



Southern Foodways Alliance

Jesselyn Back

Clay Pot - Waco, TX

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Subminimum Wage

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Angelica Mazé: And we're recording. OK, the date is April 18, 2024. This is Angelica Mazé. I am conducting a project about Waco restaurant servers earning the subminimum wage, on behalf of the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am here with a narrator, and her name is Jesse. Jesse, would you like to introduce yourself with your full name?

Jesselyn Back: Yes, it is Jesselyn Back.

Angelica Mazé: Thank you. And when were you born, Jesse? If you don't mind sharing.

Jesselyn Back: June 13, 1992.

Angelica Mazé: OK, where?

Jesselyn Back: In Lubbock, Texas.

Angelica Mazé: Lubbock, OK! What brought you to Waco?

Jesselyn Back: My dad actually works at Baylor, so that's why we came out this way.

Angelica Mazé: When did y'all move, roughly?

Jesselyn Back: 2004 I think is when we moved to Waco.

Angelica Mazé: OK, cool. So, you've been here for—

Jesselyn Back: A while.

Angelica Mazé: OK. Let's just hop right into it. You can tell this tale however you want, but how did you come to working as a restaurant server in Waco? How did you end up finding that type of employment?

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Jesselyn Back: My first real job was at Pizza Hut, so I started working in the food industry, and then I kind of left that and worked in retail for a long time in Austin. And then when I moved back to Waco, I was going to Baylor, and I needed a job that I could make a lot of money in a short amount of time, so I started looking at serving jobs, and that's kind of what led me to doing that.

Angelica Mazé: How old were you when you moved back from Austin?

Jesselyn Back: Oh goodness, I think I was twenty-one or twenty-two.

Angelica Mazé: So, you were coming back and in school. Where did you get that first serving job?

Jesselyn Back: It was actually at Mama Fu's, so another Asian restaurant. [chuckles]

Angelica Mazé: Were you making subminimum wage there? Were you making that \$2.13 an hour? If you don't mind my asking what they paid you.

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Jesselyn Back: Yes, whenever you were clocked in as a server, it was \$2.13. And then I also drove for them and did deliveries, and that was only \$5 an hour.

Angelica Mazé: Wow. How long were you at Mama Fu's for?

Jesselyn Back: Until they closed down, essentially. So, a few years.

Angelica Mazé: Do you want to talk about that experience at all?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, we can. That was actually one of my favorite jobs that I've ever had

because the management was so awesome and our team was so awesome. Back then, I guess things didn't cost as much anyway. [both laugh] We actually made really good money there because it was a small place, so whenever you're working, it was only a few people, so you were making pretty good money regardless of the pay situation, which was nice. But yeah, I loved it, and that's what made me pursue other jobs in the industry, because I had a good experience with that.

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Angelica Mazé: And Mama Fu's is a franchise?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: So, it was like a local person who owned this particular branch of Mama Fu's and was employing you. Is that right?

Jesselyn Back: Well, I mean, I guess not, then. I think... I honestly don't remember there being a specific owner. I think the headquarters out of Austin kind of owned different ones, but I don't know if someone in particular ever owned the Waco one, or if it was just part of the whole. I really don't know.

Angelica Mazé: OK, that's fine. Don't worry about it. It's all good. [both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: I have no idea, actually, now that I think about it.

Angelica Mazé: It was a while ago. So, at the time you were working part time, and then also going to college full time?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Sorry, did you say you were at Baylor?

Jesselyn Back: I was at Baylor during that first year, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: So, you said you went in with the expectation that that would be a way to make good money with not too much of your time, because you were in school. Did that prove to be the case?

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Jesselyn Back: Yes, I think so. For sure.

Angelica Mazé: OK, so fast forward. You were no longer in school, and then Mama Fu's closed. Is that the right timeline? Walk me through what came next.

Jesselyn Back: Well, I dropped out of college.

Angelica Mazé: Me too. [both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: Whoops! And then I was just working full time for five years, I think, before I went back to school and got my degree. I went to school online. That was way easier for me. I could just work all the time and then go to school online and get it done.

Angelica Mazé: So, Mama Fu's closed, and then you were still working full time somewhere else, and then you went back to school? Or, what came after Mama Fu's?

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Jesselyn Back: When Mama Fu's closed, I got a job at George's that I hated. Absolutely worst job of my life. I did that for a couple of months, and then Clay Pot, I was a regular customer there, and I saw that they were opening a new restaurant downtown where they were

moving, so I was like, “OK, I wanna go try to work for them,” because I already knew I loved the food, and I already knew I loved the people that owned it, so I was like, “OK, this seems like it’ll be a way better fit than George’s.” So, that’s just what we did.

Angelica Mazé: Do you want to talk about why George’s was so horrible?

Jesselyn Back: Ooh...

Angelica Mazé: Up to you.

Jesselyn Back: We can, we can. [Angelica laughs] The clientele is just not up my alley, and just the way that they wanted you to work, I just wasn’t really comfortable with. Not that they ever say, “Hey, we want you to look like this or be like that.” It was expected that you always had your makeup done, you always had your hair done, you know—your legs shaved, so you could always wear your little short with your socks. And that’s just not my cup of tea.

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I wanted to work there because I heard they make a lot of money, and then I realized how you had to be to make a lot of money there, and that just was not for me.

Angelica Mazé: That’s really interesting, because—just for the record, George’s is a Waco institution. There are at least—I think there are two locations in Waco. It is a local business owned by a family, and they’ve been around for I don’t know how long, but like thirty years at least.

Jesselyn Back: A long time.

Angelica Mazé: A long time, thirty years if not more. And they’re kind of a sports bar,

right?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm.

Angelica Mazé: And the few times I've been there, they are very packed. They're packed, like, all the time on the weekends. It's crazy. But, I've always wondered, if you don't mind digging a little bit deeper into that, it sounds like it was pretty gendered, too?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm.

Angelica Mazé: In terms of you as a woman—correct me if I'm wrong, did they have the same expectations of male servers as they did of female servers?

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Jesselyn Back: To be honest, I don't even remember if there was any male servers. I think everyone that was a server or bart—well, I think there was a few guys that were bartenders, and food runners and stuff were men, but everyone that I remember serving was a girl, when I was there.

