



Caroline Coke
Island Grocery & Grill
Charlotte, North Carolina

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[*START INTERVIEW*]

Keia Mastrianni: Today is May (sic) [*the date is April*] 24th, 2017. This is Keia Mastrianni recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project for the Charlotte Central Avenue Corridor. I am interviewing Caroline Coke today from Island Grocery & Grill, and we will begin our interview. It is 12:42 in the afternoon.

All right. Caroline, can you just tell me your first and last name and what you do in Charlotte?

[00:00:38]

Caroline Coke: Well, I'm Caroline Coke, co-owner of the Island Grocery & Grill in Charlotte, North Carolina, and we just basically offer food from the Caribbean, and what we do is just try to bring the island to Charlotte, and so we're always saying it's a home away from home, where people come in and they can find food that they grew up with, you know, and sometime we say "comfort food." And they can be in a place where we play music, we have music going on, so the shopping experience can be felt, like bringing you back to the island. It's basically we do sell—like I said before, it's a grocery and grill, so it's a takeout also, and what we do offer to our customers is the ingredients of what we put into our meals.

[00:01:48]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And how long has the Island Grocery & Grill been open?

[00:01:52]

Caroline Coke: We've been open for ten years and counting.

[00:01:55]

Keia Mastrianni: Ten years?

[00:01:56]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[00:01:57]

Keia Mastrianni: And how long have you been in the Charlotte area?

[00:01:59]

Caroline Coke: I've been in Charlotte for about nineteen years now.

[00:02:03]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And did you move from Jamaica or—

[00:02:06]

Caroline Coke: No, I moved from Jamaica to New Jersey and spent my teenage years in New Jersey, college, and then worked a little as a chemist, and then we decided to relocate to Charlotte, North Carolina.

[00:02:26]

Keia Mastrianni: What brought you to Charlotte?

[00:02:29]

Caroline Coke: My husband [Williford Coke] said it was—we saw the clay. [*Laughs*]
He came for work and then he was very excited. It was two and a half hours by plane to
Jamaica, so it was closer. The weather was a little milder than what we're used to
growing up in New Jersey, so that brought us here.

[00:02:52]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:02:53]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[00:02:54]

Keia Mastrianni: And your husband is from Jamaica as well?

[00:02:56]

Caroline Coke: Yes, he's from Jamaica, and we met in college.

[00:03:00]

Keia Mastrianni: In New Jersey?

[00:03:01]

Caroline Coke: In New Jersey. [*Laughs*]

[00:03:04]

Keia Mastrianni: That's awesome.

[00:03:05]

Caroline Coke: Yeah, yeah.

[00:03:06]

Keia Mastrianni: Tell me about—well, let's talk about the shop first. Let's talk about what was the impetus for you wanting to, you know, go from a chemist to wanting to open a grocery and grill.

[00:03:21]

Caroline Coke: Well, the biggest influence was my sister Velma. She loves to cook, and when I moved here, she came to visit and she decided to relocate also. And at the time, I was staying home with the children. So we decided we could not get the food that we're used to and there was no place that we could buy, you know, where there was a big concentration of the product that we're used to, and so we decided to open up a grocery and also the concept of a grocery and a restaurant, a takeout, so where people can come in, find ingredients, and also enjoy the meal.

[00:04:17]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And so you co-own it with your sister Velma?

[00:04:20]

Caroline Coke: Well, I co-own it with my husband, and she's also a partner in the business.

[00:04:26]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And who does the cooking there now?

[00:04:28]

Caroline Coke: My sister Velma does the cooking, and also my brother-in-law does the cooking, so we have two chefs cooking for us.

[00:04:38]

Keia Mastrianni: So it's a family affair. [Laughs]

[00:04:40]

Caroline Coke: It's a family affair, yeah, and also, you know, when it is a family affair, everybody has a vested interest in the business, and so that shows in how our customer service and how we present the business to the customer, and the experience that they get when they come in.

[00:05:05]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And so the cooking, I mean, talk to me about some of the food that you serve there.

[00:05:12]

Caroline Coke: Some of the foods we serve is ackee and codfish, which is ackee is our national fruit of Jamaica, and codfish, so we pair that. It's basically a breakfast food, but we have moved it into anytime. So we do the ackee and the codfish, which is a salted cod, and that is prepared. And we also serve rice and beans, or as we say in America rice and beans, but in Jamaica or the Caribbean, we'd say rice and peas. And we do serve that with also we do a roti, which is basically a Trinidadian thing. It's also done in Jamaica, but mainly Trinidad is known for roti, and so we do that to offer it to our other Caribbean nations that we also serve.

And we also do different kind of soups. One of it is pepper pot. We also do fried sweet plantains, which is a big staple of the Caribbean. And we also do, like I said, rice and beans before, and jerk chicken, famous jerk chicken, which is Jamaica is known for jerk chicken. And so we do the jerk, which is basically a spicy, you know, spicy. We do a lot of jerk spice and a rub, and that is prepared overnight so the meat could marinate, and so we do that. And normally in Jamaica it's done on an open fire, and we using the pimento wood. And so we do a smokehouse and we use pimento wood also, just to try to bring that flavor.

[00:07:14]

Keia Mastrianni: You have a smokehouse here?

[00:07:15]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes.

[00:07:16]

Keia Mastrianni: Oh, in the back of [*inaudible*]?

[00:07:18]

Caroline Coke: In the back, in the kitchen. So that allows us to give that smoky flavor, and so we use pimento wood also.

[00:07:25]

Keia Mastrianni: Oh, that's awesome.

