



Mark Casias
Blossom
Charleston, South Carolina

Date: August 15, 2019
Location: Blossom, Charleston, SC
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts
Length: 56 minutes
Project: Career Servers

Annemarie Anderson: So this is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Thursday, August 15th [2019], and I'm in Charleston, South Carolina, at Blossom with Mr. Mark Casias.

Mr. Casias, will you start off and introduce yourself for the recorder, give us your name and tell us what you do?

[0:00:58.1]

Mark Casias: I'm Mark Casias. I am a server at Blossom restaurant in Charleston.

[0:01:02.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So let's start out and, for the record, would you give us your birth date?

[0:01:06.5]

Mark Casias: May 20th, 1966.

[0:01:08.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Great. Thank you.

[0:01:09.7]

Mark Casias: Fifty-three. I'll do the math for you. [laughs]

[0:01:10.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Great. Well, start off and tell us where you were born.

[0:01:16.7]

Mark Casias: I was born in Charleston and I grew up in Mount Pleasant and went to Mount Pleasant schools, went to College of Charleston for a little bit, graduated from Charleston Southern with a bachelor's degree in history.

[0:01:27.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

[0:01:29.2]

Mark Casias: And here I am.

[0:01:29.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about the Charleston and Mount Pleasant of your youth.

[0:01:34.1]

Mark Casias: Oh, it was a much simpler time, Annemarie. It was just like any other medium-size town, and Mount Pleasant was a smaller town, a smaller suburb, but certainly within the last ten or fifteen years or so, Charleston has really exploded, not only on the restaurant scene but on the world traveling scene. We're on all these lists for greatest cities in the country, in the world, and it's really exploded.

[0:02:05.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. So how old were you—well, tell me a little bit about your parents. What were their names and what did they do?

[0:02:12.9]

Mark Casias: My parents were divorced. I was mainly raised by my mother, and she was a secretary at a law firm just a couple blocks away from here, growing up. And she raised me and my brother and my sister. She did a great job doing that.

[0:02:30.6]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

[0:02:31.6]

Mark Casias: Yeah. She really instilled a good work ethic to us early on. You got up and went to work every day, and she taught us the value of a dollar and made us appreciate that.

[0:02:46.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. What was your mother's name?

[0:02:48.2]

Mark Casias: Dana. D-a-n-a.

[0:02:51.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Great. That's nice. So tell me a little bit about, I guess—well, what kind of food did you grow up with? What food did your mom put on the table?

[0:03:03.5]

Mark Casias: A lot of southern comfort food. My grandfather, he was a recreational fisherman, so we always had shrimp in the freezer or some kind of fish. So I remember a lot of fried shrimp, Shrimp Creole, that kind of thing. My mother also made us southern comfort food, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, baked chicken, just any anything you can think of. She was a good cook and still is a good cook, and so my sister is a good cook today, and I enjoy grilling as well.

[0:03:52.6]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about—well, what did you want to be when you grew up?

[0:03:58.6]

Mark Casias: I wanted to be a lot of different things. I thought I wanted to be in advertising, marketing, or something like that, and then as I was going through school, I thought I wanted to stay at a university, maybe be in admissions or administration or something like that, and then it kind of turned into maybe athletics, maybe a sports

information director or an athletic director, something like that. But that never worked out, but that's okay, but I always thought I wanted to do something in a university setting.

[0:04:33.5]

Annemarie Anderson: So tell me a little bit about getting your first job as a server, your first job in the industry.

[0:04:41.2]

Mark Casias: Let's see. I was a busboy at a place on Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant, and if anybody knows anything about Shem Creek, there are six or seven or eight restaurants all in that area. So I was a busboy. And a lot of people work in restaurants growing up, so I was a busboy for a couple of years and moved up to a server at another place on Shem Creek, and I did that for about seven years.

Then I finished school, and then I thought it was time to move on from restaurants, so I got a job doing sales and it wasn't how I thought it would be, and I wasn't really happy, and, sadly, I did that for only a couple of years until I decided to get back into the business. Then I came here to Blossom because my sister had worked here, but by the time I came here, she wasn't here anymore, but I knew a lot of the same people that were here already, so I almost had a foot in the door and I knew what it was all about, so I felt very comfortable coming back.

[0:05:54.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. What were—let me go back. What were those restaurants on Shem Creek called?