Angelica Mazé: Wow, OK. So, that may not have been an accident?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah. Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: How long were you there for? You said a couple months?

Jesselyn Back: A couple months, yeah. Not very long. I did not last long. The management there was also just not the best and were doing interesting things that I did not agree with. So, ugh, it was just a mix of all that that just was not fun. It made me uncomfortable, I guess is the best way to say it. It wasn't going to be a sustainable place for me, because I can't

just... put my thoughts aside [laughs] and just do things, I guess. Is that what you would call it?

Angelica Mazé: Yeah.

Jesselyn Back: I know there's a word I'm looking for.

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Angelica Mazé: You have values and standards that you are not willing, maybe, to compromise—[laughs]

Jesselyn Back: There you go. That's it.

Angelica Mazé: —to earn a living. It's totally fine if the answer is no: Are you comfortable talking about some of the things that the management was up to that made you uncomfortable? Or, if you're not comfortable...

Jesselyn Back: Oh no, we can. They were doing drugs with employees and having sex with employees. There you go.

[laughter]

Angelica Mazé: Ah. I'm uncomfortable hearing that.

Jesselyn Back: Exactly.

Angelica Mazé: OK, so you had been a patron of Clay Pot, which is a Vietnamese restaurant downtown Waco—or, it wasn't downtown at the time, I think.

Jesselyn Back: When I was going to eat there, I was at Baylor, over here.

Angelica Mazé: At Baylor, OK. Yeah, which is where we're recording. So, you had already been a customer there, and you heard they were hiring, and you went over. And take it away.

What came next? How did that begin?

Jesselyn Back: I interviewed before they opened the location, so I was part of the whole new staff for the new restaurant. So, we spent a lot of time together training, which I loved.

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I had never had a job that really went out of their way to train you really well, so I really appreciated that. Also, it being Vietnamese food and me being a white person, [laughs] you know, it was nice to actually get immersed in the culture a little bit to learn what we were actually serving and doing. And they're very family oriented people, and it's a family business, so they just brought all of us on like family, and I just felt like at home pretty fast. So, I served for how long? How long? [laughs, thinking] I guess it's just been about a year or two that I've been managing exclusively, so I served for them for like five years.

Angelica Mazé: OK, wow! And at some point, you were there for how long, roughly, before you went back to school online?

Jesselyn Back: Maybe like a year or two? Yeah, I think like a year or two.

Angelica Mazé: And were you working full time during that period?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

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Angelica Mazé: And you were making at that time the subminimum wage?

Jesselyn Back: Three dollars an hour, the servers were, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Were you able to make all your ends meet while you were working full

time there? Were you living at home or renting an apartment? What was your living situation like at the time?

Jesselyn Back: At the beginning, I was living in someone's living room, for essentially free, so [laughs] I was lucky with that. I just helped pay the water bill or something like that. I was doing just fine. And then after that, I moved—where did we move? Well, I got a significant other, and we moved in with two other people, so the four of us split a house payment. So, that was also relatively affordable. But if I would have been out on my own, I probably wouldn't have been able to afford to live by myself.

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Angelica Mazé: And this would have been roughly what year?

Jesselyn Back: 2017 – 2018.

Angelica Mazé: 2017 – 2018, OK. So, do you mind my asking roughly what that house cost for renting for four people at that time, or for you individually?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so back then our rent was \$800, and we split it by room. And then me and my now-fiancé, we shared a room, so we split that room, so ours was like \$150 [laughs] a person for rent, which is insane. But very affordable. So, that's how we were able [both laugh] to finesse that.

Angelica Mazé: Nice. So, were you still living in that house with your—so, you were there with your current fiancé?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm.

Angelica Mazé: Sharing a room, but you had roommates?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Was it like a two-bedroom house or something?

Jesselyn Back: Three bedroom, yeah. So, they each had a room, and then we shared a room.

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Angelica Mazé: Oh OK, cool. And then were you living there when you decided to go back to school online? Or did you move?

Jesselyn Back: Actually, I forgot that I went back to MCC for like a year and a half before I went to online school, so I was going to MCC while I was in that house, yes.

Angelica Mazé: And were you in school full time?

Jesselyn Back: Full time.

Angelica Mazé: So, working full time, school full time.

Jesselyn Back: Always, yes. [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: Wow!

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: That's a lot.

Jesselyn Back: Fun.

Angelica Mazé: [laughs] And as you say, so fun. So, just walk me through it. When did

you leave that home? Because I think maybe you and your fiancé moved into a place of your—you know, just walk me through the next housing situation. And it sounds like Clay Pot, you stayed there through all this, but what was the next move?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so we... What did we do? Me and my fiancé moved in with Scott the year after that. And we all lived there for a year, and then, what did we do after that?

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Angelica Mazé: I think you moved into that place across from Shorty's.

Jesselyn Back: Oh yes, yes. [cross-talk] So, that was really a really cheap place too. It was like \$625.

Angelica Mazé: That whole place?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Wow, OK.

Jesselyn Back: There was no insulation, and you know...

Angelica Mazé: It was an old place, as I recall. [both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: But still, cheap, livable, we made it work. So, we went there, and then we rented our last place that we stayed at for three or four years almost. Three or four years, yeah. I can't off the top of my head remember exactly, but somewhere around there. And that one was considerably more expensive. We moved up to \$1,050, then they went up to \$1,150, and then \$1,250. Every year, they were bumping it up \$100, and not doing anything to fix it, [laughs] or you know, the normal stuff that they do.

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But yeah, I graduated in 2020, I think. Yeah, good old 2020! Yes I did! [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, we'll get to that year shortly.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so I was working—I've been through a lot with Clay Pot—I was working still at Clay Pot that whole time, and exclusively serving until the latter half of 2020 when I started doing social media marketing for her too.

Angelica Mazé: OK. Just really quickly: You went back to college online; where did you get your degree, and what did you get your degree in?

Jesselyn Back: I was going to Washington State University, and I got my degree in Strategic Communication.

Angelica Mazé: Cool. So, you graduated, and we can talk more about this, but did you have social media marketing in mind when you got that degree?