[00:07:25]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yeah.

[00:07:27]

Keia Mastrianni: So what is pimento wood [*inaudible*]?

[00:07:28]

Caroline Coke: Well, pimento is a spice that is used, and it's basically used in a lot of our dishes, soups, and it's call allspice, and it's a little round dark balls, and that gives food a different kind of flavor. So just like you have the mesquite wood,that pimento gives the food a distinct flavor, and that's what you're looking for in jerk.

[00:07:54]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And I saw you have like meat pies and—

[00:07:57]

Caroline Coke: And so we also have beef patties. A lot of people refer to them as the Jamaican beef patties. And so they come in different flavors. We have beef, we have curry chicken, we have jerk chicken, we have for vegetarian. We also are mindful that not everybody eat meat, so we have a vegetable one and we also have a spinach with cheese, and we also have soy. And those are some of the quick bites that we offer. We do have them in cocktail forms, and that is usually used for our catering jobs and for parties. You know, if a person is having a party, and most likely they're Caribbean, they will draw for for, hey, use a cocktail patty as hors d'oeuvres. They're used as hors d'oeuvres also.

[00:08:51]

Keia Mastrianni: And are y'all making that in the shop?

[00:08:53]

Caroline Coke: Yes, that is baked daily, three, four times a day.

[00:09:01]

Keia Mastrianni: Can you say that one more time?

[00:09:02]

Caroline Coke: The patties we do daily, you know, three, four, five times a day. We bake that throughout the day. So each customer comes in throughout the day, we have patties going, because that is a staple. And we also pair our patties with a buttery soft bread that we refer to as the coco bread, and that is making—so that will cause, you know, have like a sandwich effect, because we put the patty with it, between two bread, and it's a moist, buttery bread. And so you often hear somebody come into the store and they'll ask for a patty and coco bread, and that's what that is, more like a sandwich, a quick bite.

[00:09:54]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, yeah. And that sounds like a lot of food to be cranking out with just two people in that tiny kitchen.

[00:10:01]

Caroline Coke: Yes, we do. Well, we also have two other assistants that does prep work, so they do prepare for the chef when they come in in the mornings to get things done, because we do offer—our menu is quite extensive, because we also do curry chicken, we have curry goat, we also have oxtails, and we have brown stew, and we also do a veggie plate, a veggie stew. So we do quite an array, and, like I said before, roti. Then we do our soups Fridays and Saturday, because traditionally in Caribbean

household, soup is what you would eat on a Saturday. So we do different kind of soups those two days.

[00:10:49]

Keia Mastrianni: And you talked about a brown stew. What's that?

[00:10:51]

Caroline Coke: We have a brown stew chicken, and we also have a brown stew snapper or brown stew kingfish, and we also do an Escovitch snapper or an Escovitch kingfish, and Escovitch came from more of a Spanish influence in Jamaica, and what that is is basically onions and hot peppers, scotch bonnet pepper that we use, and that's sautéed in vinegar and simmered. The fish is allowed to simmer in that, yes.

[00:11:26]

Keia Mastrianni: Sounds delicious.

[00:11:27]

Caroline Coke: That's very tasty, very tasty. So we have that offering for people who do not eat meat, so we try to reach across and try to do a broad variety of food that everybody can try and enjoy.

[00:11:45]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:11:46]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:11:47]

Keia Mastrianni: And what about the soups on the weekend? What kind of soups are you serving?

[00:11:50]

Caroline Coke: We do a pepper pot soup, and that influence is really from Trinidad or Guyana, and so that's basically with a lot of vegetables in it, and it's really spicy, and then you have your potatoes and your yams in it. So our soup is very what I would say filling. It's more like a meal. It's not like a broth, because we do put in dumplings, which it's made from flour or cornmeal, and we do potatoes, a traditional and sweet potatoes, and that is not like the sweet potatoes from America. It's different. It's a Caribbean potato that we use.

[00:12:37]

Keia Mastrianni: Is that a white potato [*inaudible*]?

[00:12:38]

Caroline Coke: It's white, it's white, rather than that orange-yellow color.

[00:12:42]

Keia Mastrianni: But still sweet and more starchy?

[00:12:45]

Caroline Coke: Yes, sweet and also starchy, yes. And we do yams. And you might hear the name “yam” around, because Usain Bolt, who was one of our sprinter from Jamaica, refer, when they asked him what made him so fast, and he said, “The yam, yellow yam.” And so that is traditionally put in our soups or when somebody will come into the store and say, “Do you have any ground provisions?” And that is referred to as a ground, because that is underground when it’s grown. So the yam would be one of our starchy carbohydrate.

[00:13:26]

Keia Mastrianni: So ground provisions is kind of what they refer to as the tubers or roots?

[00:13:30]

Caroline Coke: The tubers or the root.

[Recorder turned off]

[00:13:35]

Keia Mastrianni: We’re back on. All right. So and then tell me about the things that you sell in the store, just a wide array of—

[00:13:45]

Caroline Coke: Okay. Some of the things we do, starting from our juices, we make a drink that traditionally is drank around Christmastime, and that is sorrel, which sometime is referred to as hibiscus leaves, but what is sorrel is it's red and it's dried, or we use it sometimes as you obtain it from the tree, or the plant, I should say, rather.

[00:14:19]

Keia Mastrianni: So it is hibiscus.

