

**ANGIE BELLINGER**  
**Workmen's Cafe, Charleston, South Carolina**

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**Marion Square, Charleston, South Carolina**

**Interviewers: Kate Medley, Sara Wood**

**Transcription: Shelley Chance**

**Length: Fifty-five minutes**

**Project: Charleston Food + Wine Oral History Bus**

[00:00:01]

**Sara Wood:** We’re good, it’s all good. Okay, Angie will you tell me a little bit about—this is just to get a level on your voice. Tell me about—can you talk about some of the people who come into the restaurant like are they regulars, people that you’ve seen over the years that come in?

[00:00:31]

**Angie Bellinger:** I have quite a few regulars that come in. I have—I would say there are two customers that come to mind immediately that I see at least three times a week. And I can almost guess the time they’re coming because one customer, he comes in about an hour before I close because he works at night. And another customer, she comes in about an hour before—an hour after I open because she works at night. And then she has to put her kids on the bus. So she usually comes in you know as soon as I open, she comes in ready for a meal.

[00:01:16]

**SW:** Does she have—does she get the same thing or does she mix it up a little bit?

[00:01:19]

**AB:** She sometimes mixes it up, but she loves pork chops and she loves fried chicken. So those are the two meats that of course she’s going to get. So if I don’t—if I run out of meat—pork chops on the bar, and I see her car pulling in, by the time she gets in and settles down and I put her food on the plate then her pork chop is already done. So I have a lot of—the majority of my customers though are blue-collar workers, you know. There was a time I had a lot of UPS [United Parcel Service] drivers coming in for lunch but they were all transferred to different areas. So now I have a lot of garbage collectors, utility company guys coming in for lunch.

[00:02:06]

**SW:** Do they live and work around James Island?

[00:02:08]

**AB:** They work around—the workers that do come in, they come in when they’re working in that area. So yeah, the majority of them are blue-collar workers. I have a few white-collar workers, but when they come in, they usually come in and take their lunch and leave, yeah, yeah.

[00:02:29]

**Kate Medley:** I might dial this one back [*referring to the camera set up*].

**SW:** The exposure?

**KM:** No, this one.

[*Jeff Mosier walks in to adjust temperature on the bus. “Oh that looks beautiful,” he says. Off-mic conversation about the camera set up.*]

[00:03:31]

**SW:** So Angie, just a couple things to keep in mind because there’s lights and cameras and all this motion happening, I’m going to be right here and so it’s good to just talk to me, like if you just give me your answers here. And try not to look at the camera, in the camera, and sometimes Kate will ask you questions but still answer to me. Does that sound all right?

[00:03:56]

**AB:** Sounds good.

[00:03:59]

**KM:** Okay, I’m going to click this right in front of your face. Excuse me [*Clap*].

**SW:** It’s official.

**AB:** It’s official.

[00:04:12]

**SW:** So Angie I just wanted to start off by asking you if you would please just say hello, introduce yourself, tell me who you and what you do?

[00:04:19]

**AB:** Okay, my name is Angie Bellinger. I own Workmen’s Café on James Island. Oh man, I’ve been doing it for ten, twelve years. I had the café closed for about three years in 2009. And we reopened you know, we closed because of the economy. But I never lost my passion. I don’t think I’ll ever lose my passion for what I do. So I’m the cook, I do everything: the dishwasher, the shopper, the server, the cashier, the greeter, the everything. You know so but I—I love what I do. And so at Workmen’s Café we prepare Charleston traditional dishes, lima beans, white rice, mac and cheese, fried chicken, fried pork chops, things like that, you know collard greens, yeah.

[00:05:11]

**SW:** Why did you decide to open the café?

[00:05:14]

**AB:** It was not my decision, it was not my choice. I never thought I’d be doing what I’m doing now. I love to cook but I never thought I’d be running a restaurant. It was never a dream of mine. I was living in Ohio – Middletown, Ohio in 1999, or I’m sorry—2000, when my mom called and said those three words only a mother can say to make you feel guilty, “I miss you.” And I’m like, “Oh man, I know what that means.”

[00:05:43]

**AB:** So anyway I think that was her way of getting me to say yes to come home and she said, “Oh, I’m opening a restaurant and I want you to come home and run it.” “I don’t know anything about running a restaurant.” “Yeah, well I’ll teach you. I’ll teach you.” I thought, “God, okay.” But it took me six months to move back to Charleston because I didn’t want to come.

[00:06:03]

**AB:** But I’m glad I did. When I came home the restaurant was in its—it hadn’t opened yet. It was in its—I don’t—I think it was a preemie then. There was so many things that—that folks had come in and done some work for my mom and did wrong. So I had to get those things corrected before inspections and all of that. So it took us nine months after I moved home to open.

[00:06:27]

**AB:** And she thrust me into the throes of it all and I—it was all trial and error and still today it’s trial and error, so—. But I’m here, Workmen’s Café is still there.