[0:05:58.6]

Mark Casias: One was called R.B.'s. Not Arby's but R.B.'s like the initial, and that was Ronnie Boals. He's a legend in the Charleston and especially Mount Pleasant food and beverage scene. He had a place across the creek called Ronnie's, and that's the place where I started serving first. I met a lot of great people there and people that I'm still friends with today, even that far back. But, yeah, it was great. It was a great experience.

[0:06:32.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit about that. Describe kind of the restaurants and the work you did there.

[0:06:38.2]

Mark Casias: Very high volume, tourist-targeted, lots of fried shrimp and seafood platters and turn-and-burn, like I said, volume. But it had a nice view, so it was always very busy, and it was a lot of long, hot nights working, especially between about March and the summer, the end of summer, like in August or September, because it was so tourist-driven. But we worked hard and we played hard, and then we'd get up the next day and do it all over again. You just learned to work hard, and you get rewarded for it too.

[0:07:33.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Can you remember some of the folks that you worked with there?

[0:07:36.5]

Mark Casias: Yeah. One of my very best friends that I worked with, and we're still good friends today, a guy named Mark Vetsel, never knew him before, and we still keep in touch. He has since moved away, and he got a *real* job, so he didn't fall back into the business. But he comes back down and we get to see each other there. Even just through social media, it's easier to keep in touch with everybody we've worked with. And the thing about growing up in Mount Pleasant is we all knew each other from school, and then we all kind of worked together and hung around together, so we still see a lot of those people.

[0:08:23.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And what was the—what year did you start at R.B.'s?

[0:08:27.6]

Mark Casias: I was probably about eighteen or nineteen when I started at R.B.'s, worked there for a couple of summers, and then I moved over to Ronnie's after that, serving, and I was there for about seven years.

[0:08:44.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And what initially drew you to getting a job in the service industry?

[0:08:49.3]

Mark Casias: The flexibility of the schedules. They could work with my school schedule. And, yeah, getting paid every night and just having a new day the next day. We don't have these projects like some people do that go on for weeks and weeks and weeks and people breathing down our necks to get those completed. So every day's a new day. Our inbox is empty when we come in.

[0:09:16.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about, I guess, coming here to Blossom. You already mentioned that you kind of were dissatisfied with an office job.

[0:09:29.6]

Mark Casias: Yeah, I had a sales job and I'd get a paycheck every two weeks, which was totally foreign to me, and I'd look at it and I'd say, "Gosh, you know, I could make this in about a week or less than that if I really hustled." Gosh. And it just got to the point where I had bills to pay, and it just wasn't getting it done. So I had to make a decision, and I did and I'm glad for it. So I decided to come here to Blossom, and it just all kind of worked out. Even at that time, I think I was still in my late twenties, still kind of an older person that just starts out at a new place, especially here. We get a lot of college-age

people that start out. So even though I was in my late twenties, I was still a little bit older but still had a lot of experience, which was attractive, I guess, to the managers hiring me, and I'm glad they did.

[0:10:40.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, could you talk to me a little bit—can you kind of describe your first day or your first couple days working here?

[0:10:47.7]

Mark Casias: When I started here, Blossom was still relatively brand new, and it was the young, cool, hip place to be, and it was a little intimidating coming from a tourist-driven restaurant that I last worked at. Like I said, it was cool and young and hip. Our slogan at the time was “Innovative Cuisine,” so there were all kinds of ingredients which I've never heard of. This was about 1995 when I started, so the restaurant scene was really just starting to get big here, and places had to set themselves apart.

So we had a lot of innovative cuisine, a lot of different ingredients. We made our own pastas and we made our own bread. We had fresh seafood, and it was mainly a Mediterranean-style place. It wasn't a seafood restaurant, but we had seafood available. We had veal and some chicken dishes, some meats and steaks and pork. It was fantastic. A gigantic wine list, which was in itself, tough to get used to too. You got to know your wine if you want to sell it.

So it was a hustlin' and bustlin' place, and we did a kind of a late-night thing. We closed at 1:00 o'clock back then. We had Sunday brunch and we did lunch. And it was a

little intimidating at first, but once you get used to it, everything was good. We had a big reputation to live up to, because Magnolias had been around for so long, and then they opened up Blossom, so we had some big shoes to continue to fill. So service had to be on point and you had to be knowledgeable about the menu and the wine list. So it was quite a step up from my first job, my first serving experience.