[00:14:19]

Caroline Coke: It's not hibiscus, but some people refer to it as the hibiscus leaf, or interchangeably use it, but it's sorrel, and it's high in vitamin C and it's often referred to now as a good drink to use if you having health issues. Cancer, it's used for cancer patients also. So we usually do that around Christmastime, but now it's we do it more often, or it's become now any time of the year, but mostly you'll see that around Christmastime. And we prepare that with ginger. We pair it with ginger. So that would be a traditional drink you'd find in a Caribbean household during Christmastime.

And also we do what's called a fruitcake, and what that is, is different fruits like prunes, cherries, mixed peels. Those are soaked, and raisin, that's soaked in wine and rum for like a year, and then we bake. We make a cake out of that, and that's traditionally a Christmas cake, we'll call that, or you'll find that cake during traditional

weddings of the Caribbean. That would also be served. So we do provide that, the fruitcake. We have the sorrel.

And we also have different sodas from the Caribbean, like DNG was one of our sodas, company that made all our sodas. So instead of a Coke or a Pepsi, we would have a pineapple soda or cream soda or ginger beer and also Ting, which is a grapefruit soda. We also have a soda which is one of my favorite, we call it Cola Champagne, which is not champagne, but it's just a carbonated beverage. And so those are some of the drinks. And we also have Irish moss, which is a seaweed, so the seaweed that we make into a drink with different ingredients that we use, and traditionally that is given because the seaweed has a lot of nutrients. So basically those are some of the drinks that we do. Also fresh carrot juice we do in-house. So we do some healthy drinks, along with our sodas.

And then we also have different items. We have traditional rubs that you'd use for pain, different linaments that we use that is herbs. We do a lot of herbs, dry herbs, that is used for different ailments. So if a person from the Caribbean would come in and—because traditionally we use a lot of home remedies and a lot of herbs for medicinal purposes. So we have soursop leaves, which is a big thing now; we have the coconut water; we have sarsaparilla, that is used for different ailments; and we have the thyme, thyme leaves, which we use in all of our dishes that we prepare. So we have some of those.

And produce, like we said. We have the yams, yautia, which we call it, it's yautia in Spanish, but it's called the cocoa. That's what we refer to it. We have breadfruit, which is a traditional breakfast thing that we eat. We also have different stuff like our cookies, different cookies. We have the Shirley biscuit that came from Barbados. That

was made in Barbados. So we do have banana chips. So instead of the potato chips, our chips would be banana chips or plantain chips. That's our snack food.

And we do our traditional bread, which is hard dough bread, like it's referred to as harder dough. It's not a soft bread. And we do what we call bun. But what bun is, is it's a sweet bread. You might refer to it in America as sweet bread, but it's bread sweet with raisins, and we do eat that during Eastertime, and that is eaten with cheese, our traditional mild cheddar cheese. And that is eaten during the Easter season because during Good Friday traditionally there's no cooking going on in the household. So what we would eat all day would be bun and cheese, and then in the afternoon for dinner, we'd have fish. So there'd be no cooking. Thursday night, the night before Good Friday, all the cooking would take place, and we knew all that time we'd be eating bun and cheese. So that's a tradition, and we still keep it going even here. So you find around this time of the year that we are selling a lot of bun and cheese, and so that is like a big thing during the Easter time.

We also carry ackee, like I referred to before, and we do some soap. Soap, those are the things that we normal—laundry soap, which is a blue soap. It's a hard square soap that we use for white clothes. So we do carry that, and we do carry different soaps, like even Dettol. Dettol is an antiseptic and it came from England. And so a lot of the stuff that we normally would find in the Caribbean, we try to carry those products. So people still get—even though they are away from their country of birth, they still can have the same tradition now passed down to their children, or their children can still experience what they experience as a child growing up.

[00:20:24]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, and I have so many questions about, you know, growing up. Tell me about the town you grew up in in Jamaica.

[00:20:34]

Caroline Coke: Okay. Well, I'm from St. James, the parish of St. James, and a little town. Well, Montego Bay, you know, which is a big tourist destination, that's where I grew up in. And so it was close-knit, everybody knew everybody, and families. You were known by your family name. So it would be the Cokes. Okay. So there goes one of the Cokes. So people recognize you by your family. So growing up, it was very important that when you stepped out of the house, you were not only representing yourself, but you were representing your family. So you know how you were supposed to conduct yourself, representing your family, so it's a whole different consciousness that it brings you to that. You're not only representing yourself; I'm representing my family.

[00:21:37]

Keia Mastrianni: Was that just something like an innate thing that you knew growing up, like this is—I mean, or how was that instilled in you?

[00:21:46]

Caroline Coke: Well, I think it's something that, like you said, an innate thing, and it's instilled through your parents. So they will be telling you, "You know, remember you're a Coke, and you just don't do this and you just don't do that." So you're not only walking out, when you're doing something, you realize, "Listen, my family name is on the line." And so it gives you a sense of responsibility and also a sense of pride of who you are and the background and the family you're coming from. So we grew up traditionally, and I try to instill those things in my children, that you represent your family and there are certain expectations growing up. So like I always say to friends like, "You weren't asked, because I wasn't asked, 'Are you going to college?' It's, 'Which college are you going to?'" So there's certain expectations growing up that you're expected to live up to or to follow.

[00:23:02]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure, sure. And talk to me about your family, your mother and father. What were their names? What did they do for a living?

[00:23:11]

Caroline Coke: Okay. Well, my mom is Lilieth Smith. She was a midwife in the community and also a health educator. And a midwife, she delivers the children, babies, around town, so everybody knew her. So you knew. And my father, Oral [David is his real name, but his family called him Oral], he was a teacher, science teacher at the local school. So your family, depending on what your family did, you're known. So there are

certain things that you, like I said, you had to live up to your family's name and also expectation.