[00:06:40]

**SW:** Can you tell me about where you come from? Like you’re from Charleston?

[00:06:45]

**AB:** I’m from Charleston.

[00:06:46]

**SW:** Can you tell me about where you grew up and what it was like there?

[00:06:50]

**AB:** I grew up a few blocks from here [*referring to the bus which is parked on Marion Square in downtown Charleston*]. It was—some would consider that I—some would say that I

had a rough childhood. But I don’t think there was ever a dull moment. We grew up on Duncan Street which is the street directly in front of the YWCA on—on Cummings Street. And it was good. I—those days we had children in the street playing ball. A day didn’t go by where there was not a game being played in the middle of the street, either kickball, the guys played football, the girls played tag football, we played softball. We were roller skating. I mean, you name it you know we were doing it all in the middle of the street. And what was so fun about it is when a car came from either direction we all cleared the streets. But when the cars left we all knew where we were and the games resumed.

[00:07:51]

**AB:** So we lived on Duncan Street from—well I was born in 1961 and we left Duncan Street in 1970. And we moved uptown by the Citadel. And then in those years my brothers and sisters all got married and moved on and that just left me and my mom, so my mom moved to James Island to restore her childhood home. And she dragged me over there kicking and screaming. I didn’t want to go. My reasons were they didn’t have any parks over there, no sidewalks, people walked in the street—I’m sorry, in the road. But now you would have to drag me away. But it was something, back then it was—growing up on Duncan Street was—it was amazing.

[00:08:43]

**SW:** Can you tell me your mother’s name?

[00:08:46]

**AB:** Ruby Lee Bellinger, yes.

[00:08:49]

**SW:** And will you say it because my questions are going to be cut out of it, will you say my mother’s name is—?

[00:08:54]

**AB:** I’m sorry. My mom’s name was Ruby Lee Waley Bellinger and she got married to my dad when she was sixteen. Her mom died when she was fourteen. And so she went from her father’s house to—to married, you know being a wife and ultimately being a mother. And she eventually gave birth to nine children. The first one died, I think, two days after birth. And she raised eight of us by herself because my dad left home, you know, when my oldest brother was fourteen. So she raised eight of us alone and she—she was amazing. She was an amazing woman. She was—when she moved on James Island she founded the church called the Power House of Prayer, so she was the pastor and when she passed away in 2004 she was the overseer and my sister was the pastor.

[00:09:58]

**AB:** But—

[00:09:59]

**SW:** Angie, I’m going to pause you just one second. Sara we have—the memory card that’s full. So let’s cut the audio too. [*Off Mic Conversation – Clap*]

[00:10:23]

**AB:** Where do I begin?

[00:10:23]

**SW:** So you were talking about your mother raising nine kids.

[00:10:28]

**AB:** Okay, yeah in her lifetime my mom—in addition to raising her children she sold life insurance which was really her—her moneymaker. She sold life insurance. She owned—if I can remember correctly she owned a nightclub on what we call Mosquito Beach back in the ‘60s [1960s].

[00:10:52]

**SW:** What was it called do you know?

[00:10:52]

**AB:** I don’t know, I don’t remember what it was. I do recall many days when she would go—back then when she sold life insurance it was—they would go and collect the premiums or they would go to the people’s houses and collect the premiums. So I remember many days going to work with her and there was some days when we went to work she would in between policy holders, she would go to Mosquito Beach because she would either have to meet the bread truck, the beer truck, she would have to meet some vendor.

[00:11:26]

**AB:** And I remember in those days because her night club was at the end of the beach and the patio—it’s called a patio now, I don’t know what they called it then, but the patio hung over the Stono River. And so, excuse me, back then they didn’t have pane windows, what they had were boards that were on hinges and they would raise the board and they would hold it up with a stick. And I remember those days when she would be doing business with the vendors. I’d be sitting and waiting for her at one of the booths and I’d be looking out over the Stono River.

[00:12:02]

**AB:** She owned the nightclub, she owned a—a what is it called—community store I guess, corner store and she had—she owned two restaurants besides Workmen’s Café. All of this took place before, I would say, 1980 and so—but after all of that then she got into—she started doing just the insurance. And that was her sole income.

[00:12:34]

**AB:** But and then I’m sorry, I forgot about the last one. She owned a bible bookstore, yes, she owned the bookstore. She was running the bookstore when she decided to open the restaurant. And that’s how—the bookstore is here on one side and the restaurant was attached to the bookstore. And then she added to the bookstore, a thrift store. I thought, “Oh my god, what—what else can there be?” [*Laughs*] But she’s always been a—she always had a business mind, always. And when she threw me into Workmen’s Café I told her, I said, “I’m not like you. I’m not good with numbers. I’m barely good with people.” And you know and she’s like, “You’ll do fine, you know if you run into any problems I’m here. You know that’s what I’m here for.”

[00:13:23]

I learned a lot from her. I had to learn from her how to cook lima beans. I could never get it right and she said—she just got so frustrated. She said—

[00:13:37]

**Kate Medley:** Wait Angie, will you start that over again and just say I learned from my mother how to cook lima beans and then go on? I want to hear the story.

[00:13:44]

**AB:** Okay, I learned from my mother how to cook lima beans. And what happened, because I would give her lunch every day. And while she was in her bookstore she would call me

up. “What’s on the menu?” And I would tell her. “Okay, well I feel like some lima beans. Bring me some lima beans.”