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Jesselyn Back: Yes, I did. Yes, I definitely did. That's something I had always wanted, to have my own business. And I really enjoyed creating, the creative side, doing the photography, and all the writing, and stuff like that, so I was super excited to do my own thing and be my own boss, mainly.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, so that's one of the things I want to remember to ask everybody, is kind of like, while you're doing this work, this serving work, is that something—I think it's pretty rare, but sometimes people envision themselves doing that for a long time, but usually

folks that I'm talking to have other things that they are working on, like, they're going to school, or they've got plans to move on from working in restaurants at some point. So, while you were working at Clay Pot, you were already, it sounds like, thinking about what you were going to do next.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, even though I'm still there. [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: That's OK! That's OK. But you are also doing that work.

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: So, you graduated in 2020, and then you became the social media marketing manager for Clay Pot—

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Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: —at the same time. And you were still at that point serving?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: How did split your time at work, between the two roles?

Jesselyn Back: My effort at the restaurant would mainly be me serving, and then taking photos while I was there to do my social media stuff, but I can do my social media stuff from anywhere, which is one of the other benefits of that. So, most of my time spent there was actually serving, and then I would—at home or wherever I was, I could do the rest of the stuff.

Angelica Mazé: Well, I'm glad we got to 2020, because this is definitely already developing into a theme for most people.

Jesselyn Back: Honestly, I forgot about 2020. [laughs] After the last year of my life, I totally forgot we went through all that. Whew!

Angelica Mazé: It feels like a long time ago, but certainly we'll get into specifically for you why it was a momentous year, but I know for everybody—everybody who worked in the service industry, the pandemic presented some challenges and also a very different environment from what people were used to working for in all kinds of different ways.

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Jesselyn Back: Definitely.

Angelica Mazé: So, do you want to just talk about—well, let's just start off at the beginning of 2020. You graduated. Did you graduate in spring of 2020?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, May. Is that spring?

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, that's spring.

Jesselyn Back: Because fall would be—yeah, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: I count it as spring just because it's spring semester, so for our purposes, we'll call it spring. It doesn't feel like spring in Texas.

Jesselyn Back: Ever. [both laugh]

Angelica Mazé: So, let's just start at the beginning of 2020. You want to talk about how things were going at work? We'll focus on that, but then all of the life stuff too, we'll get to that.

Jesselyn Back: OK, yeah. So, 2020, I was getting ready to graduate. I was super excited. In my last semester, we actually took a trip to San Francisco.

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Literally, we got back two days before they announced that they were shutting everything down, or maybe like three, maybe. I don't know. That same week, they shut the world down, essentially.

Angelica Mazé: Like, right after you got back?

Jesselyn Back: Right after we got back. We could have got [laughs] stuck there. But it was crazy because everywhere we were going, of course you're hearing the news, but like no one had changed anything, you know. Nothing had been like—we wore masks, actually, on the plane, which I had never done before in my life. But definitely, I was like, "Let's be safe."

Angelica Mazé: On the way back?

Jesselyn Back: On the way there and back, just to be safe. My parents are science people, so you know, they were like, "Come on now." [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: So, this is when we were hearing that this outbreak had occurred in China, with Covid-19.

Jesselyn Back: Stuff was going on.

Angelica Mazé: But we didn't know.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, we didn't know how severe, really, it was in the US yet, so we went on that little trip. It was amazing. Got back. I literally worked a few days, was serving a few days after we got back, and then boom, everyone had to shut down, so that was crazy.

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And we had no idea what we were gonna do, what we were gonna be able to do. So actually, at the restaurant we ended up gathering all of our supplies and stuff and trying to—made a little grocery store, essentially, for people. Because as we all know, all the grocery stores were selling out, and it was insanity.

Angelica Mazé: No toilet paper, all these essential things, flour, rice—

Jesselyn Back: —No one had, yeah. And we had all that stuff at the restaurant we weren't going to be able to use anymore, so we just essentially set up a little grocery store to help all our local people and to help us survive the rest of what was to come, which was crazy. I don't even remember how long we had to close for. Do you know off the top of your head? I can't remember.

Angelica Mazé: I'm trying to remember. Because I was also working in service at the time, at Balcones, the whiskey distillery. I want to say—I'm not sure if the two businesses we worked at were closed and open for the same time period.

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But it was, I want to say, through May before we opened again, and that was in the parking lot in a tent, and we hadn't even gone inside yet. Y'all started doing curbside at some point.

Jesselyn Back: Curbside, yeah. We were doing to-go only. Yeah, curbside probably started around the same time, I think. As soon as they gave the go ahead, both our businesses were like, "OK, we're gonna do this," blah blah blah. But my timeline is—[laughs] I'm not sure exactly. I actually just did my social media stuff during that time and let some of the other people that needed their jobs back to survive be the ones that came in and worked in the restaurant when we

were open like that. So, I was lucky enough to have something else to do, because there was no way I would have been able to survive on \$7.25, I think. Or maybe she was paying \$8.00, I think, just for working the counter—plus tips, still.

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But during that time, it would have been crazy, because we had several people that this was their livelihood, especially the people that work in the kitchen and all that, that are all hourly. They needed the money, and I was like, “I’m not gonna take that from you guys,” you know? So, I was lucky enough to have another thing that I was doing that could help hold me over.

Angelica Mazé: Were you working full time doing social media management through all that?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm, yes.

Angelica Mazé: OK, so she was paying you full time to keep doing that?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: At \$8.00, you said?

Jesselyn Back: Oh, no. For me, umm, oh my goodness. This was the beginning, I think. We were doing \$500 a month? So, it wasn’t anything crazy, but...

Angelica Mazé: So, that payment came as sort of like a contract payment or a freelance payment for that?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: And then you would get paid...

Jesselyn Back: For whatever work I did in the restaurant, yes.

Angelica Mazé: So, folks at that time were not, obviously, waiting tables, so they had people working the kitchen to make food, and somebody at the counter?

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Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: One or two somebodies to fulfill orders.

Jesselyn Back: Exactly.

Angelica Mazé: And then we're guessing here, May-ish, possibly, y'all were able to open up again. Talk about that a little bit, like when you started having customers, maybe. Just talk a little bit about the adjustments you had to make when you opened the doors again. Like, did you have to space tables? You know, all of that. Did you have to take precautions for Covid? And then we can talk a little bit about how it worked with the customers too, interactions and all that.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so fun. [both laugh] So, we did. We opened back up, and we had a lot of precautions, actually, that we took. We were taking temperatures. Everyone had to wear a mask. We did have to space the tables apart. We were really good about wearing gloves and trying to limit contact in all those ways, which seemed pretty simple and straightforward for us who wanted to stay safe.