[00:23:57]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. It's like if you were the chemist [*inaudible*]. [*Laughs*]

[00:24:00]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes, yes.

[00:24:03]

Keia Mastrianni: And who was doing the cooking in the house?

[00:24:07]

Caroline Coke: In the Caribbean, traditionally—okay, in the Caribbean growing up, my mom was always gone most of the time, so we had a helper, what we called a helper, and that person would cook and wash and take care of the household, because they were working parents and my mom was gone, and she could be called out anytime of the day or anytime of the night, because during that time, there was not a lot of doctors like you refer to as the gynecologist. You had one big hospital that served certain areas. So, therefore, that's where the midwives would come in, that they would go out and they would do a lot of in-home deliveries. Not a lot of people traditionally went to the hospital to give birth. So we had a live-in helper that takes care of the cooking, the

cleaning, and all that. So I'm not from that traditional where Mom does all the cooking.
No.

[00:25:19]

Keia Mastrianni: And so this helper was the cook of the house [*inaudible*].

[*Recorder turned off*]

[00:25:23]

Keia Mastrianni: And we're back. Okay. So we were talking about the helper, and she prepared the meals in the house?

[00:25:31]

Caroline Coke: She prepared the meals in the house and, you know, do the house, the running of the house, basically in terms of doing the laundry, cooking the meals, and making sure that we went off to school and so forth. So that's how our—and not all households are like that, you know. You have the traditional household where the mom stayed home and the dad working. That was a lot common in a lot of households, but ours, it was just a little different because of the profession of my parents.

[00:26:10]

Keia Mastrianni: Did you have grandparents around or—

[00:26:13]

Caroline Coke: Yes. And the thing with the Caribbean, or Jamaica particularly, your grandparents were there, helping to raise you also, and played a very integral role in your life as children. So our household was our grandparents lived on the same basically land and just a little above our house. So we would come home and Grandma was there, and even if your Grandma was older. See, we never had like nursing homes or so forth to your parents go. Everybody lived basically, and if they didn't live on the same property, they weren't too far away. So that's basically how we grew up. Our grandparents were right there, so we had an interaction with the grandparents, and they were instilling stuff in us, because I still remember stories that was told by my grandparents. And I would tell my mom, and she'd say, "Where did you get that?" And I would say, "Oh, Grandma said that." So, fond memories of grandparents. Extended family was a very—and played a big role in our lives.

[00:27:44]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. So people gathered together often and spent time with each other?

[00:27:48]

Caroline Coke: Yes, we spend time a lot with each other, you know, family dinners, Sunday dinners, everybody was present and we still do that. I still do that, even though

I'm not there and my mom is here, so we still do Sunday dinners after church, everybody, the cousins and nieces, nephew, and so we have a big gathering on Sundays.

[00:28:12]

Keia Mastrianni: Cool.

[00:28:13]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:28:13]

Keia Mastrianni: And everybody cooks, or your sister's cooking?

[00:28:16]

Caroline Coke: My sister is cooking, I'm cooking, I do cooking, so we basically for holidays, everybody cook different. My mom would cook, my sister would cook, and so it wouldn't be like stress on one person. So we all contribute to the Sunday meals and holiday meals, and we still keep a lot of the traditions, yeah.

[00:28:39]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. Jamaicans are celebratory, aren't they [*inaudible*]?

[00:28:43]

Caroline Coke: Yes. We have lots of holidays, and we find a day to celebrate if we can. And the music, it's fun and lively, or the reggae, we're known for reggae music. So it's

basically when you go to Jamaica, it's no problem. That's one of the favorite famous saying, "No problem." Everything is all right, and basically it's no stress. It's people tend to move around on an island way.

[00:29:22]

Keia Mastrianni: Do you feel like that has—you know, I'm interested. How old were you when you came from Jamaica to the United States?

[00:29:27]

Caroline Coke: I came here when I was thirteen.

[00:29:30]

Keia Mastrianni: Thirteen. And how was that transition for you? Was it a culture shock?

[00:29:34]

Caroline Coke: It was difficult. My first year was—my first three years were very difficult, you know, because I wasn't used to the weather, for one, and, secondly, I'm used to everybody being friendly and you know every neighbor. I mean, you're in a community and it's a community. And coming to America was kind of a little different. People didn't speak. And so that's why the South was an attraction for us, too, because people speak more. So basically it was a shock, not knowing your neighbors and people

weren't that close. I mean, we were always—I mean, neighbors look out for neighbors' children or, you know, you got to know. And even discipline, your neighbor was able to discipline you, because they were like your mother. And it's often referred to like even the African saying that it takes a village, truly in Jamaica it takes a village. Everybody's involved.

[00:30:53]

Keia Mastrianni: And everybody's helping everyone?

[00:30:55]

Caroline Coke: Everybody's helping everyone.

[00:30:57]

Keia Mastrianni: And sharing resources?

[00:30:58]

Caroline Coke: Sharing resources, like you said, and whatever. I mean, I could be walking down the road and Mr. John, who lives up the road, would give me a ride, and it wouldn't be a big deal. Or if you needed sugar, you could always go over to your neighbor's house and say, "Oh, can I have some sugar?" and it wouldn't be a big deal. It was a community, and, you know, you miss that sometimes.

[00:31:25]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:31:26]

Caroline Coke: You do. You do.