[00:14:01]

So one day I took her some lima beans and she was just not happy. I said, “What’s wrong?” She said, “Oh girl! You’ve got to get these beans right. One day it’s too watery and one day it’s too thick and one day you just hit it on the head, what is your problem?” “I don’t know, you cook it!”

[00:14:20]

“All right, I’ll cook the beans for you until you get it right. I’m going to work with you on the beans.” And she cooked it for about two weeks and told me how to cook it. And finally the first time I got it right she said, “Oh my gosh.” I said, “What now?” She said, “I never thought I’d say this but your beans are better than mine.” I thought, “Are you serious?” “I don’t know what you did. Whatever you did continue doing it because it’s right. It’s just right.” “Beans”—she said, “beans is that one dish that you cannot mess up on. You cannot—you got to get it just right.” That soup has to be—and to the day—to this day I can cook it with my eyes closed. I don’t have to measure the water. I just put the beans in the meat you know after I wash it all and put it in there. I don’t season it until after it’s done. So I finally got it right.

[00:15:18]

**KM:** Will you tell us how you make lima beans?

[00:15:20]

**AB:** You make lima beans by—you gosh, I’m so used to just doing it you know. And not necessarily in this order but you have—of course you have to wash the beans. Some people like to let their beans soak overnight. For obvious reasons you know folks let it soak because beans

affects people in a certain way. Okay, so they let it soak and what it does—the water overnight it puffs it up. It makes it swell.

[00:15:57]

But I don’t do it. I just wash mine. I just dump it out of the bag and put it in the strainer, wash it real good under warm running water. [*Runs hands together as example.*] I put it in my hands and I scrub it like that to get all the dirt off of it. And then I wash my meat. I use smoke neck bones and fresh pigtails. Now some folks like ham hocks. I don’t like ham hocks because it has more fat than meat on it. And it—it’s mostly bone.

[00:16:20]

So I used smoke neck bones and pigtails. Occasionally I might do ham shanks which is rare—very hard to find. So, I wash that and—because I serve it in a sixteen ounce cup I will cut my meat so that when—if someone comes in to get a bowl of beans and rice or a bowl of beans, the meat can fit in a bowl.

[00:16:44]

And so I put it on—put it in a pot and then I put the water in. How much water? I don’t measure it. But say I cook two bags of beans, in my pot I go up to the level where the handle is in the—in the pot and that’s where I put my water. And I let it—I bring it to a boil and once it starts boiling then I turn it off and let it simmer for an hour and a half but I keep checking it because of course the water is going to—the beans is going to absorb the water. So I keep checking it and I’ll add water. And I know when I see that—that liquid getting—getting a certain amount of cloudiness in it then I know to quit adding water, because you don’t want it watery. You want it to be thick but not like a chowder.

[00:17:34]

So then I quit adding the water and then I let it simmer because if you let it constantly boil the beans will come out of the hull. And you will have mostly the skin or the hull off of the beans and the beans because it’s soft it would eventually turn to mush and it’ll make the—make your—your soup cloudy like you want it but it won’t have that—it won’t have the beans in it.

[00:17:59]

So I let it simmer because the—the action from the boiling it—it shakes the beans around and it makes the beans come out of the hull. So it took me a while and I’m learning that there is a science to cooking. There is a science. When I cook I don’t measure. I do like my mom taught me, I cook by a little bit of this and a pinch of that and that’s enough. And I’ve had people to ask me even you know I’ve tried to teach some of my nieces and their children how to cook and they all ask the same question. “How do you know when enough is enough?” I say “I don’t know but I can feel it.” And that’s what cooking is, you have to have a passion to be able to feel when it’s enough. When you sprinkle the salt in you have to be able to feel, “okay that’s enough.” And with the salt, sometimes I get carried away and I start—because my mind goes someplace else and I forget I’m sprinkling salt. And there are times when I’m sprinkling salt and I’m thinking I’m sprinkling sugar and I went, “Oh! No, that’s enough!”

[00:19:05]

So but anyway that’s my story about cooking beans. But I do love my job, yes.

[00:19:12]

**SW:** Can you talk about—you were telling me this when we were driving here—can you talk about how your mother learned to cook or why you know you were telling me the story about—?

[00:19:23]

**AB:** Yeah, my mom—when my mom was fourteen her mother died. She was the—she was the only girl out of seven children. And she got married when she was sixteen. I think she started having children somewhere within—I think she said—she started having children her first year of marriage. She didn’t know how to cook and my dad taught her how to cook, she said. He taught her how to make biscuits. He—and I thought “For a man to know how to make the biscuits that you made,” I always thought that was awesome because her biscuits are so phenomenal.

[00:20:04]

And so she said when we got older and we would always have this conversation about their marriage early on and how she met my dad and all this, she said, “Well yeah, I didn’t know how to cook when I met Herbert.” I said, “Really?” She said, “No, your dad taught me how to cook.” She said, “Girl I couldn’t even fry chicken.” So he taught her all of that and—and it had to be because back then it was a woman’s place to prepare the meal. And it was the man’s place to provide for the family to make sure she had the food needed to prepare so that when he comes home he’d have something prepared.