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But for some people, on the other hand, people were not exactly very nice. And I don't know if that played into a little bit of racism because we were an Asian establishment. I mean, it

definitely did. Let's be honest, it did. But yeah, people weren't always kind about having to wear a mask. We got cussed out multiple times.

Angelica Mazé: Wow.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, people storming out [laughs] saying all kinds of crazy stuff. Like, we had to deal with a lot of craziness those first few months after we reopened. It was actually pretty freakin' ridiculous, that. I just didn't understand, why are you coming out [laughs] to just berate people when we're just trying to keep *you* safe? Not even just us. Yeah, so that was wild. Not too fun, and that's what really started me not wanting to be in the service industry as much anymore, because that kind of took my faith in humanity down a little bit.

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Angelica Mazé: You have that in common with many people. [both laugh] It was a real reckoning, I think, for a lot of us, myself included.

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Backtracking just a little bit to clarify for future-lings who maybe don't remember the pandemic [Jesselyn laughs] many, many years from now, lucky ducks. Here's hoping, knock wood. I think I know what you were driving at, but do you think some of this resistance and some of the abuse, you said, was coming from racism directed at the Vietnamese family that owns Clay Pot? Was that directly connected to the fact that the virus had come out of China and there was this kind of anti-Asian backlash across the country?

Jesselyn Back: Absolutely. Absolutely. Especially where we are located, and you know, the politics here anyway, in general.

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It's always kind of had that little, like, people come in and kind of act a little unsavory sometimes. But this, the pandemic really put it over the edge with people not caring about how they came off at all. There was no—they did not have any filter. They did not care. They just wanted to say how they felt, I guess. How they really felt, what they've probably been wanting to say all along but didn't have a good enough excuse to say stuff. Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: And would most of this come up as a result of these customers' resistance to the safety measures you were...?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm, wearing a mask.

Angelica Mazé: It was specifically wearing a mask?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: It's fine if you don't, or don't want to, but do you remember any incidents that stick out to you? Just any incident where people were particularly inappropriate?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, there's a few. One of the ones that sticks in my mind the most was, we had a regular. This woman came in to to eat with us several times a week.

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She brought in—I don't remember if it was her sister. It was someone that I hadn't seen before. But they came in, sister wasn't wearing a mask. She was, 'cause she knows better. [laughs] 'Cause she comes all the time. We asked the sister to, politely, "You're gonna have to wear a mask, or you're not gonna be able to come in. That's just our rules for now." And she lost it and

started screaming, cussing at us, slamming the door. Like, literally went insane. Her sister stayed and ate there, our regular, because [laughs] she loves our food. And she apologized for that. But I'm just like, "What the heck?" Yeah, cussing us out. I don't think she said anything particularly racist.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, just any recollections.

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Jesselyn Back: We got bad reviews saying that we're stupid and we don't understand how things work, and just things that were insinuating a lot of racist stuff, but they were just writing online because they had to wear a mask to come in and eat at the restaurant. And a lot of these people were people that came and ate with us a lot before and then decided to—so, I'm not gonna name any names about this, but several different business owners that are local to Waco, that own local Waco businesses, said some pretty messed up stuff during that time, either directly to our faces or wrote stuff online. So, I no longer support those businesses, because I know who they are, but it was really disheartening to see how messed up people were.

Angelica Mazé: People in your direct, professional community.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Just keeping it very general, like you said, so you don't have to name names, were any of those businesses also food businesses—

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: —who were dealing with the same kinds of—OK. Or maybe they weren't dealing—it sounds like they weren't as worried about safety measures.

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Jesselyn Back: Oh yeah, not at all, they definitely did not care about that. The real political side of everything definitely divided a lot of people, and they just... [inhales sharply] yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Did those patrons, or any of these folks, regulars, or people who you knew through the very small Waco food community—it's still pretty small—did they stop going after they had these meltdowns or whatever? Or did they keep coming back?

Jesselyn Back: Some of them would order to-go, still, because they couldn't give up their Clay Pot fix. [Angelica laughs] But a few of them I didn't see for a long time, until, actually I saw somebody for the first time not too long ago, that I hadn't seen since then, and they literally were like, "Yeah, we couldn't deal with that maskin' stuff. This is the first time we've been back." And I'm like, "Yeah, I've been here every day. I know you haven't been here, so, cool! [laughs] Glad to have you back, guys. Hurray!" It's just crazy.

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Angelica Mazé: My timeline is also pretty blurry from particularly that year. [both laugh] It was a very surreal year; it's very hard to keep track of.

Jesselyn Back: Seriously.

Angelica Mazé: But, let's assume you were back open, we're guessing around May something. How long were you dealing with that? How long were you dealing with masking and all of the other safety precautions, but also dealing with—

Jesselyn Back: Until we stopped enforcing it. There was not a week that went by that we

didn't have to deal with something crazy.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah. And that would have been—

Jesselyn Back: That was a while.

Angelica Mazé: —into 2021, right?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah. We stayed masking for at least, I feel like, a whole entire year after that. At least.

Angelica Mazé: Wow, that's a long time to put up with abuse on a weekly basis.

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm. [laughs]

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Angelica Mazé: Before we get beyond that, let's talk a little bit, because that was not the only thing that made 2020 difficult for you personally. And it does tie in—I think we were talking about this before—a bit into how one makes a living and prepares for things that are difficult to prepare for. So, what else happened in 2020 that was challenging for you?

Jesselyn Back: 2020?

Angelica Mazé: Or 2021 maybe. [pause] Cancer?

Jesselyn Back: 2023.

Angelica Mazé: Oh my gosh, that's right! [cross-talk, laughter] My bad.

Jesselyn Back: I'm like, what am I forgetting about?

Angelica Mazé: You're like, "That's it." OK, so then I'm jumping the gun. It just feels like

it's been a long time.

Jesselyn Back: I feel like something did happen though, in 2020. I think we had a mini-flood in 2020.

Angelica Mazé: Oh, that's what it was! The flood!

Jesselyn Back: And that was still—that was last year, the big one, but we actually had a lot of weird stuff happen.