[00:31:28]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. So when you came here just—I think about the whole idea of you guys made the decision to open Island Grocery & Grill and what a comfort that must be to people, and I just think about, you know, you came over here and you're without, you know, the things you grew up with, you know.

[00:31:46]

Caroline Coke: Right.

[00:31:47]

Keia Mastrianni: So did you find Jamaican enclaves in New Jersey, places where you could find your people?

[00:31:53]

Caroline Coke: Yes, there were enclaves in New Jersey, more so than in the South, that when we moved here, because in New York there was a Jamaican grocery like everywhere, and most of the stuff that we get now, it's coming through New York. It's sourced through New York or Miami, Florida. So there was more of an abundance and

availability of products. And so moving to Charlotte was a big difference, and so we realized that there was a need, and that's what we're striving every day to fill that need, because you walk into the store, somebody, you hear the music, you hear the language, and you find kind of a camaraderie through that, and you get to build relationships and even maintain some of your culture and some of the things that you're familiar with, the foods and the music or the smells. You walk into the store and you're smelling, hmm, that is oxtail, or that is goat, or that is jerk, and, you know, it brings a sense of, I guess, calm or, you know, sense of belonging, I should say.

[00:33:28]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:33:29]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:33:30]

Keia Mastrianni: And it's almost—I mean, it's almost you move from Jamaica to New Jersey and had that kind of experience of being a stranger in a strange land for *[inaudible]*.

[00:33:37]

Caroline Coke: Right.

[00:33:38]

Keia Mastrianni: But almost coming down here was like a repeat of that experience.

[00:33:41]

Caroline Coke: Exactly, exactly.

[00:33:43]

Keia Mastrianni: But you had traveled here or had visited the South to kind of get the lay of the land or—

[00:33:49]

Caroline Coke: Yes. My husband consulted here for a while, and then we came on vacation and we visited a few times. And we felt like it was—it reminded us about being in Jamaica, you know, the space, and it wasn't as crowded, and a sense of being outside. You can be outside more, for a longer period of time, just because of the weather, and so coming from a tropical climate, you get to experience, and being in Charlotte, you experience the warmth a little longer than up north. So that was a plus, and that was attractive to us.

[00:34:31]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:34:33]

Caroline Coke: And growing vegetables or food, that was a big thing for us, too, that you were able to grow some of the stuff that traditional that we—like pumpkins, we can grown pumpkin. We can grow callaloo, which is a green that Jamaicans eat or people from the Caribbean. So some of those we could grow, and it would grow because of the weather. So there are definitely a lot of pluses that remind, and I think that’s what brings Caribbean people to the South.

[00:35:13]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And, I mean, it’s a beautiful thing that you are—I mean, you’re creating community here for your store.

[00:35:20]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[00:35:21]

Keia Mastrianni: Was that something that you had the intention of doing, or has it just been something that unfolded for you?

[00:35:26]

Caroline Coke: I would say unfold. And was I intentional about it? I think I had some intentions, because you will bring or build community once you have kind of a grocery the way we have it. And so it’s a grocery part and it’s also food. So definitely you’re going to bring more people that is familiar with that, and you’re also reaching out to people who would want to—not familiar with that. Because traditionally people, you’re

used to the Chinese restaurant or the Italian, but the Caribbean, basically you'll find it in major cities. And so coming to Charlotte and bringing that, I think that was a flavor.

That's one of the flavor that was missing.

And also with American Airlines, there's two flights per day that leaves to Jamaica, and so people are more learning or getting to know more, and so you have other people coming to experience. They've been to Jamaica and they like what being there, and so they will come back and try to find some of the things that they've experienced in food while they were on the island. And so that's some of the things that we're able to do, to actually bring them back to their vacation or at least give them some of the experience that they experienced while being there. And so that gives us great joy, too, and then we're able to share our culture, because it's a rich culture, and sharing it, it gives us joy to share through food, and what a better way to share your culture but through food and also music. And there is a Caribbean Festival that takes place every year in Charlotte, so people—we're getting more recognition or, we're saying, exposure in Charlotte.

[00:37:47]

Keia Mastrianni: When is that Caribbean Festival?

[00:37:49]

Caroline Coke: It's usually in July.

[00:37:51]

Keia Mastrianni: In July.

[00:37:52]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:37:53]

Keia Mastrianni: No, I think it's such—it's such wonderful work and fulfilling, I guess.

You know, I don't know how life was as a chemist and working in that field, to transitioning to something completely different, being an entrepreneur with your family.

I don't know. I mean, it sounds more fulfilling, to me, what you're doing now.

[00:38:14]

Caroline Coke: Definitely. Owning your own business has its pros and cons and I would say we've got a lot of—I've gotten a lot of fulfillment. Not only I'm able to work with my family, I'm also able to pass on to my children a legacy of being able—so the culture is before them on a daily basis. So they're also experiencing that, so the pride of starting your own business, it's also there, and they see that. And so sharing that with my children and experiencing that with my family and my husband, and also sharing, building a community here, it's very rewarding.

[00:39:07]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And over the last decade, I mean, you people must have—you know, I can imagine it runs the gamut of folks who come in and are like, “Oh, thank God I found your store,” and then [*inaudible*].

[00:39:18]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes. And hearing that from people and people expressing their gratitude for us being there, and gratitude, and also you get to be personal with people. You know, people come into the stores and they share their stories, they share family. You get to hear about their children growing up or see the children. And my kids get to experience being in the store and people seeing them. They’re both off in college now, and people get to see that. So it’s quite fulfilling. It is. And, you know, you share joys with people and also their difficult moments, and you see people.