[00:20:42]

So she said when he found out he couldn’t cook he became frustrated. And he said, “I got to show you what to do because when I come in I got to have a meal,” so he taught her how to—she—I think he even taught her how to cook rice. And—and ever since then she’s been teaching you know she—she’s been cooking. And when I was fourteen I went to her and it was just the two of us living on James Island and I told her, I said, “I want to learn how to cook.” And she said, “You do?” I said, “Yeah.” She said, “Okay, when we get in the kitchen you’re going to

have to do everything I tell you.” “Yes, ma'am.” “No back talk.” “Yes, ma'am.” “And when I say clean you need to clean while you’re cooking because I don’t like a messy kitchen.” “Yes, ma'am.”

[00:21:35]

Well unfortunately for me I don’t like washing dishes. So now I don’t clean up until I’m done cooking, which if my mom was alive today that would drive her nuts. But she taught me how to cook. She taught me the tricks I would say of the kitchen. I learned a lot from—she taught me the basics of cooking and the tricks. A lot of what—some of what I know I learned from Home Ec [economics] but most of what I know I learned from trial and error. But she gave me the foundation and she took me in the kitchen and yeah, she made me do it all. “Now that you have that chicken in the frying pan, okay go wash the dishes. But don’t forget you have food on the stove. All right now that you’ve—okay you don’t have to check the beans right now because the beans—all the greens are good for an hour. Go wash your dishes. Make sure you wipe down”—and she always said that, “Make sure you keep your counter surface clean. Make sure your table is wiped down.” “Yes, ma'am.” And to this day I don’t like a dirty table.

[00:22:42]

When I’m at the table eating in my house if you know how water builds condensation from a glass? And if I move the glass and if my arm hits it, it drives me crazy. So I will get up and move everything off the table and wipe the table down and put my food back. I just—ugh, it came from her.

[00:23:02]

**SW:** Why did you want to learn to cook at fourteen? Why did you ask her that?

[00:23:06]

**AB:** Because I asked her to teach me when I was fourteen because before we moved to James Island I was not interested in cooking because I was too busy out there playing basketball, football, tennis, being on the park, back then when I was growing up on Elmwood Avenue by the Citadel. That’s when all of the playgrounds in this area had teams and each park competed against each other. So I played every—I played the softball and the kickball and basketball. So I was too busy doing that to have any interest in cooking. But when we moved on James Island there were no parks. There was nothing for me to do.

[00:23:49]

I said, “Well I got to do something,” and then of course I loved to eat then, as now, so I said, “Man I need to learn how to cook,” because—because it was the two of us and because she worked so much. I used to have to wait for her to come home to cook. I mean I could do the scrambled eggs or I could make a sandwich but to prepare a meal I couldn’t do that. I didn’t know how to fry chicken.

[00:24:14]

So it frustrated me that even though I had the afternoon—afterschool snack I still would have to wait until she came home to—to eat. So I told her, I asked her to teach me how to cook. And then when I learned so I made sure that when she came home she had a meal. And every time she came home if I got home from school first I’d rush in and prepare a meal and when I heard her car pulling up in the yard, I made sure the food was hot and she would come in, put her things down, and she would say [*smells the air to imitate her mother smelling the food in the air*], “I smell food. Did you cook?” “Yes, ma'am, I did.” “So what do we have?” And I’d tell her,

“We got fried chicken. We got some”—I didn’t know how to cook collard greens then so I’d open canned vegetables and cook rice or something like that.

[00:25:06]

And the one thing I liked about my mom was no matter what I gave her to eat if she didn’t like it I never knew. I never knew until I got older. And if I prepared something wrong then she would say, “You—you got a little carried away on—or this meat is a little overcooked or this is a little under-done,” but yeah. She was—for the most part she was never too critical. She was—her criticisms were constructive. So she was very gentle and kind in a way to help me to grow, yeah.

[00:25:42]

**SW:** Angie I have a few more questions for you. One of them is I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind—when we were in the car driving over here again you were telling me the story about how she was on the phone with her friend.

[00:25:56]

**AB:** Oh. [*Laughs*]

[00:25:57]

**SW:** Could you retell that story?

[00:25:59]

**AB:** I came in from work one night and my mom, my mom always said and I knew—I—sometimes I wondered if it bothered her that I never told her I loved her. I—and to this day in my fifties I have a hard time saying those three words.

[00:26:15]

But I often wondered you know if she knew that I really did love her. And I came in from work one night and she was on the phone as—as usual in the kitchen and I heard her say—. I was walking down the hall and I heard her say, “Well my daughter is here.” And she said, “Angie”—

[00:26:39]

**SW:** Could you start that—she said—?

[00:26:41]

**AB:** Start all over?

[00:26:44]

**SW:** Just when you walked in.

[00:26:47]

**AB:** I was walking down the hall and she was on the phone as usual. And she said, “My daughter is home.” And she said, “Angie.” And I don’t know who she was talking to but she said, “You know what? I could count on one hand the amount of times my daughter has said to me *I love you.*” And whoever she was talking to must have said, “Well how do you know?” She said, “Well I know because of what she—what she does for me. She said there’s nothing that she does for me that I have to ask her to do.”