Angelica Mazé: You did! Something came—it wasn't the ceiling that happened last year, but you had something.

0:31:01

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, in 2020 someone broke in and turned all the gas up all the way, and it set off the sprinklers in there, so we had to close for a couple days. It wasn't crazy like the real big flood. But yeah, someone broke in and turned up all the gas lines, and it set off the sprinklers, and that was during the Covid timeline, you know. So, we are assuming it's tying into all the rest of that craziness that was going on. But yeah, that definitely was wild.

Angelica Mazé: But you were only closed for a few days?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah. For that one, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: All right, so fast forward. Now we're in 2021. Masking mandates have eased up.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Are you at that point more or less back to serving full time and then also

doing social media marketing for Clay Pot?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: And Clay Pot also has this other sort of sister business, which is Le's Kitchen. The owner's sister opened that place.

0:32:03

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm, in that year. It was 2021.

Angelica Mazé: It was 2021 as well. So, were you immediately doing social media marketing for them as well?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, I helped her do the whole business, do all that stuff on that side, so yes.

Angelica Mazé: Out of curiosity, because you had this—I don't want to call it extra income, you had two jobs. But, you had two jobs, so you had income coming from all of the social media marketing. I'm assuming you got paid separate, or extra, for taking on that other account with Le's Kitchen?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: How would the pandemic have looked like for you, and how would have those last few years looked like for you financially, or making ends meet, or reaching your goals, if you hadn't had that social media marketing job, and then the second job as well?

Jesselyn Back: I would have been homeless. [laughs] Seriously. There is no way I would have been able to afford to live. No way. No way.

0:33:00

Especially if I was living alone. Absolutely not. I mean, I could go move back in with my parents; that would probably be the only option. But yeah, there's no way I could have afforded to keep paying for anything—

Angelica Mazé: On just your serving wages?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah. Especially being closed, doing all the other stuff. We all know serving comes from the tips. So, just like working in retail, you get no tips, but working behind the counter, your tips are going to be significantly less, so even that \$8.00 an hour is not—there's no way you're going to be able to afford to live.

Angelica Mazé: It's fine if you don't have details, but I'm just curious, it's worth asking. You said some of the other folks during the pandemic, the folks who you sort of made room for them to work because you had this other gig to work at Clay Pot, you said that they were relying pretty heavily, or almost exclusively on that wage to support themselves.

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Do you have any sense from having talked to them what that was like for them?

0:33:58

Jesselyn Back: Most of them had to get another job, for sure. I think like probably 98% of the people, maybe like one person that was their only income, but they didn't need that to fully support themselves. It was just like extra income that they wanted to keep. So yeah, it was hard for everybody. Everybody was struggling, and thankfully the owner, our boss, was really

awesome and was doing everything she could to take care of everybody. Otherwise, I feel like she would have just had to shut it down and just have the family run it, you know? But she made sure there was still room for everyone to be taken care of, as much as she could. Which made a whole difference.

Angelica Mazé: That's rare and wonderful.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, and that's why people wanted to stay and work, even if they didn't necessarily need this job, they kept this job and also picked up another one.

Angelica Mazé: OK. So that they would always have this?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so they could come back whenever we were fully open again.

0:34:56

Angelica Mazé: And at the time—and I'm just saying this because I know this—you were living with your partner who was working full time at Balcones, the whiskey distillery.

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm.

Angelica Mazé: That's right, right?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: I will say for the record that I worked with Jesse's partner at Balcones Distilling during this time period. We were both working full time, but we—

Jesselyn Back: In the back.

Angelica Mazé: —were working in the warehouse, because we both worked in front of house, and of course all of the front of house operations in the tasting room before it shut down.

So, we were rolling barrels and stuff. But presumably having a partner, like you said, if you had been doing it alone, but you had a partner who was still employed full time, so that—

Jesselyn Back: That helped, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: So then it sounds like we're kind of back to normal, relatively speaking, once things kind of mid—

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, I feel like by the end of 2021, everything was pretty much back to what it was. I say that, and now I'm...

0:35:59

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, me too.

Jesselyn Back: I'm thinking that we did something else first. Well, we were having regular dine-in, but we had changed—OK, this is great actually.

Angelica Mazé: Yes! [both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: Big brain moment. So, when we opened back up, we were doing counter service instead of just full service, so we actually didn't have *any* servers. We had—everyone was working behind the counter, and everyone was kind of working together. She was paying everyone, I think, \$12 an hour that was working counter service, plus tips that you would get from the counter service. So yeah, after Covid we were all a little scared, a little worried about how we had been treated, so we weren't sure how it was going to be, going back to fully regular serving, you know, \$3 an hour normal stuff. We were all pretty concerned about how that was gonna go, so that's why we actually decided to do counter service.

0:37:00

Just to ease back into everything and make sure—like I said, thankfully she cared about us—to make sure everybody was going to get paid. So, we did do that for a while, but it just wasn't sustainable in small business. Like, just being able to run a small business after all of that, because just business was not the same as it used to be after Covid. It never really peaked back to what it was before, and I don't know if that has anything to do with just Covid, or just the economy in general, everything being more expensive, people having less money in general. We ended up switching back to just full service, normal model. I don't even remember now how long it's been. Like a year?

Angelica Mazé: I feel like it hasn't been that long.

Jesselyn Back: Maybe like a year, year and a half, something like that now that we've been back to the service model, which, I mean, it works.

0:38:02

She's able to save some money off the top for them, but she's paying the rest of us more now also, so it kind of evens it out a little bit. But I'm trying to think. Yeah, because the cost of living has gone up, so thankfully she's been able to pay us more, otherwise a lot of us probably wouldn't be able to stay dealing with that. But yeah, less people, we have to work a little bit harder, but you do make more money. It's always that fine line and that balance of, how are you going to make it work? Especially for a small business. You don't have all those extra funds and everything else, especially after the flood [laughs] and everything else that happened.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, the great flood. Well, before we get to the great flood [Jesselyn

laughs] and all the calamity that was 2023—I feel bad, [laughs] my timelines are obviously all over the place.

Jesselyn Back: No, that’s me too. It all feels like one big year. [laughs]

0:39:00

Angelica Mazé: It’s just like a three-year block that’s squished together. How did you notice tips coming in during that pandemic period? Because I’ve seen different people say, in some areas of the country and in some restaurants—people who had a lot of regulars that they had a good relationship with, established over the course of months and years—that those continued to tip really well during the pandemic.

