridge, close the gap on some of those barriers and begin to actually learn about each other and I think food is a great source to allow that to happen. I think food is an amazing tool to bring people together. If we think, if we look back over our lives, everything that happens to us, in some capacity, food is involved. Whether it's happy, sad, celebratory... food's there. I think food has the ability to take us to places we never physically will be able to go but we can experience that through taste and through that journey. And so I'm hoping through Art Up, we're able to do those things and close that gap a little more.

[00:39:54]

Delorme: And in sponsoring these cultural dinners, how do you manage that with your own culinary background and looking through, say, different countries?

[00:40:04]

Townsend: Well, you know, I find learning things to be very exciting. And when I don't know something, I like challenges. And so it pushes me to, you know, discover more about food and other people and it excites me. What I like most about that is I get to take something from this country or this ethnicity and combine it with the skills set that I have based off of my background and create this... You know, people always ask you as a chef, "What's your niche? What's your favorite dish to cook?" I don't have a favorite dish to cook! *(laughs)* I just love cooking. I think what my skills set is and what I'm good at is building flavor. And I think that I'm able to do that through my experiences with different cuisines and learning about different places. And so, that's what I've tried to do. I'd have to say if I had a niche, I would like to call it "sophisticated comfort food." *(laughs)*. So, that's what it would be.

[00:41:15]

Delorme: So what would someone find, perhaps on your menu that's never been to the village?

[00:41:20]

Townsend: Here, recently, because it's so hot, we've been served watermelon gazpacho that's pretty tasty, so they say. We have a chicken shawarma on our menu, we have a gyro, we have a harvard, which is sautéed mushrooms and roasted red bell peppers and caramelized onions with a pesto sauce.

[00:41:49]

Barker: I like your quiche. That's what's special.

[00:41:51]

Townsend: Oh, they say the quiche is really good. So different things like that. On any given day, we've had pineapple jerk chicken as a special. We've had tandoori chicken as a special with some Israeli couscous.

[00:42:06]

Barker: Whatever Eli's feelin' that day is what we have as our special (*laughs*).

[00:42:07]

Townsend: Whatever I'm feeling! So it's really, you know, what I do sometimes is I sit at home and I look up recipes or I taste a spice somewhere and I go in depth about it and what I can use with and what I can't. And so it's pretty much how it works. Not much cooking gets done at my house (*laughs*).

[00:42:33]

Delorme: So, moving forward, what do you see for the organization in the future and any plans?

[00:42:38]

Barker: Yeah, I think that, well, we are about to renovate, which is great. But our upstairs space is going to be a really great multipurpose space, so hopefully that's going to increase our catering but also our capability to do performance art type work. Because we do a lot of facilitating other groups or allowing other groups to use our space but I would really, really like for us to generate our own material. Accessible art and art that creates dialogue in the community and represents our community. So, I'm really excited about starting this storytelling project but also I would like us to be... Personally, I really wanna look into some funding to help us sustain people continuing to use our space without being charged. So we're getting a food truck so that's going to be a whole new thing for us! (*laughs*)

[00:43:34]

Delerme: What's your plan with the food truck?

[00:43:36]

Townsend: Well, that was I think that was my brainchild, which some days I sit at home because Leslie bought me a book, *Food Trucks for Dummies*, and I've been reading it. And so some days I sit at home and think, "What did I get myself into?"

[00:43:47]

Barker: It was your idea!

[00:43:48]

Townsend: I said it was my brainchild!

[00:43:50]

Barker: Yeah!

[00:43:51]

Townsend: And so what my concern was with renovations that we wouldn't have a food source for people who couldn't feed themselves and it would be a shame that we couldn't maximize still having some kind of income coming in, so that we can, you know, continue doing the things that we do. And so, you know, a part of my own selfish dream was to have my own food truck and then I thought, "*Hey, wouldn't it be nice to have a non-profit food truck?*" I mean, who wouldn't want to spend their money there? Your money that your spending is helping feed someone who can't feed themselves. So that's kind of how it was birthed. And the idea though is, so that we can definitely become more sustainable. But, in the future I hope that we are able to have it as some kind of tool with our neighborhood food entrepreneurs, that they can access the truck if they need a place to prep or if they want to be a part of some type of event in the neighborhood and we're not using it, they can definitely, for a small fee, use the truck and it still creates some type of enterprise for them as individuals. And so, you know, going in, after the renovations, I guess I'm essentially in charge of three food entities, which is a little