[00:27:22]

“As a matter of fact there’s some things that she does—that she wants to do for me that I have to stop her and tell her no. Let me do it for myself because if you do everything for me then you’re going to make me feel like an invalid.” So you know and after she got off the phone I said, “Well you know I’m only doing what you taught me. You always taught me in the church.

You always taught us in the church, you always told me in the church, ‘love is an action word.’” And she said, “Anybody can say *I love you, I love you, I love you* all day, but unless you show them how much you love them then they—you’ll leave them guessing.” I said so I learned from that.

[00:28:00]

And I said, “You always knew I was—I was like that. You know I was never you know I never express my emotions except when I got angry or I was tired.” I said, “Other than that you know I never was affectionate.” She said, “Yeah, I know.” And I mean when we lived together my mother even though I ran the café, my mother didn’t have to do anything. The only thing she had to do for herself was her laundry. She had a car that—that—she had a Lincoln Continental and when she passed away the car—I think the car was three years old, two or three years old. And I made sure the maintenance was kept up on it and when it was time for whatever scheduled maintenance I took it to the dealer. I did the grocery shopping for her. I bought her clothes. And that was one of my favorite things to do for her, to go shopping for her because she would hand me her credit card and she would tell me what—what she wanted and she said, “Get me a couple of skirts, a couple of blazers, get me so forth and so on and oh and go ahead and spend \$150 on yourself,” and which is rare that I would spend that much money for me because I was trying to focus on her.

[00:29:15]

So I’d come back and, “Well what did you buy for you?” And I’d show her and she would say, “How much did you spend?” “I spent about \$100.” “That’s it?” “I—I can’t focus on me and you so my most important thing was to buy your clothes first.” But and then we—we came to an agreement when the café opened. She said, “Since you’re in the café, the café is

occupying so much of your time, then I’ll be responsible for keeping the kitchen and the house clean and—if you would just sweep the floor.” She said, “You don’t like washing dishes and I don’t like sweeping the floors.” I said, “Fine with me.”

[00:29:57]

I don’t have—what it took me five minutes to sweep the floor? No problem. But I tried my best to—to show her how much she meant to me. And after she passed away someone said to me, “You don’t know, you may not have known this and—and you may—I don’t know if your mom told you but your biggest expression of your love and devotion to your mama is when you moved back home.” And I said, “Wow.” They said, “You don’t know how much you really made her—her day when you told her you were coming home.” And I’ve heard so many people say all your mom kept talking—*my Angie is coming home, my Angie is coming home*. I said, “She was that excited?” They said, “Oh my gosh, yes!” And so they said, “You don’t know the—the provisions that she made to make sure you came home.” I said, “Yeah, I do because when I was moving she paid for me to ship all of my things home.” And she got so impatient she said, “Throw the rest of that stuff in the trash or give it away and get yourself home.” So I said, “Wow, I didn’t know—I did not know it impacted her like that until after she died, yeah.”

[00:31:08]

**SW:** Can you—you said you were in Ohio. Can you talk about why left—what you did in Ohio and—?

[00:31:15]

**AB:** I moved—I moved away from Charleston, as a matter of fact, I left Charleston in 1990—I’m sorry 1989. I went down to undergraduate school at the Atlanta College of Art. I got

my bachelor’s degree from there in photography. After that I came home, I came to Charleston and lived here for three months—hated Charleston.

[00:31:34]

**SW:** How come?

[00:31:36]

**AB:** I didn’t want to be in Charleston because I experienced a different lifestyle in Atlanta. It was—it to me being in Atlanta—I liked being around people that are doing things, not so much people that are making a lot of money and definitely not people that are in—you know have a lot of material possessions but I like people who are active in whatever they were doing and not sitting around and watching TV all day or whatever the case may be. So I did not want to be here and I worked for three months and then I applied for graduate school to Indiana State University.

[00:32:12]

And I was accepted there. I lived in Indiana, Terre Haute, Indiana for four years. And I grew wary of that and so I ended up moving to Charlotte because I did not want to come to Charleston. I applied for many jobs and the *Charlotte Observer* interviewed me, offered me a job—

[00:32:34]

**SW:** What kind of job?

[00:32:35]

**AB:** I forgot what they called it but I worked in their paste-up department if that’s what you call it, where the pages would come to our department and we would paste the ads. The pages would come with the articles already on it and the—the outline would be you know they

would tell us where the—where the ads would go. And it was our job to paste the ads and make sure they’re positioned correctly on the paper.

[00:33:01]

So I worked for the *Charlotte Observer* for about a year and I really did not like that job. And one of the reasons why I did not like it is because I found out that I was discriminated against and—

[00:33:17]

**SW:** How so?

[00:33:18]

**AB:** Well I was discriminated against by the job they hired me for. I wasn’t very skillful in it and I had very little skills in it, but they were willing to train me, so they said. And after two weeks of training the guy that was training me told the general manager that he doesn’t have the time to give me the amount of training that I needed. And so they—and the general manager said, “Well we don’t have the time nor the—the money, the funds to send her to school for training.” So that’s how I ended up in the paste-up department.