[0:13:04.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Sure. Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit about that, gaining that knowledge. So I hear you say a lot about, like, you didn't know some of the ingredients, you had to know a lot about the wine. How did you kind of develop that knowledge?

[0:13:18.6]

Mark Casias: Yeah. Well, here we have a lineup at the beginning of every shift, and the chefs will go over the specials and the ingredients and everything, which we never really had at my old place. They never really had a lineup or anything to educate us. So they were all about bringing us along and wanted their servers to be an extension of the chefs. They wanted you to be able to explain everything in full detail. There were a lot of experienced servers here at the time, too, who brought along the new people in an effort to sustain a high level of serving.

[0:14:02.4]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit about—kind of describe a typical day for you here when you first started work.

[0:14:13.2]

Mark Casias: Well, it was so long ago [Laughter], I'm trying to think. You come in and you clock in, and there's usually some loud music playing in the background to get you moving and get you going, get you ready for the day. It's not too different from what goes on now.

[0:14:46.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, tell me what—tell me your—describe your typical day today, then.

[0:14:50.2]

Mark Casias: Okay. Well, I usually typically get in here about an hour before we have to be here. I wake up early anyway, so instead of just hanging around at home and just wasting time, just come in and just casually just set up your section and maybe start some coffee and tea for everybody else, and maybe once all the setup work is done, maybe grab some breakfast somewhere close. Just kind of ease into the day, just nice and slowly, and peek at the books and see what our day has in store for us. We'll maybe ask about specials beforehand, before they tell us, so you get a little leg up.

We'll just greet everybody as they come in, ask about their night and ask about their day or anything else that you know that's coming up for your coworkers. You get to develop friendships, so you ask about that. Yeah, just get ready for the day and make sure

your uniform's ready to go, pressed and cleaned, and pens and apron and lighters and wine tools, make sure everything's ready to go so you'll have a successful day.

[0:16:07.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit about once you're done with everything, the restaurant's open, guests are coming in, talk about what it's like to be on the floor.

[0:16:18.2]

Mark Casias: It's not much different from any other—you know, some places you wait for the phone to ring, and others we wait for the guests to come in, and we just kind of go from there. We turn on a smile or maybe continue your smile, and we start our day serving. You'll maybe ask a guest if they're in town for any one of the things that'll be going on, whether it's Spoleto or just a holiday week or anything like that. We'll get them excited about some of the food and maybe sneak a little glass of wine or a cocktail in front of them if they want, and we'll just try and make it a fun day for us as well, because we've got to be here, so we're going to try and have some fun too. I always say that the fun thing about serving is it's almost like you get to go out, too, even though a lot of times you don't get to eat and drink, but you still get to go out and you get to socialize, and you totally get to walk up to strangers and just start a conversation with them, which I maybe wouldn't dream of doing outside of here, but it's kind of fun that way.

[0:17:35.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Yeah. It's kind of my job, too. [laughter]

[0:17:38.6]

Mark Casias: Yeah.

[0:17:40.5]

Annemarie Anderson: So tell me a little bit about—you kind of mentioned this when you were talking about getting ready for your day, but what kind of relationships do you develop, working relationships with your colleagues, both in the dining room but also the kind of relationships that you have to have with people who work in the kitchen?

[0:17:57.9]

Mark Casias: Yeah. You know, you don't have to love each other, you don't even have to like each other, but you have to work together, and here you really have to work together, whether it's refilling somebody else's water or dropping off other guests' food. You just got to work together, and they do the same for you, and it just makes for an easier day.

And those kitchen guys, they're all great guys. They bust their tail day in and day out, and there's a lot of cutting-up with the kitchen, keep them on the good side, because it's hot back there and you don't want them frustrated or feeling down. So we pump each other up that way. Yeah, they're a bunch of funny guys, and we all try to have a good time at work. We're here so long, that's just the only way to do it. You got to have a little fun.

[0:19:00.8]

Annemarie Anderson: For sure. Definitely. Well, so do you typically work lunches or dinners?

[0:19:07.2]

Mark Casias: I work a couple of lunches, and everybody works lunches, and lunches are fine. Some people think it's kind of a drag having to wake up and serve sandwiches and iced tea and things like that, but, you know, I see it as just another opportunity to make some money. A lot of places that are just open nights, you have seven opportunities there, but not everybody works every day, so really you cut down and maybe have four or five nights. But here we have fourteen opportunities and sometimes ten or nine or less, so it's just a better opportunity to make some income.