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm. If not more, for sure. People definitely showed up for us and were tipping and doing all that good stuff for us for a good while after everything happened, too, and then it kind of just trailed off a little bit after that, I think once people realized how serious their actual financial situation was after there was no more, what was it?

Angelica Mazé: PPE?

0:40:00

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, and unemployment, all that stuff—

Siri [Jesselyn Back’s phone]: Sorry, I don’t understand.

Jesselyn Back: Oh wow, Siri. [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: That was Siri. Sorry, you were saying customer-wise, some of them got government subsidies and things that were put in place to help people who were out of work

during the pandemic. Once those funds dried up, you noticed that in tipping?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm, and people just coming out in general. We definitely had a lull in business, a big lull.

Angelica Mazé: We're in 2024 now, and we'll get to 2023, but it's been, we think, maybe at least a year since you've been back to full table-service at the restaurant. How are people tipping these days, generally? If you can generalize.

Jesselyn Back: I feel like it really just depends, but honestly what I've seen is either it's gonna be a great day, or people are erring on the side of less than it used to be.

0:41:03

And I've—you know, you've been seeing all the articles lately about how everyone's asking for a tip now. Like, those memes of you're going up to heaven [laughs] and God's up there with a tipping pad. [both laugh] Have you seen that?

Angelica Mazé: No, is that like you're at the pearly gates—[both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: And they're asking for a tip, [both laugh] which is hilarious. But, I just feel like tipping culture has been annihilated, I guess, lately, and there's so many people that think they shouldn't have to tip, and I think that's crazy. That's just crazy, but, you know, there's two sides to that.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, I was going to bring something like that up because of some of the accounts that I follow on Instagram, specifically. I hate to say that I use Instagram as a reference, [Jesselyn laughs] but here we are in 2024. But, accounts like Perfect Union and Insider Food, there are a lot of activism-based food-industry accounts that I follow, and also labor accounts,

where there's a lot of discussion about tipping.

0:42:08

And then like you said, there are articles in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

Everybody's talking about it because everything has a tip option now. You buy something at the grocery store, there's a tip—maybe not the grocery store, but a lot of places are asking for tips. If you are in a convenience store or whatever, there's a tip option everywhere.

Jesselyn Back: Right, like Starbucks now.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, Starbucks, everywhere.

Jesselyn Back: Which never did.

Angelica Mazé: You get a coffee, you get a baked good, sometimes it's not even a food thing, it's just a cashier. And I've seen people getting upset, saying, "I shouldn't have to subsidize this person's wage with my tip."

0:42:57

But in the state of Texas, we're already asking customers to subsidize a server's wage, because the servers don't make the full minimum wage. That wage difference between \$2.13 and \$7.25 an hour is already supposed to be being made up by the customer, which I think is really interesting. I think maybe it's some ignorance, and then also that it's not the same from state to state. So, a state like California is different.

Jesselyn Back: Yes. My opinion on the matter [laughs] is if you're a big corporation and you got money, you better be payin' your people more money, 'cause we all know that you can

afford it. And then with the smaller businesses, I can understand them paying a lower wage for servers and needing the tips to come through a little bit higher.

0:44:00

But I also get it. But even if we were paying the minimum wage, what is that gonna do? You know, at this point, it would really not make a difference between there and there. But I feel like it depends on who the company is that has tried to make things work, and it's all about how if they care enough about you to do whatever they can. We can talk about specifically for me. Even if they're paying that low wage, are they offering you any other benefits? Are they trying to take care of you in any other way? I know people say, "Well, you can go get a different job." Well, a lot of people can't go get a different job, and serving is their livelihood. If you are going to a place where you know they make money off of tipping, you better tip! Or don't go to those places! [Angelica laughs]

0:45:00

You know? I feel like that's simple math. Simple math. But you know, people wanna complain about everything, so it's gotta be something.

Angelica Mazé: [laughs] I feel like you have gotten an earful, especially the last couple years.

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Well, take us to 2023, which was last year. Various things happened. We'll set the stage again by saying you had been open for sure for a while, full service as a restaurant doing table service. And things were kind of shaking out back to normal, whatever that means,

but maybe people weren't spending as much, people weren't tipping as much, and then we head into January to February, 2023.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, so it was January 20th of 2023. It was me and one other coworker that were at the restaurant working in the front. They had just hired people upstairs. They were gonna renovate up there so the owners could actually live upstairs.

0:46:00

Angelica Mazé: Oh, I didn't know that.

Jesselyn Back: That had been the plan for a really, really, really long time. So, she's been saving for that—[laughs] poor Thanh—to do all that, and this was the first day they had people up there working to start renovations, and they busted two of the water—somehow, with a two-by-four, just turned around fast and busted two water lines, and it flooded the restaurant. Literally, in like less than a couple minutes, the entire restaurant was completely flooded. There was customers in there eating—yeah!—that literally refused to leave because they wanted to finish their food! [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: The water's rising [laughs] and they—

Jesselyn Back: We had to kick them out! They really wouldn't leave! So, if that's any testament to how good food can really make your day. [both laugh] And that's one of the good parts about working in the service industry, because you're bringing people joy through food, which I know me and you both really appreciate that. [laughs]

0:47:00

So, besides that—that was crazy—we ended up being closed 'til May of that year, so about five

months of being completely closed. [clears throat] And then I, unfortunately, got diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer at the end of February of that same year. So, we closed down the restaurant, and I mean no one could work because the restaurant was completely destroyed, so they had to rebuild everything. So, I was making no money there. Thankfully I still had my social media stuff, though, so I was able to make money through that, and our boss, she was able to pay us whatever she could each month that we were closed. All the full-time employees, she still paid as much as she could for us to, you know, just to get by.

0:47:55

And I'm trying to remember, quite a few of us were trying to apply for unemployment during this time, but it had been right around the time the OI plant closed—the glass plant here—so the offices were so busy trying to get all those people on unemployment through their company, that literally a lot of us could never get through to even apply. I went up there, did all the things they told me to do, and then they literally could never get through to actually process. Only one person was able to get on unemployment from the restaurant during that time.