daunting! But, you know, I don't think your given visions that you can't fulfill. And so, I'm looking forward to definitely increasing our catering. The hope with all these different avenues is that, number one, more people learn about Caritas and what we are doing. Number two, the hope is that we'll be able to create more jobs for people because essentially if all three entities are functioning at their capacity that means more of our neighborhood people will be able to be employed, which brings more money into our neighborhood as well as provides people with what they're lacking, so that's my hope. I had a dream. I know this is really... I had a dream that we opened some type of Caritas School but we won't go there (*laughs*)! You know, I just want to be a catalyst and a tool for positive growth in my neighborhood. And you know, there are definitely some challenging days but there are some days where the stars align and the kids say "Yes, Sir" and call me Mr. Eli and the food truck is on time and no one has a gripe or a complaint. There are days like that that make everything worthwhile.

[00:46:35]

Delerme: Can you speak a little bit more about those food entrepreneurs that you're serving? What type of things are they selling, what types of enterprises are they involved in?

[00:46:45]

Townsend: Oh, well a lot of the things they're trying to sell, I probably can't pronounce without reading! (*laughs*) But there's usually like, are they Sambusas?

[00:46:54]

Barker: Sambusas.

[00:46:55]

Townsend: Sambusas, which is this fried thing with a lot of good stuff on the inside.

[00:47:02]

Barker: Spices and vegetables and there's meat ones too.

[00:47:05]

Townsend: There's chicken shawarmas that are sold. There's dumplings that are sold. There's soups and stews and hummus and some of the best falafel you've probably ever eaten.

[00:47:19]

Barker: Ipsy's falafel is the best in the world.

[00:47:21]

Townsend: Oh yeah. Ipsy's is delicious. And its just, you know, all an array of different types of food from different places.

[00:47:30]

Delorme: And where are they selling these foods?

[00:47:33]

Barker: So that's the thing. It's a project called the Freshlow Project and it started through the Binghampton Development Corporation – actually, they would be really great to talk to you and I can put you in contact with them. We have a meeting with them next week but the Binghampton Development Corporation and the Little Bird Innovation helped these people try to get their stuff off the ground. So, they've had festivals, they do catering and that's what they're kind of working on like, further, is gonna be a market? Is it gonna be a food truck? So, it's sort of really early in the works but there's a lot of people in the neighborhood that are trying to do that.

[00:48:12]

Delorme: Are there any questions that I haven't asked with things that you'd like to speak to either going back to your history that brought you to this path of service or the arts?

[00:48:26]

Townsend: I wasn't headed in this direction at all! (*laughs*) I had just finished going to school in Little Rock, Arkansas for a hospitality and tourism degree and I was actually on my way, which, I thought was to Nashville, Tennessee to take a job. It was a Friday afternoon and a mutual friend, Onie Johns, the founder, and myself, she sends me a text

and she says “Hey, you think you wanna work for a non-profit?” and I was like “Eh, I don’t know.” And she was like, “I know it doesn’t sound like money but go ahead and look at the website, tell me what you think, and get back to me.” So, I looked at the website and I was like, “Oh this is really easy food.” And I started reading about what they do and you know, my first question was, “How do they distinguish between who pays and who doesn’t pay?” That was my first question in my mind. And so, I told her I could be interested and then I got a call about nine pm that night. It was from Onie. The village closes at eight and so she had just made it home. And so she started telling me about Caritas and herself and that turned into about a two or three hour conversation and in that conversation, she convinced me, somehow, to come down from Little Rock and interview with her on that same Sunday.

[00:49:40]

Barker: *(laughs)* Of course she did.

[00:49:41]

Townsend: *(laughs)* She has a lot of powers! And so, I came down that Sunday and I met with Oni and it was just like, you know how you just watch movies and all the right things happen at the right time? That’s what happened in the interview. There were people walking down the street from the neighborhood and they stopped and they spoke and we had a conversation and then that lasted for about maybe four hours, the interview.