But, yeah, I don't mind working lunches so much. I work a couple lunches and then about four dinners, and we come in at different times at dinner. Sometimes we come in at 4:00 and sometimes 4:30. The opener, the 4:00 'clock people, they take all the early tables. That gives the others an opportunity to hang around and line up so the chefs and everybody can go over what's coming up. But, yeah, a couple lunches, a couple, four dinners, and, if need be, another lunch or another dinner or two, depending on the time of the year, depending on how the staff looks.

[0:20:42.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Sure. Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit about kind of, I guess, your role. You've been here for a long time. Do you help train folks?

[0:20:55.4]

Mark Casias: I don't mind training, but I think they kind of see training as a burden, so they don't ask me to train a lot, plus they think I'm just a grumpy old man, so they want to keep the new people away from me as much as possible. But I don't mind training and I certainly don't mind showing them a few tricks here and there, just the quicker ways to do things or an easier way to do things, or just maybe say, "Hey, you don't really have to do that now. You should maybe set up your section first and then maybe worry about this other thing," because you can do that when the restaurant's open if we're limited on time or something. So just timesaving tricks and just a little easier way to cut a lemon or an easier way to dump some ice or make some coffee or iced tea or something like that. But, yeah, I don't mind training, and it's kind of a good way to get to know the new people coming on, what brings you to the restaurant, what brings you to town, if you're in school, what are you studying, or what brings you back to the industry.

[0:22:11.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Sure. Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit, too, about—well, I mean, you mentioned some of those kind of timesaving things and some other things you've learned. What have been some of those important things that you've learned working?

[0:22:28.1]

Mark Casias: Yeah. A lot of times the Aloha POS system can get kind of intimidating. I think a lot of times it takes a lot of getting used to, a lot of repetition. Another thing that I like to help the new folks in is the timing of the food, because that can be very difficult. You don't want a big lapse in between, say, starters and entrées, so I like to help because that's really important. You want to give quick, prompt service. So you try and teach the new people it's okay to wait a little while sometimes so the food doesn't come out too quick, or maybe you might want to ring this in just after the starters, or maybe you might want to recommend some things from a different part of the kitchen because the grill side is really busy, so maybe you might want to push something that's on the fry side or the pantry side. So it's always good to kind of help them learn to read the kitchen and to kind of make life easier for the guest and for yourself too.

[0:23:49.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit—I mean, we've kind of talked about this, too, with your earlier jobs, but talk a little bit about how tourism in Charleston and the Charleston area affects your job.

[0:24:09.1]

Mark Casias: Yeah. I mean, like I said, it's really exploded here. When I started in 1995, there were fewer restaurants, and when you had a big event like the Spoleto Festival here in the spring or the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition, which is in late winter, I mean, you really felt the presence of those big events in town, and as time went on, there were more

and more restaurants. The restaurant scenes really kind of exploded. So those events really helped kind of fuel the restaurant scene.

I got distracted a little bit.

[0:25:10.4]

Annemarie Anderson: Sorry. That's okay.

[0:25:11.3]

Mark Casias: That's okay. Let's get back on my train of thought. Let's see.

[0:25:14.3]

Annemarie Anderson: You were talking about the Spoleto Festival.

[0:25:17.2]

Mark Casias: Yeah, yeah, some big events in town, and that brings a lot of people. Back then it brought a lot of people in from around the country, but now, gosh, we're worldwide. Any night, you could have three or four different nationalities in your section. I mean, before, in the early days, we'd have a lot of English people, a lot of French, maybe German people, but now not only do we have those folks, we have Russian people, we have people from China and South America. You can hear all kinds of accents here, on the sidewalk, anywhere in Charleston. It's really turned into an international city.

Yeah, tourism is absolutely *huge* now, and so while the restaurant scene has kind of hit a plateau, now the trend in Charleston is hotels. So now there's a hotel being built

on every corner. Now every vacant building and lot, they're building hotels, so it's just getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And these aren't youth hostels either. These are expensive hotels, so they're attracting a higher-dollar, a higher-profile traveler to Charleston. So that's been a noticeable difference over the years, the international guests, not just the people from the state or the country, but internationally, it's just been huge.

[0:26:56.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. And talk to me a little bit about how you've seen the food and beverage industry specifically kind of evolve or transform since you started working in it.