And also there are times when people walk in the store and they might not have the money to pay for the stuff, and we’re able to share. This year we’ve started also feeding the homeless in Charlotte, so that’s a part of things that we’re also doing that. We go down and we feed, so we’re not only taking from the community, we’re giving back. So we do feed the homeless, and we do go down and we hand out clothes and so forth. So it’s a symbiotic relationship, and that’s a good feeling at the end of the day.

[00:40:57]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. What does your mom think about, you know, what you guys have done?

[00:41:04]

Caroline Coke: Proud, I would say. When she came here in Charlotte, she worked as a nurse, R.N., at Carolina Medical and around Charlotte. So she's seen us starting the business. She saw the growing pains and everything. I mean, it was a learning curve because—but my grandmother always had a store in Jamaican, a community, what we call a shop. So I saw that. I'm sure she's excited. I mean, she's proud of us. We learned a lot. There were a lot of days when, “Oh, what are we doing?” and we're exhausted. And what I did for that part of it, I went back to school and I did an MBA so I could understand the business side of the business itself.

[00:42:04]

Keia Mastrianni: MBA in business *[inaudible]*?

[00:42:07]

Caroline Coke: Yes, mm-hmm. So to take us to the next level and expansion, you know.

[00:42:12]

Keia Mastrianni: Wow.

[00:42:14]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:42:15]

Keia Mastrianni: That's incredible. [*Laughs*]

[00:42:16]

Caroline Coke: Yeah. Doing this, and it has its days when it's tired and it's laboring, but for the most part, you're providing a service and it's good to see people eat and they're satisfied. Or, like you said before, somebody walking in was like, "Oh, my god! There's a store I can this and get that!" And we had that experience with two ladies. They're at the chef school in Charlotte, and they were excited when they came in that, "Oh, my god! I can find goat meat, I can find oxtail, I can find drink." And, you know, at the end of the day, you come home, and some days when you're stressed, you can walk into the store and just grab a beef patty or a chicken patty, and you're smiling because your days just melt.

[00:43:17]

Keia Mastrianni: It takes you back to a place.

[00:43:20]

Caroline Coke: It takes you back to a good, good place.

[00:43:22]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:43:23]

Caroline Coke: And that is a good thing. That is a good thing.

[00:43:28]

Keia Mastrianni: And you see people—do you see people get taken back to their own food memories, as growing up on the island when they eat some of your stews and soups and dishes?

[00:43:40]

Caroline Coke: Yes, and even the candies that you grew up with as a child. You know, just walking into the store and you're able to grab one of those candies, it takes you back to childhood and whatever the memories is. It takes you back, and they're often pleasant, pleasant memories.

[00:44:02]

Keia Mastrianni: What was your favorite thing to eat when you were growing up?

[00:44:04]

Caroline Coke: My favorite thing to eat when I was growing up was, well, fruit-wise I love mangoes, so that was one of my favorite fruit. My food that I love to eat was the Escovitch fish. That was my favorite.

[00:44:21]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:44:23]

Caroline Coke: So eating that and—so three times a week, I still eat the Escovitch fish.

[00:44:31]

Keia Mastrianni: Now, did you have like a dedicated fisherman in your community that kind of brought the fish around?

[00:44:35]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes. Now, the sourcing of the fish was quite different because my mom or my dad would on a Saturday morning early would go, because we weren't living that far from the sea, so they would go and actually on the shore, the fishermen would come to the shore and they'll have the fish right there. So even traveling back to Jamaica, we do that, go back and get the fish and keep that going. So that's how we—you know. And the produce was obtained from the market because we have a big market, or what you'd refer to as a farmers' market, where you get the honey, you get all the vegetables or stuff that you need, herbs, the spices, and stuff. And so, still, you still have a market. And so I'm often referred to as that place where you'd find the meat, the fish, and food, some of the stuff.

[00:45:45]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And you had talked about being outside and the weather and stuff. So even part of the culture, I mean, you do feel very connected to the land and to the nature, in a sense?

[00:45:58]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes, yes, because it's tropical. We're outside. I mean, kids played outside, so we were outside a lot, so outside playing, outside gardening, outside doing stuff, so a lot of outdoor stuff. And I find that being in the South, you are able to do—and particularly living in the Charlotte area or the Piedmont area, as it would be referred to, like Jamaica, you can be at the beach when you want to. You can drive to the mountains in Jamaica. And so Charlotte does provide that same kind of feeling because we're like three, two hours from the mountain, two, three hours from the beach.

[00:46:48]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. So you found a lot of similarities in the South.

[00:46:50]

Caroline Coke: I find similarities and a lot of balance in being out and who I am.

[00:46:57]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:46:58]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:46:59]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And for people who come into your store who, you know, aren't from island culture, from the Caribbean, how has that been? Have you felt welcome in the city of Charlotte? Have you felt like, you know, people are just interested in learning more about your cultures?

[00:47:17]

Caroline Coke: I find that more than when we moved ten years or eighteen—I mean, say, ten years ago, because there's an influx of people from the North, and what that brings is a lot of cultural shift or changes, especially around the Central Avenue area, because you could go and find foods from people that hail from different part of the world. And I am finding that change to be good, because knowing about different culture also teaches us how to live with people from different culture, and so I like that. I'm able to share culture. And the more you know about somebody culture or understand their culture, you have a different appreciation for the person or the way the person acts or view the world, based on where they're from or their culture or their experiences. And so I'm like a lifelong learner, so I like to hear people's stories, and being in the store, you hear a lot of that and you get to see a lot of that.