[00:33:53]

Well I found out about two months after I was in—I was moved that they gave another girl the position who had no experience as a graphic designer. And this—the guy that came to me in confidence he said, “I don’t want my name mentioned. Don’t tell them where you got this information from.” But they hired a white co-worker and they told her—she said, “I don’t know anything about graphic design.” And they told her, “Don’t worry about it, we’ll send you to school and we’ll pay for it, and if it takes us a year, if it takes you a year then no problem.”

[00:34:31]

So then with that information I went to the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Council] office and I filed a complaint. Within I think two weeks after I filed my complaint then I was called into the office of the general manager and they offered me—they made me two offers that I had no choice but to—the way they put it I had no choice but to accept one of the two. One offer was a permanent position guaranteeing forty hours a week but it would only last for a year. And after a year there was no guarantee that I would still be employed. The other one was a part-time position working thirty-six hours a week with no—no benefits and that job would end in six months and there would be no chance of re-hire.

[00:35:24]

So I accepted the twelve-month offer because I knew I wasn’t going to be there much longer anyway. So I would say about eight months after I accepted the offer then I—I quit. I put in my two weeks’ notice and that’s when I moved to Ohio. And when I moved to Ohio, oh man, I said, “This is where I want to spend the rest of my life,” because I loved Cincinnati. I really did. I just knew I was—when my mom called when I was living in Ohio to ask me to move home, I was in the process of buying a house. I was looking at—looking at buying a house. And she had even sent me the money to pay for an inspection of whatever house I found. But then that call came.

[00:36:11]

But I lived in Ohio for two years. I worked as a photographer for Life—Lifestyle or I can't remember the name of the company but it's a national company where they go in and they take pictures of newborns in the hospitals and then they go into the homes and take the one-month old picture and things like that. So I worked for them until I just got tired of you know—

well it wasn’t that, they fired me because a customer complained. Anyway and they investigated and found out that I was not guilty of the complaint. So I ended up leaving. And I went to work for the Chamber of Commerce in a small town. And I worked for them for six months—about six months and then I moved home, yeah.

[00:36:57]

**SW:** Angie can you tell me a little bit about the menu that you have at Workmen’s Café? I don’t want to forget to ask you about the menu. Tell me what you serve there.

[00:37:04]

**AB:** At Workmen’s Café we serve—everyday menu items include white rice, lima beans, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, fried pork chops, baked chicken, there’s some days I do meatloaf with gravy, made from scratch mashed potatoes, collard greens. There’s some days I do okra gumbo. I just created a new dish and it was by chance, by chance, and it was a hit. I just created chicken gumbo and I put it on the menu because I needed to fill a spot. I said, “Okay, well I’m just going to come up with this recipe.” And it sold the first day I made it, it sold like crazy.

[00:37:54]

And so I—because I was looking for something to do with my leftover chicken breast, and I said, “Okay, this will work fine.” And I do desserts. I’ll do peach cobbler some days. Some days I will do banana pudding. What else do we do? Carrot cake, sweet potato bread pudding, you know things like that and iced tea, fresh squeezed lemonade which is another big hit because a lot of customers come in and say, “You know all the lemonades I’ve had were from the machine.” And I told them, I said, “I always said to myself if I ever own a restaurant I will never serve anybody instant lemonade.” So I squeeze my lemons. Yes, I do. And I put in a little bit of

bottled lemon juice to give it that—that bitter—that sour taste, but it’s mostly fresh squeezed lemon juice, yeah.

[00:38:52]

**KM:** And for somebody who has never been to your restaurant how would you describe the style of food there?

[00:38:59]

**AB:** The style of food at Workmen’s Café is what I would call lowcountry fare, traditional. Some call it comfort, some call it home—a lot of people call it home-cooked food. A lot of folks—a lot, particularly—most of my customers are men. And my customer base is made up mostly ninety-eight percent white. I have—how can I rephrase that? Ninety-eight percent of my customers are white and which just shocks a lot of people when they hear that. I said, “Well when I realized that it was evolving in that direction it shocked me, too.” And I was asked, “Does it bother me?” I said, “Not at all.” I said, “It doesn’t matter. As long as whoever comes through that door appreciates the food and will pay for the food,” I said, “So I don’t have a problem with it,” so—. But most of my customers are men and they always say, Wow. This is what my grandmother cooked.” “Man you’re—you’re”—one guy said one day to one of his coworkers, he said, “Man you’ve got to try her okra gumbo. It tastes just like my mom’s, just—I mean it just tastes like—. You—if I didn’t know better I would have thought my mom was in here cooking that okra.”

[00:40:15]

So it’s mostly, you know, home-cooked foods. And so what I’m looking into doing now is, I’m keeping the tradition, what I will call traditional foods, the macaroni and cheese, the—the foods that we grew up eating in grandma’s kitchen. And then I’m adding my own touch to it by

adding pork tenderloin in a whiskey mushroom sauce. I’m doing also beef, beef chuck roast. I did one recently where—and I’m still experimenting on ways to use the beef other than beef stew, so recently I did a beef chuck roast. And I cut it up into three-inch strips, maybe that were a half-inch thick and I put wedges of—of zucchini and yellow squash in there with some chopped—chopped onions and sweet peppers. And that sold well, with a little bit of broth to the bottom.