[0:27:08.9]

Mark Casias: I think over the years you had a lot of seafood restaurants and a lot of seafood, Italian, French, but now the industry's evolved into these fusion places and places that take a lot of ingredients and a lot of food from different cultures and kind of melding them together. There's so many different types now, and not only types of food, but the types of restaurants. You have a lot of casual places, a lot of middle-of-the-road upscale places, and then you have a lot of elite, posh-type places as well. Yeah, they're all over.

[0:28:18.1]

Annemarie Anderson: No, that's great. No, that's great.

[0:28:19.5]

Mark Casias: I mean, there's just a lot of different styles.

[0:28:22.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Do you think all of those different styles and kind of the profusion of restaurants, like, how has that impacted your job, if it has?

[0:28:31.2]

Mark Casias: We try and present kind of an upscale feel, but still yet we want to be super casual. We want everybody to just kind of relax and have fun, and I think we try and do that with our menu. We have some casual comfort foods on there, and then we have some pretty uptown foods as well. So I would say about Blossom, you can come in and you can for sure have a great meal, and then you can spend a lot or you can spend a little bit. Really, it's up to you. It's really kind of what you're in the mood for, your group's in the mood for, so we're very accommodating as far as that goes, I think.

[0:29:19.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Well, tell me a little bit about what do you think is the most challenging part of your job and what's the most rewarding.

[0:29:38.9]

Mark Casias: Let's see. Yeah, there are challenges every day. [Pauses] Sometimes challenging coming up with an answer. [Laughter] I think some challenges, sometimes

you just don't feel like doing it. Sometimes it's really hot outside, sometimes there are other distractions in your personal life, and you've just got to try and overcome it. You've just got to try and push through and just realize, hey, it's only going to be five or six hours; you can do this. Sometimes people you're working with challenge you, whether or not they want to be here or not, so it's tough that way.

And challenges and—?

[0:30:48.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Rewards. What's the most rewarding part of your job?

[0:30:50.7]

Mark Casias: Oh, I think when you can give somebody a good experience when they come in, maybe surprise somebody with a nice plate of food, and you can tell, you know, you can see a person's whole mood swing just from the time they come in to the time they finish. That's really rewarding. The people laughing and cutting up with you when you feel like you've made a connection, that's really rewarding too.

I had two great parties last night, two separate parties, and it was raining last night, they were soaking wet, and they probably weren't in a great mood. They were in a good mood, but maybe not in a great mood, but they had a good meal, got warmed up, and that was just kind of rewarding to see their whole mood change like that, just maybe making a small difference in somebody's night, maybe adding a little bit more to their anniversary dinner or their graduation dinner or their birthday dinner just by doing something small like bringing them a complimentary glass of champagne or something

maybe. That's rewarding, and knowing that you had a small part in their night before they carry on with the rest of their lives.

[0:32:19.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's nice. Tell me a little bit about some of the relationships that you might have developed with guests. Do you have any regulars or [unclear]?

Mark Casias: Yeah, I have a pretty good handful of regulars, and they're all great. A lot of times keeping names straight and where they're from, I think that just happens with any server's longevity, just keeping things straight. But anyway, but, yeah, I have some good regulars, and it's always fun to see them and catch up with them, and it's very complimentary that they could sit anywhere in the whole place but they decide to sit with you or wait with you or request you when they call in for a reservation. Yeah, that's really nice.

[0:33:09.6]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Could you talk a little bit maybe in detail about those folks? Or tell us about a couple of them? You don't have to remember names or anything.

[0:33:18.8]

Mark Casias: I have three guys that come in for lunch pretty regularly, they're three lawyers in town, and you know instantly what to bring them. You know right away to bring them out three iced teas, and I already know what two of them are going to order for lunch, and the other guy could be a wild card. I guess it's comforting for them to see me in there and take care of them, knowing what they want already. One guy's going to get an extra side of dressing with no peppers and no pepperoncinis or no onion on his salad. I know that every time, so we don't have to go through that song and dance. And one guy always takes the check, so I take the check directly to him.

And I've got another couple, they come in, they live in Kiawah, so they come in town every ten days, two weeks or so, and they go to Costco and they do some other things in town that they can't do in Kiawah, and they always come in. They come in and they're always nice enough to sit with me. They'll get a bottle of wine, they'll get the same appetizer, and they'll usually split an entrée. He's kind of quirky, he doesn't like for me to pour his wine, so I'll open it and I'll leave it on the table, and he'll pour it himself. So he doesn't want to retrain anyone else, I guess, so he knows that I know his rules. They're super nice people, and we cut up and catch up every time they come in.