And I was just fascinated with her story. I could feel the energy of Caritas. And ironically, the friend that connected us, she was telling me about a project she was in the works of working on which actually has a physical being now which is in Soulsville and its with one family and Tom Shadiak. And so, she was telling me about that project and how she could see me working there and I was telling her that I was looking for something a little more that connected passion and purpose together and so this is why she called me about that. Needless to say, I was leaving the Janet Jackson concert, and Onie called, and she extended an offer and I accepted it. And so, that's how I ended up here. But I really think that it was destined. It was a part of my journey. I like the person that I've discovered even more being at Caritas and the things that I've learned. Because we all think we're nice people in theory like, "Oh, I'm nice." You know, I realized working there that I wasn't so nice and that I could be an asshole at times without even thinking about it. And again, it really taught me how to meet people where they are with the hope that they can leave with something and leave better than when they came. And so, I like the person that I get to be every day.

[00:51:38]

Delorme: Is there anything more you'd like to add that I didn't ask about?

[00:51:39]

Barker: Hmm. There's a billion things. I don't even know.

[00:51:48]

Townsend: I mean, you moved into the neighborhood two years before you even got the offer. *(laughs)*

[00:51:49]

Barker: Yeah, my journey was much slower than his. Onie actually, nobody's ever been ED [executive director] except for her. She was the founder, she was executive director, and she was ready to retire. And she actually didn't get a salary, she just did it. She just started it, she did it. And so at least two years before I ever ended up with the job, she was like, "I think maybe you should consider taking my place when I retire." I was running the after school program and I was just like "What?!" *(laughs)* And she said, "Just pray about it. But I can pray harder than you." And I was like, "Oh, ok. Yeah, I know. I know." So, she goes "Well, would you move into the neighborhood?" And I was like "Yeah, I'll move into the neighborhood." My lease was almost up and I was driving by this house, and saw it, and was not looking to buy a house, just not at all, and I was like "Would you rent it?" They were like, "No, it's really for sale." I was like, well, I'm gonna look at it anyway. Fell in love with it, moved into the house. Two years later, end up at the Village. It could have gone a million directions. The board had not interviewed anybody. It was really just Onie saying, "I think you should think about this," and... here we are. *(laughs)*

[00:53:12]

Townsend: So, I guess we started at about the same time.

[00:53:14]

Barker: Started at the same time.

[00:53:17]

Townsend: Yeah, cause when they sprung it on me, I maybe was there four or five months –

[00:53:20]

Barker: That she was leavin’?

[00:53:21]

Townsend: And they were just like, “She’s retiring.” And I’m like “what?! What have I gotten myself into?” And I was nervous about who was getting hired. I didn’t meet one of the candidates outside of Leslie, but I was in the space where she was and I just didn’t like her energy. And so, I was nervous because this is a job, it’s very important that we have an energy and that we share the same outlook on the vision for the place because if we don’t, we won’t be able to get anything done. So that was my biggest fear. You know, I had already put in my mind. From the beginning, I had made a pledge that I would be here a minimum of three years and a maximum of five. But it looks like I may exceed five. But, when I found out we were getting a new executive director, I said,

“Well, if I don’t like her, I’m moving in a year.” *(laughs)* And so, I found out it was Leslie and it’s funny how I think the universe helps you build relationships with people without even knowing the purpose. Because, Leslie had the opportunity, excuse me, to come, I did an art exhibit on the history of soul food this past February and Leslie was able to come and be a part of the actual tasting and the pictures for it. And so, we began to develop a relationship then. And she’d come by the Village and one of my, I think it was the Grilled Chicken Berry Salad, it was her favorite thing. And so, we’d have conversations about that and she’d order food for the afterschool theatre program and come pick it up. And then one day I was like, “You’re in theatre, right?” And she was like “Yeah.” I was like, “I need some help with a costume idea.”

[00:55:09]

Barker: *(laughs)* Your Halloween costume! That’s right!

[00:55:10]

Townsend: And so, and that happened and I showed it to her and it just happened. We began to develop a relationship before I even knew she was going to be my boss! And when I found out it was her, I was very happy! *(laughs)*

[00:55:25]

Barker: I’m glad you were happy! *(laughs)*

[00:55:28]

Delerme: Perfect. Well, that's all of my questions for you. Thank you so much!

[00:55:31]

Barker: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:55:32]

Delerme: I really appreciate it.

[00:55:39]

END OF INTERVIEW