Angelica Mazé: Wow! So, you went to the unemployment office and you got the paperwork and all of that stuff, and then you would bring it and then you would never hear from them? Or, what does it look like when they just don't get—

Jesselyn Back: It just says, "Still processing," in there, and they just never did it. I had talked to people multiple times, and I was like, "What do I need to do to talk to somebody. I'm here." And they're like, "Oh, no. You have to just still do it online."

0:49:00

Angelica Mazé: Wow! So, they were so inundated with people from this glass plant and trying to get them processed—

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, pretty much we all just gave up at that point, and then I had a lot of other things on my mind after that [laughs] that I was just not worried about it. But yeah, only one of our employees was able to get through and get onto unemployment. It was ridiculous, and I don't know if they were having issues with it not working online all the way correctly. I think that was part of the problem, but they wouldn't do anything for you in person when you went down to the office either, so that was like—[cross-talk]

Angelica Mazé: Nobody communicated to you that there was a glitch online or anything?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, and I told them this is what's happening, and they're like, "You still have to do it online." There was no other option for help.

Angelica Mazé: Wow.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, and they would always be busy when you tried to call. It was just ridiculous. So, literally pretty much everybody had to get another job, and all the full timers, we would meet once a week and work on what we were gonna do when we come back.

0:50:05

Thanh would pay us as much as she could, a few hundred dollars here and there the whole time we were closed, and then we would have meetings to try to figure out what the heck are we gonna do. We had no idea that we were gonna be closed for that long, and she still hasn't been able to recoup anything from that. The insurance, she's still fighting with them to this day.

Angelica Mazé: Oh no! Wow!

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so she used all of her own money out of pocket to open the restaurant and get everything fixed because we couldn't afford to be closed any longer, and we had already waited months for them to take care of stuff, and they just weren't doing it.

Angelica Mazé: I didn't realize that. Wow.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so now it's even more precarious for her because she spent all her savings and everything she had to get the restaurant back open for all of us, really.

0:50:58

Angelica Mazé: Wow, that's tough. I didn't realize she never got compensated for that.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, she's still fighting them. It's crazy.

Angelica Mazé: Wow! Well, I remember the flood, and I remember that it sounded pretty bad, both being shocked and discouraged that it was—the months dragged on. And of course I knew that you also were going through this cancer diagnosis at the same time.

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Backtracking a little bit, because you mentioned before this interview started that Thanh—so, Thanh Le, who is the owner of Clay Pot and the employer we keep talking about—

Jesselyn Back: Talking about, yes. [both laugh]

Angelica Mazé: —She does provide health insurance for y'all? And when did that come about?

Jesselyn Back: We got on, I think it was November or December of 2022 is when we had

someone come out, and we talked to them, and we started getting everybody signed up that wanted insurance, which was really awesome. Perfect timing for me, thankfully. [laughs]
Unfortunately, but thankfully.

0:52:02

Angelica Mazé: Yeah!

Jesselyn Back: Because I hadn't had health insurance since I got kicked off when I was 25.

Angelica Mazé: Right, so I was going to double check. I never want to assume, but sometimes I find myself assuming. You were not getting health insurance during these years serving?

Jesselyn Back: Correct.

Angelica Mazé: Like, George's didn't offer health insurance? Mama Fu's didn't offer health insurance?

Jesselyn Back: No. Nowhere I've ever worked, besides Clay Pot, has, actually.

Angelica Mazé: OK, wow. Do you remember how that came about? Were you and your colleagues talking to her about it? Was it just something she wanted to do on her own? This was obviously before you got sick, so how did that come about?

Jesselyn Back: It had been something we had all kind of talked about before. We're really close. That's like my second family, the Le family, so we had spoken about it before, but we really didn't know where to start for who to talk to. And then we just by happenstance—or,

happenstance... happenstance? [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: I like happenstance, let's go with that. [laughs]

0:52:58

Jesselyn Back: One of the insurance guys, he started his own company, and his goal and point was to help people in the service industry, so he started his own thing, and we met with him, and it ended up being the perfect match at the perfect time. His name is Tory. He's a really, really nice guy.

Angelica Mazé: Cool.

Jesselyn Back: I think the insurance, his thing is called HighView, but let me double check on that for you, and I can give you the actuals if that's not right. But yeah, he runs it and works with all the local businesses. It's a really great deal. There's no way I would have been able to get or afford insurance without this special program.

Angelica Mazé: Had you ever looked into, before—[regarding pronunciation] is it “lee” or “lay”? Is it Thanh “lee” or Thanh “lay”?

Jesselyn Back: [regarding pronunciation] Technically, it's “lay.” [cross-talk, laughter] We all call ‘em “lee,” but it is technically “lay.”

Angelica Mazé: So, before Thanh got you health insurance and got everybody health insurance in December or whatever of 2022, had you looked into getting marketplace insurance through what I still think of as Obamacare, where you put in your income and you're still eligible even though you're—

0:54:09

Jesselyn Back: No, I hadn't even tried, because I had looked before, years before, of just regular insurance, and I was like, "There's no freakin' way I'm gonna be able to afford that." So, I was just like, "I'm gonna have to go without until something happens." You know, one of those cases.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, and this actually brings up another question that I want to ask before we get heavy into 2023, which is, were you paying off student loans at this time, after you graduated from Washington State? While you were working full time and not having health insurance, were you also paying student loans off? Or did you not have any loans when you graduated?

Jesselyn Back: Oh no, no, I have loans. They're there. [Angelica laughs] They are accruing interest as we speak. Which, actually I found out the other day that I might be able to do something with cancer and getting interest turned off, so we'll see.

0:55:03

I'm hopeful. That would be really awesome, so I'm looking into that. But yeah, I am in a lot of student debt. [laughs] And I've been paying a little bit off the interest on one of my big loans, but I'm talking about like \$25 a month, nothing crazy. And then the rest of them, I don't qualify to pay right now because I don't make enough money. Fun! [laughs]

Angelica Mazé: Did you apply for that through your loan provider, or your loan service, or whatever they're called?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Or was that through the education department, which I can't remember the full name of at the moment?

Jesselyn Back: I think they're doing Nelnet now for all the loans.

Angelica Mazé: Oh yeah.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, that beautiful thing. So, now they're doing the new thing. You've always been able to apply for an income-based repayment plan, right?