And at dinnertime, dinnertime guests, I've got a couple of handfuls of regulars there. We say hello, or even if they don't sit in our section, I can tell another server, "Oh, she likes a plate of lemons brought with her tea," or, "I think he has a garlic allergy. You might want to ask to be sure." The regulars really are the backbone here, and we get kind of caught up with each other, but it's always fun to see a familiar face in here for the regulars, yeah.

[0:35:52.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. That's impressive that you remember all those things about those folks.

[0:35:56.7]

Mark Casias: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, they're really great people, yeah.

[0:36:02.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, I think you kind of mentioned just a little bit about, you know, being paid out every night, but how has payment changed? Because I know especially going to systems and credit cards, that's kind of changed. Like, how has that kind of change impacted your career?

[0:36:22.6]

Mark Casias: Yeah, well, when I started here, we got paid every night, which was fine, so you had a pocketful of cash and you had to really discipline yourself to make the deposit. A friend of mine here once said, "There's money you walk out with, and there's money you walk home with." So a lot of times those were two different amounts, so you had to really discipline yourself back in the olden days to go to the bank every day or save up for a couple days and then go deposit it.

But a couple of years ago, we followed kind of the trend of getting our tips in a paycheck, which took a little getting used to, but I think I really like it a whole lot better that way. Before, with cash, at the end of the calendar year, eventually you had to write

that check to the IRS, and that was *painful*, and you had to really plan for that. But now, you know, the appropriate taxes are taken out every two weeks, and you get what you get, and then you get a nice little refund check February, March, April, whenever it is, and that's really great, especially for my situation now, because by the time I get the refund check, that's when my house insurance is due and my house taxes are due. So it's just kind of like the government's holding onto it for me so I don't spend it, and it really works out for me very well. It may not work out for anybody else, but for me that's a great situation, and I'm glad we have it that way.

[0:38:05.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Seems like it works out. Well, tell me a little bit about—I think we've talked—I think we've danced around this a little bit, but I'm interested in—I mean, I think people who I've talked to so far have talked about service and hospitality and their kind of approaches to those two terms. Could you talk about what do you think—what is your definition for service and hospitality? And we'll just start with that.

[0:38:37.1]

Mark Casias: Yeah. I mean, my approach to the guest is, you know, I certainly want to give them the best service that I can and the best food that we have to offer. So I take a very friendly approach to the guest, and it just takes a long time to develop that too. I don't know if anybody new to the business can do it, but I approach a guest as if we've known each other, without being overly stiff and overly formal, I guess, like a lot of

places can be. But, you know, if you just kind of break down that awkwardness between two strangers to where you can say, “Hey, what do you think you’re in the mood for? You like a steak or you like some seafood? What kind of seafood? Do you like fish or do you like maybe shrimp, maybe scallops?” And then if you can help them guide themselves around the menu like that, god, that’s a big step. That’s a big step to having a good night, a good rapport with a guest.

[0:39:55.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Talk about building that rapport. How do you go about that?

[0:40:02.0]

Mark Casias: Yeah, like I said, I don’t like to be too formal with a guest, but then there’s also that you can be too friendly. You don’t want to get too political at a table or anything like that, so you just want to be a little casual, casual and friendly, and make them feel at ease, and that way he doesn’t have to worry in the back of his mind about, “Oh, is this guy going to get my order right?” or, “Is he going to remember my substitution?” or, “Is he going to remember that I have a gluten allergy?” If I make him relax, then he can enjoy the time with his guests, which is the real reason why he comes in, to spend time with others and have a good meal. But just by putting his mind at ease with me, I think that goes a long way in making sure he has a good time.

[0:40:58.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. What about hospitality? How would you kind of define that?

[0:41:06.0]

Mark Casias: Maybe just going the extra step or two, you know, just making his or her time here as accommodating as I can. If they don't like Brussels sprouts and maybe getting them something else, or maybe if there's an appetizer at Magnolias that they really love, maybe going over there and bringing them over, or maybe calling them a taxi or recommending a good ghost tour to go on, just something outside of dinner in the time here, I think is a good direction to go in as far as hospitality. Just maybe helping himself out, "Hey, have you tried Fort Sumter? Nothing like a day on a boat going out there," or, "If you want another recommendation for another restaurant, hey, if you haven't tried Magnolias, maybe you might want to try this place or this place for breakfast," or, "Maybe, hey, you know who has really good desserts? Carmella's right down the street, they have really good desserts." So just any good little piece of advice you can get, I think is good.