And being in Charlotte, because even for school, I was able to do a Cultural Day at my kids' school when they [were] growing [up], and we do the traditional dances from the Caribbean and the steel drum, which was from Trinidad. And so my kids would often identify themselves as being Jamericans and being Jamaican from Jamaican parents, but

still embracing their American heritage, because they were born here also. So it's a meeting of two worlds, and you find such a common place, a common ground, how you merge those two cultures, and I think my kids are better kids from being from that, you know, experience the culture from their parents and being submerged in it, because being at home and experiencing that, and being in the store and even seeing all the Caribbean people. And they often say, "Oh, my god, they're basically the same. It's not only my parents that act a certain way." You know what I'm saying? So they go, "Oh, okay." So they'll not feel like they're alone, but they can see other children and they get to meet other young people or other children and go, "Oh, my mom does the same thing. My dad does the same thing." And so they're not feeling along or isolated like as if here we are, and we're not even living like Americans, you know, totally, but they do get to appreciate that. And I think that makes them well rounded, well rounded.

[00:50:28]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And I'm sure it gives them a sensitivity and appreciation for other things.

[00:50:34]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[00:50:35]

Keia Mastrianni: You know, although they didn't have the immigrant experience.

[00:50:38]

Caroline Coke: Right.

[00:50:39]

Keia Mastrianni: I'm sure you've kind of been able to share that, so that they can be sensitive to others as well.

[00:50:45]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes, yes, and we do. And every experience in our household is a teaching moment, you know, it's something for you to learn from and move on. And so they're able to experience that experience, and we often remind them of our stories. I'm sure sometimes they're like, "Oh, my god, how many times we're going to hear this? Because that's what we have to refer back to. That's what we have to draw back from.

So we use our experience of coming here, of my mom coming here and adjusting, and then we coming,, following after, because we all didn't come as one unit. My mom came and dad and worked, and we were left in Jamaica for a while with relatives, like I said, the extended family, and then we join her. And so we were able to share being absent from our parents, that separation, and then rejoining them. So we're able to tell them about that, how we felt being separated and how we felt when we rejoined our parents, and that helped us being—especially for me, I mean, when they left, it was a time when I was turning into a teenager, so it could go the other way for me, but it made me stronger, because then I had to be independent, being without parents, and had to think a lot about what my intentions were before I did a lot of thing, because although

they were not there, I still represented them, and I still had my grandparents there to still, you know, be as a parent. And that's how important it was that my grandparents were still there, so my parents were—it was like them being there.

And then coming back here and being separated from my grandparents, not having that community until they were able to join us, so, yeah, so there was a little shift there for a period of time, an adjustment to being in a different country, and so it wasn't always great, and there were days when I yearned to be back there and was upset that my parents uprooted us. There's certain things, your friends, and things you're familiar with, and your comfort. You know, it took you out of your comfort zone, but it built character and it sure built ours.

[00:53:32]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, yeah, how that experience served you into adulthood, you know, being able to—you know.

[00:53:41]

Caroline Coke: Well, for one, I'm never really attached—like I was able to move from New Jersey also to come back to Charlotte, so wherever we go, and the thing about us, I moved to Charlotte, I was the first one, and then my sister join, and my mom. So we always move together. You know, that helped. So it wasn't an adjustment where I didn't know anybody, because my family, the unit is always so strong and we're supportive of each other, that we draw from family support. It's a big thing in our culture, family.

Even leaving Jamaica, my parents still—family supported family back home, you know, did what they had to do. And those are the things that it built.

And I also stress that with my children, with their cousins. Like we always say, “I don’t want to hear that your brother lives in California and you have never met your nieces or your nephews or you don’t know what’s going on in your brother’s life.” Not saying that you’re going to—you know, because you do have a life. But what we instill in them is that regardless of what happens in life, family is the one that will always be there. Your friends are there, but your family will always have your back, and so that is the kind of thing that being separated and being brought up in the family that I was brought up in have allowed me to always have that assurance that no matter what, I can do a lot. And if I do it and I fail, I still have a net or a wall to lean on.

[00:55:41]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:55:42]

Caroline Coke: So it builds your confidence and it gives you that certain air about you of “I can do all things.” You know.

[00:55:52]

Keia Mastrianni: That’s very cool.

[00:55:55]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:55:56]

Keia Mastrianni: Tell me—let’s see what else. Now, is Velma your older sister?

[00:56:04]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[00:56:05]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay.

[00:56:05]

Caroline Coke: She’s two years older.

[00:56:06]

Keia Mastrianni: She’s two—and that’s the only sibling that you had?

[00:56:09]

Caroline Coke: I have a brother.

[00:56:10]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay.

[00:56:10]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:56:11]

Keia Mastrianni: He's younger or older?

[00:56:12]

Caroline Coke: He's older.

[00:56:12]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay.

[00:56:13]

Caroline Coke: He's older than Velma also, and he went back to Jamaica.

[00:56:17]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay.

[00:56:18]

Caroline Coke: And he's doing business there also, owns a restaurant and a grocery also.

[00:56:24]

Keia Mastrianni: Oh, nice.

[00:56:25]

Caroline Coke: Yeah, yeah.

[00:56:26]

Keia Mastrianni: I had a quick question. You had mentioned soursop leaves before. So what kind of home remedies—what did soursop leaves—

[00:56:35]

Caroline Coke: Okay. The soursop leaves, we often use that as a relaxant. So soursop leaves would be used as a chamomile tea. So we make a tea out of the leaves, and that is usually drank at night for calming you down or calming your nerves, and it's good for your nervous system, so it calms you. So we use that. And the pulp, it's now used. We use that to make a drink, and they have found in research now that the soursop leave has a lot of anti-cancer properties in fighting cancer. So we make a tea out of the leaves, and the pulp we do make a drink out of it. So that's what the soursop is used for.