[00:41:15]

So I’m—so I’m to add one of my other dishes I’m adding on the dessert line is the sweet potato bread pudding. And a lot of people say they’ve never heard of sweet potato bread pudding, so that’s my own creation. And then I’m doing—another is the banana pudding that I got from—the recipe I got from my pastor which includes bits of pineapples and has Cool Whip mixed in it and creamed cheese. And so a lot of you know—on one side I’m going to have the traditional dishes and on the other side I’m going to have my own flavor. And then in a couple of weeks I’ll be doing sandwiches grilled or fried, pork chop, chicken, we’re going to do shrimp po-boy and oyster po-boy and I created a shrimp patty, a shrimp burger. And the first time I made it and whenever I create a new dish I always get one of my family members to be my guinea pig. And so the first time I made it and my niece ate it, she bit into it and she said, “Are you sure this is shrimp? Is this fish?”

[00:42:25]

I said, “No, that was my reaction too when I first bit into it. It tasted just like a fish patty but it was 100 percent shrimp, grounded shrimp.”

[00:42:37]

**SW:** Can you talk—how are we doing on time?

[00:42:40]

**KM:** We’re a little over thirty [minutes].

[00:42:41]

**SW:** Okay, I wanted to ask you to talk about how—you know this is another car conversation that we had—you were telling me when we were driving in how the black owned restaurants are disappearing from Charleston or they have been and the—how it’s hard to find what we think of as lowcountry food. Do you want to start by maybe telling me what you think of when you think of lowcountry food and where it’s—what’s happened to it over the years?

[00:43:13]

**AB:** Well personally I think the—the traditional foods, the lowcountry foods that we all grew up on because Charleston is surrounded or I wouldn’t say surrounded but Charleston has a lot of farming or what used to be farming communities, where people lived off of the fat of the land, if you will. And so a lot of back in the ‘50s [1950s], ‘60s [1960s], and ‘70s [1970s] we had a lot of black-owned restaurants. And that’s what they were traditionally serving. Your lima beans, white rice, fried chicken, mac and cheese, cornbread on the side or a biscuit and back then I think they just—everything was all inclusive for one price. You got the drink, the dessert, the bread, the meat and the—the vegetable.

[00:43:59]

And from what I understand after reading in the local paper, the *Post and Courier* it seems like the black-owned restaurants are disappearing from downtown Charleston. And I did not know that in the past year or so that I think five or six of them has closed. And so when I meet customers, people that are coming in from out of town, they—as a matter of fact, I met a customer that said they traveled from I think Georgetown [South Carolina] to get to me and

Georgetown is about two hours away. And I—I honestly did not believe them. I said told them I said, “You’re kidding.” And the wife said, “No, really, we traveled here to get to you because this food is hard to find downtown. And we wanted to experience Charleston’s food. We wanted—because we’ve heard so much about Lowcountry cooking.”

[00:44:53]

I’ve had a couple—two best friends that flew in from New York that were staying in Mount Pleasant and they traveled from Mount Pleasant to James Island to try my food because they said it’s so hard to find. And I—getting back to the article, the *Post and Courier*, I think is—I think today is the second series, second part in the series, they’re doing a series on the disappearance of black-owned restaurants in the Charleston community downtown. And I have seen it change over the years. I mean when I was a kid growing up you had at least—in one block on King Street you had maybe just on King Street you had three restaurants at least. You know, and maybe two of them were black-owned but a lot of them are disappearing for whatever reason. And according to the article there are a lot of contributing factors that’s—that’s you know, that’s causing the black-owned restaurants to disappear.

[00:45:54]

So when I read that it just really made me think that I’ve got to work hard to get Workmen’s Café’s name out there to let them know that number one, not all the black-owned restaurants are gone, number two, not all of the restaurants that serve traditional foods or Lowcountry food are gone. I read an article where one lady said that when she—she said, “When I come through Charleston I want that food that somebody’s mother cooked in the kitchen.” She said, “I want that food that somebody didn’t take their traditional food or traditional dish and put their own flair on it. I want to be able to taste the true seasoning and true flavor of that food.”

[00:46:41]

So I said, “Okay, I got to work hard to get Workmen’s Café’s name out there to let them know here I am.” And which believe it or not, I counted it myself, Workmen’s Café is, excuse me, 6.3 miles from the heart of Charleston to James Island. And it’s about once you get on the connector it’s about a ten or fifteen minute drive. Well from that area, from King and Beaufain it’s 6.3 miles there, so from that area, that location to Workmen’s Café that’s about a fifteen minute drive.

[00:47:22]

**SW:** I want to make sure we’re not going to run out of—. Kate do you have any—? Angie, is there anything that you want to add that we didn’t talk about or something that we didn’t ask you but we should have?

[00:47:41]

**AB:** Not that I can think of. Well I know I—I don’t—I did not mention the location, the address. Workmen’s Café is located at 1837 North Grimball Road, on—on James Island. I’m exactly one-eighth of a mile from when you make a right-hand turn, I’m an eighth of a mile from Folly Road. And we are open every day Monday through—Monday through Thursday 11:00 to 4:00 and Friday 11:00 to 6:00. And Fridays I’m really trying hard to push my seafood menu. That’s another thing that I’ve added. I’m trying to push the seafood menu serving Lowcountry seafood and cook it—prepared the way my mom taught me so the—the crab patty recipe is her recipe. The cornbread recipe is her recipe.