[0:42:32.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. I think you kind of mentioned this. You were talking about "real jobs." And I say that with air quotes. But, I mean, when did you decide that service and being a server, you wanted to do that as a career? Would you talk about that and kind of the perceptions?

[0:42:54.2]

Mark Casias: Yeah. Well, like I said, I was in a sales job, and it wasn't much different from what you've seen on the television show *The Office*. I was on the phone trying to sell these musical supplies to music stores and that kind of thing, and it just wasn't for me being at a desk and with a computer monitor in front of you and a headset and talking and making phone calls all day long. That just wasn't for me. I had to be out. I had to be out with the people.

So I came here and I thought, "You know what? If I could just do this for a year or two until I find another something else to do, then I think that'll be my plan. I'll make some quick money and maybe keep my ear out for something else." Well, then, the money was real good, so I just kept on, and then you just meet these incredible people that you work with and, again, who are still friends. We're all still friends to this day, even though they're not here. And you just keep meeting fun people to be around, and next thing you know, work's a pretty fun place to keep coming to. And every night's a different night, and you just never know what's in store for you tomorrow.

And next thing you know, you're having your year anniversary and then it turns into another one and another one, and then you just get caught up into these—you just get caught up. "Oh, Southeastern Wildlife Exposition's coming up. I can't quit now. I've got to work that. That'll be good." "Oh, springtime's coming. Springtime's our busiest season. Oh, so that'll be good money. That'll be a good cushion, so I'll work that for a couple of months through Easter." "Oh, well, graduation's coming up, and then Spoleto Festival's coming up." "Oh, I can't quit because summer's come up because I need to take some time off and go to Vegas or go to Atlanta to see some ballgames." And, "Oh,

well, football season's coming up and I need my Saturdays off, and maybe I should stay here and work just through football season." And then, "Oh, the fall and Thanksgiving's coming up. I've got to stick around for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving's a good time, and Christmas." And then it just starts. Some people want to call it a trap, but it's just a routine, and you get caught up in the routine and then you have some fun along the way, and most nights are better than the bad nights, and it's like any job. I don't think anybody really sets out to do this, but it gets in your blood and you end up sticking around.

[0:45:43.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Do you have people ever, like, treat you negatively or say anything? I was talking to Slade Stokes and he's mentioned something about that.

[0:45:56.4]

Mark Casias: Every now and again, we'll get people in there saying, "Oh, what else do you do?"

And I just say, "You know, this place keeps me plenty busy."

And we'll be talking and, "Oh, you don't want to teach with your history degree?"

And I just tell them, "No. I wanted to get my education, and history was the path I chose," so that.

I think, luckily, now being older, people recognize that that's your craft and that's what you settle into, so I don't get that so much anymore. I think some of the younger people who are in school or who just finished school, I think they get a lot of that. "Oh, what do you want to do next?" or, "What are you planning on doing?" And that's fine,

and some others do have a plan. But I think at this point in my life, it's recognized that this is what I'm going to do and this is probably what I'm going to end up doing.

[0:47:00.4]

Annemarie Anderson: It makes sense. Well, tell me a little bit too—I think you just mentioned this. We've talked a little bit about the relationship you have with your fellow employees here, but what about some of those relationships that you've developed outside of Blossom within kind of the industry in Charleston? So, other relationships that you've developed with other servers.

[0:47:28.0]

Mark Casias: I think all my relationships with other servers started here, and a lot of folks have since moved on to the other places and they're still there. A lot of my relationships here, they have moved on to other things outside of the business. Gosh, I have a couple of handfuls of people I work with have become nurses. I feel like I've gone through nursing school sometimes because we help each other study with the cards and things like that, and they've gone on. Other people have gone on to do great things. There have been a couple of handfuls of people that have gone on to other restaurants, and it's fun to occasionally go there and then see them doing their thing somewhere else and catching up with them a little bit. Relationships?

[0:48:33.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, as far as, like, is there—do you feel that there’s a community, I guess?