[00:57:21]

Keia Mastrianni: And you did mention that your husband was sick, so were you using some of these natural remedies [*inaudible*]?

[00:57:25]

Caroline Coke: Yeah, we do a lot of natural remedies, yeah, we do. He drinks a lot of teas in the mornings and green drinks, and so we do, because, you know, coming from a country where we did not rely on modern medicine a lot, and so a lot of the herbs have been tried, tested, and passed down. My grandfather was ninety-five when he passed, and he was a big herbalist, so I think that's where my chemical background—so I like playing with herbs. I do a lot of research on herbs and I use a lot of herbs.

[00:58:09]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:58:09]

Caroline Coke: Yeah.

[00:58:10]

Keia Mastrianni: And your grandfather, was he—you know, they call it foraging now, or just going out and collecting these herbs [*inaudible*].

[00:58:16]

Caroline Coke: Yeah, he collected a lot of herbs, and a lot of the herbs were grown on the property, and so he would use them. And as a child, I remember him sending us outside and he'll tell us, "Bring me three leaves of that and three leaves of that," and using the herbs. So you get to learn a lot of the herbs and you get to see. And I wrote a lot of the herbs down and what they're used for, and so I refer that. So when someone comes into the store, I'm able to tell them what this herb is used for, and a lot of the

Caribbean, they use the same herbs, but they might call it a different name, so being able to tell what this works for and knowing the names, I'm able to also translate that to a lot of other Caribbean islanders who might not call it, but they know exactly what it's used for so, yeah.

[00:59:12]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. So you're kind of channeling the spirit of your grandfather through that. [*Laughs*]

[00:59:16]

Caroline Coke: Yes, yes, yes, yes. So they'll come in and they'll ask, "Oh, so I'm having asthma attack," or my child. "What tea?" Or, "I remember we used to do this back home, but I can't totally—."

And I'll say, "Well, why don't you use this." And during the flu season, we do a lot of herbs too. We boil a lot of herb teas. And even last week, somebody had a flu, and we're able to tell them different herbs to—

[00:59:49]

Keia Mastrianni: What do you—what's a good flu mix for [*inaudible*]?

[00:59:51]

Caroline Coke: Well, for tea we use garlic, ginger. We use the thyme leaves. We have sarsaparilla. We have eucalyptus leaves that we use. So we blend all of that together

along with sorrel, because you want to get a lot of vitamin Cs and so on. And we do that, and we put that, and we steep that, and we're able to—

[01:00:12]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[01:00:14]

Caroline Coke: —give to them.

[01:00:16]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[01:00:17]

Caroline Coke: And so we do a lot of that, too, also.

[01:00:21]

Keia Mastrianni: And I think about—just you mentioned ginger and things like that, but Jamaican people seem to love like bold flavors.

[01:00:28]

Caroline Coke: Yes.

[01:00:29]

Keia Mastrianni: Like sharp ginger and spicy stews.

[01:00:31]

Caroline Coke: Spicy stews, yes. So we use a lot of herbs in our cooking. For like the curry chicken, we use the ginger, because that helps bring out the spice, and you know curry is from turmeric, the turmeric root, and that's an anti-inflammatory thing. So curry is eaten. We'd would be able to pick the turmeric or gather the turmeric and use that in our cooking, and the thyme. And we use a lot of fresh herbs, thyme, the tomatoes if we're making the stews, the ginger. Garlic is used a lot. The onions, the scallions. So we use a lot of herbs, and so you get that bold flavor. Evening, or when we do shrimp, a lot of ginger, you know, curry shrimp, so the food is flavorful. You find a boldness when you're enjoying a Caribbean food, yeah.

[01:01:35]

Keia Mastrianni: I'm like hungry now that we've talked about all this stuff. *[Laughs]* Is there anything that you would like to share that I left out or something you want people to know about Jamaican culture, Caribbean culture?

[01:01:48]

Caroline Coke: I think it's the one thing I would like, I would share is, and I spoke about it earlier, is the connection to family and the importance of family in the Caribbean culture, and that is one of the things that I see lacking in present society or even being here. The closeness that you would try to—that you would look for in a family structure,

sometime it's lost because of the hectic lifestyle that we practice in America. We no longer sit down together for the meals or find the time, family time, where traditions are passed on or knowledge in itself is passed on. And a lot of people don't know who they are as a person and trying to find themselves, and I think if that is instilled from younger age, or you spend time knowing, talking to your grandparents or trying to know who you are as a person, it molds and it shape you. So you won't find a lot of young folks who just lost or don't know who they are, and so if you don't know who you are, you tend to not know where you're going or any—

[01:03:33]

Keia Mastrianni: Right.

[01:03:33]

Caroline Coke: You lose focus. And that's one of the things that I would like to share, the tradition of strong family and not just the nuclear but the extended family.

[01:03:48]

Keia Mastrianni: And knowing where you come from, you know.

[01:03:51]

Caroline Coke: Yes, knowing where you come from, and knowing that you not only represent yourself, but you're representing your family. So knowing that, it's a certain

way you carry yourself, a certain way you present yourself, and it's also a certain way of being, yeah.

[01:04:12]

Keia Mastrianni: That is wonderful. Thank you. We will take thirty seconds.

[End of interview]