[00:48:30]

The—the biscuit recipe is hers but what I did with her recipe, I added sweet potatoes and now sometimes I do mashed sweet potato—I’m sorry, sweet potato biscuits. But for the most

part a lot of what I’m doing is a lot of what she taught me, you know, how she prepared food in—in our home. And that’s—that was her idea. She said, “We want to give the folks food that they grew up on,” you know but—. And that’s what I’m working hard to—to maintain, trying not to add any special seasonings to the lima beans. And I’m thinking, “What else can you do to lima beans?” I mean I don’t want to do anything to mess it up anyway. But there—trying to push our food.

[00:49:20]

**KM:** Angie we’re almost out of time but I do have one question. For people who don’t know, when you say Lowcountry food what does that mean?

[00:49:28]

**AB:** For Lowcountry food in Charleston, in my opinion, it’s your food that’s—some people would consider it basic. They would consider it basic food. But it’s food that you can really taste the flavor of. It’s food that don’t have all that extra additives like from what I understand a good example is shrimp and grits. From what I understand, a lot of restaurants is serving shrimp and grits, barbecue shrimp and grits. They’re serving shrimp and grits with, I don’t know, and the red gravy or—or white wine gravy. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that. It’s working for them, that’s fine. But the true shrimp and grits as what we grew up on is the shrimp with the brown gravy and onions and maybe bell pepper because back then when I was coming up my mom took whatever she had in the kitchen, in the refrigerator, freezer, cupboard, whatever she had, she took it and she made a meal.

[00:50:36]

So my mom never used garlic powder and onion powder, Lawry’s Seasoning Salt. She never used soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce. And if today if she were to—if someone was to

put a plate of barbecue shrimp and grits in front of her she would—she wouldn’t eat it because she chewed me out one day when I brought in some biscuits from KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken]. And she told me, “Don’t you ever bring anybody’s biscuits in my house.” And she made me throw—throw them in the trash. She said, “Nothing comes in this kitchen that’s instant.”

[00:51:12]

So that’s how she taught me don’t be a lazy cook. Get in there and prepare your food the right way. So we didn’t grow up eating stone ground grits. I’m not saying anything is wrong with it, we grew up eating Jim Dandy and Quaker grits, but she taught me how to cook the grits the right way. So when I was serving breakfast a lot of my customers asked me, “How did you get your grits so smooth?” “I just—I cook it longer than the two and a half minutes that’s recommended.” “Did you put milk in it?” “No, just water.” “There was something else you did to it, it’s just so creamy.” “I didn’t do anything else to it. I just prepared the way my mom taught me.”

[00:51:58]

**AB:** So Lowcountry food in my opinion is the foods that my—my parents grew up with. My mom grew up feeding us, you know we didn’t have all that—. I mean it may have been available in the stores back then. She just never used it. My mom was strictly a salt and pepper, onions, and potatoes and carrots, and—and bell pepper cook. I mean, she would use Lipton onion soup mix but only when she was making shrimp and rice or oyster pirléau. And so that’s how I grew up. I mean and when my family and I get together for Thanksgiving, we do the morning after Thanksgiving, we do a family breakfast. And it was my mom’s tradition. That’s what she started. It was her thing. “I want my children here for—for breakfast.” So we all would

be—before the café was open, it would be fifteen, twenty people trying—in her kitchen eating breakfast, reaching over each other. The table could only seat maybe six people. So it would be so many people reaching over—“I’m sorry, just let me have a biscuit. I just want grits. Can you put some”—you know folks would be standing around in the kitchen eating and people would be standing on the porch eating. Sometimes some of them would take their plate out in the yard and just stand out in the yard and eat.

[00:53:24]

**AB:** But my mom prepared the breakfast. She made everybody else bring the orange juice, the milk, you know the sausage and things like that but she provided the shrimp and gravy and the grits and the biscuits, the cornbread, and the fish. So after she passed away all that fell on me, so when we get together for the morning after Thanksgiving, then I send out the menu via email and everybody chooses what they’re going to bring and they bring it to me. And I fry the fish. I do the shrimp and gravy. I do the grits. I do the biscuits. And then my brother makes the cornbread. But that’s—to me that’s what we consider Lowcountry food.

[00:54:08]

**SW:** I’m going to stop there, Angie.

[00:54:09]

**AB:** Okay.

[00:54:10]

**SW:** We have exactly one minute left on the tape.

[00:54:12]

**AB:** Okay.

[00:54:13]

**SW:** But thank you very much for—

[00:54:14]

**AB:** My pleasure, my pleasure.

[00:54:17]

**SW:** I’ve been really looking forward to this because I wanted to interview when I was here last September.

[00:54:22]

**AB:** Oh my pleasure. Yeah, me, too, cool.

[00:54:26]

**SW:** Shut it all down now.

[00:54:30]

*[End Angie Bellinger Interview]*