[0:48:39.2]

Mark Casias: Oh, yeah, yeah, for sure. Not so much now, but in my younger days, you leave work and you go out and have a few drinks or something or some food, and you’ll meet up with people from other places. There’s several food and beverage-type late-night places to hang out, and you’ll run into the same people there. But, yeah, there’s a great community of the food and beverage people in Charleston, and we all kind of know each other or we certainly recognize each other, and we all certainly get along and, yeah, we like to go out and eat and drink too. We’re just not going to stay at our same place. So we like to go out and eat and drink, too, and when you’re sitting somewhere, you’ll kind of mention that, “Oh, yeah, I work at Blossom. Hey, you should come in there sometime, and I’ll look out for you.”

Yeah, that’s a great camaraderie between everybody in the restaurants here, and I think that’s the same just about anywhere. It’s not really any kind of rivalry or anything. It’s a great friendship, because we all know what we have to go through. We’re one big support group for each other. One big dysfunctional family, I think everybody says, yeah.
[Laughter]

[0:50:07.5]

Annemarie Anderson: I could see that. What were some of those places that are kind of like industry hotspots to go and have a drink or get something to eat after work?

[0:50:17.3]

Mark Casias: There's a great place right down Waterfront Park, it's called the Griffin, and if you haven't gone there, you need to stick your head in there. It's pretty legendary. This is a place where it's really dark and there's just lots of—well, I think there's wood, but now there are dollar bills all over the entire place, and people leave their mark there. They certainly look out for the food and beverage folks, and there are other folks in there too. But they know to get the shot glasses ready and that kind of thing. So we all love the Griffin.

There's a place, Carmella's, which I mentioned earlier. There's a dessert place in there. The guy that owns it used to be a bartender here, and so we love them and we support them, they support us. We get a discount anytime of the day down there, so it's very easy to go there, and everything down there is just great. They have coffee and a full bar and desserts and sandwiches and things like that. It's such a great place.

And there have been, sadly, other places that aren't around anymore. There's was Mo's Crosstown Tavern and Mo's Downtown here. There was just one right a couple blocks away. TBonz on Market was a very popular place back in the olden days too. So we raise a glass to those places not with us anymore. [Laughter]

[0:51:47.7]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, what—I mean, what have been some of the most enduring, important lessons you've learned since you started this job or this—just started as a server?

[0:51:59.4]

Mark Casias: Well, gosh, if I learned anything, it's just everybody's different, and you just have to be really patient. Yeah, just everybody's different. What works for some people may not work for other people. You've got to let the guest tell you what they're looking for. They're looking for something casual, they want to be left alone, if they want more interaction, if they want more attention, yeah. It's hard to read, but, yeah, you've got to figure that out. Certainly everybody's different. And patience.

[0:52:47.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And I think this has come up with every single person I've talked to, just because it's obvious, but I think service is physically, mentally, and emotionally sometimes really a lot challenging.

[0:53:05.7]

Mark Casias: Yeah.

[0:53:06.6]

Annemarie Anderson: In what ways, I guess, do your employers support—like what sort of support do you need to kind of do this job day in and day out?

[0:53:12.8]

Mark Casias: Well, we need an employer that kind of understands what we have to go through on a daily basis, and, luckily, our general manager is someone I waited tables with, so she knows that we need a comfortable place to work in, she knows that we need supplies and we need food and we need to be kept happy, and she does a great job doing that. She's always good for bringing in a couple bags of candy on the weekends for us to nibble on, so she keeps us happy. It's nice having someone that's been in our shoes and fighting for us too.

[0:54:10.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

[0:54:15.1]

Mark Casias: Yeah. I don't know.

[0:54:16.9]

Annemarie Anderson: No. Is there any—I don't have any more questions for you, but is there anything that we haven't talked about or that you want to talk about that you haven't mentioned?

[0:54:25.0]

Mark Casias: No. It's just like, you know, you never set out to do this, but once it gets in your blood, it's just one of those things. It's just being a lifer. And it's been great. It's been good to me. Like I said, gosh, I have a house and I get to take trips and I get a great

set schedule. Everything's just—it's been a good run. I don't know how much longer I'll be doing it, but it's been a good run. There are no regrets. I met a lot of great people, god, I've been so lucky, and some of which are still in my life today, and I don't know where I'd be without them. Yeah, it's been really great. [Laughter]

[0:55:19.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, thank you so much for talking to me, Mr. Casias.

[0:55:22.7]

Mark Casias: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

[0:55:23.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Me too.

[End of interview]