0:55:57

So, I've been on that, because obviously I've been going through a lot of weird stuff for the last few years, so I haven't really had to pay anything on them yet. But this last time, they have a new special one. I can't remember what it's called.

Angelica Mazé: You mean like a forbearance thing that they had out?

Jesselyn Back: I don't know if it's forbearance. It's another form of income-driven payment, but it has to do with Covid or something from those times.

Angelica Mazé: I was going to say, your graduation period did also coincide from when they just suspended all payments for two years or something?

Jesselyn Back: Yes.

Angelica Mazé: Because I also have student debt, and I don't think I technically had to start paying again, which I will say for the record, I am not paying, because I can't.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, exactly. They started in what, September of last year, or October?

Angelica Mazé: Later for me. I think it's because I did—yeah, it was October of last year

officially that people were supposed to start paying again. So, you were able to secure an income-driven payment pause of some kind?

0:57:02

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so obviously I didn't have a job to go to, and I also had cancer, so I just applied. I was like, "I'm not making any money. I literally cannot afford to do this." So yeah, I have a zero dollar payment right now, but I'm still accruing interest every day. Uh-huh.

Angelica Mazé: I had forgotten to ask that, because of course if we're talking about monthly expenses and how we—

Jesselyn Back: Otherwise, yeah, it would be hundreds and hundreds of dollars. I think my payment is supposed to be like \$400-something a month.

Angelica Mazé: Oh my gosh! That's about what I am supposed to be paying. [laughs]

Jesselyn Back: Pain!

Angelica Mazé: That's amazing. We can talk about that later. [both laugh]

Jesselyn Back: We'll cry about it later.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, we'll cry about it later. OK, so fast forwarding back to 2023, luckily you got health insurance. You had not had it before, and it came right like a month and a half before you got this cancer diagnosis.

0:58:00

I assume that you have had to—I know you had to go through a lot of treatment. Stage 4, in particular, is no foolin', and we can talk as much or as little about that as you feel comfortable,

but you had to miss, presumably, a lot of work, or some work?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm, a lot of work. We started chemo—I'm trying to think—I think April 24 of last year was my first round of chemo. They had me on a lot of stuff. Because I'm so young, my oncologist pretty much was like, "We're treating to cure." Even though stage 4 is not really ever technically curable, it's just not in the writing, you know. But she wanted to do everything she possibly could to tackle it, so we did! So, I was on a lot of—they gave me a heavy dose of a lot of things, so it took me out quite a bit.

0:59:00

I was doing chemo every three weeks, so I would work one week out of the month and then I'd be down bad for the other three weeks of the month. That's just what I had to do. As soon as I felt good enough to work, I would come back in and work. When did we open back up? In May? Yeah, so technically that one first chemo, we had already started getting everyone back in, retraining, all that stuff, so there was work to be done there with getting all the new hires and all that stuff, so we started working a little bit for that. But yeah, we opened like the very beginning of May, so thankfully by that time that I was going through that, she was able to start making money again, and we were able to start the business back up. So, the weeks that I was feeling OK, I had a job to come back to, thankfully, instead of just being out of luck. What else was I saying? What did you ask me? [laughs]

1:00:04

Angelica Mazé: I think that's what I asked. Yeah, just missing work, missing wages because you were out 75 percent of every month.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so the only way I was able to make it by is because we set up a GoFundMe, and from other people helping me out, otherwise it would have been a pretty grim situation. And with breast cancer, thankfully there's also a lot of online help and funds and stuff you can apply for. I mean, this is just stuff you would never think about, you know? And then you get thrust into this like, life or death, like [laughs] what are we doing here? So, I did a lot of research, found a lot of great funds and stuff to help, and that was really the only way I was able to get by.

1:00:57

Tying that back into the health insurance thing in the service industry, I just can't even fathom what would have happened if Thanh wouldn't have gotten insurance for us in the first place when all this happened. And the insurmountable debt that I would be in forever, because I'm on—I guess we can go into that. I'm on treatment forever, 'til I die. I will be going every three weeks to get medicine, get—I don't even know how to explain this. [laughs] I have a port! And we have to access that every three weeks to do HER2 medicine. I do a bunch of other things as well, so there's just a lot of therapy and medicine that goes on after. I'm cancer free now, as of August. [both cheer] So, we're hoping it stays that way, but yeah, I'll be on forever treatment.

Angelica Mazé: Multiple forever treatments.

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, multiple forever treatments that are *very* expensive.

1:01:58

Angelica Mazé: I was going to ask, I know you've been insured this whole time, but you also, it sounds like, did a bunch of research. Do you have a sense for what you would be paying

out of pocket for one treatment?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, for just one treatment of going—well, with the chemo, it would have been like 80 grand every time I went.

Angelica Mazé: Every time you went, which was?

Jesselyn Back: Every three weeks, for like six or seven weeks that I was doing all of those medicines at once. But now, one of these drugs that I do every three weeks is about twenty grand, and the other one is about sixteen grand—every three weeks, and that's forever. So, *insanely* expensive. There's no way anyone could survive that debt. That's so crazy.

Angelica Mazé: How well is your insurance covering it?

Jesselyn Back: Pretty good, yeah. I have a Baylor Scott & White plan. I don't know what they call them, Premier something? I don't know. Don't ask me, I really have no idea. [both laugh]

1:03:01

But the insurance guy is really awesome. He got me on a very low deductible plan, and with a low out of pocket. So, my out of pocket for that last year was \$9,000, which is a lot of money that I had to pay out of my pocket. Well, I'm still paying for it actually. Obviously I could not afford that. So, I'm on a payment plan, which is another great thing about insurances and stuff, but now my out of pocket is only \$1,800 a month. So, when and if I ever catch up with the first year's debt, maybe I would be able to afford that every year, but you know, we're a little backed up on that.

Angelica Mazé: And the whole time while you were out of work doing chemo for all of

these months, your fiancé, whose name is Don, he was working full time and took on—

Jesselyn Back: Another job.

Angelica Mazé: —another job, right? So, he’s working. Tell me, what is he doing and for how many hours? Like where and what?

1:03:55

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, he’s working at Balcones as the head bartender. He does the whole bar program and everything, and he works there forty hours a week at least. And then he is also helping over at Dichotomy, working part time, just helping admin and doing bar backing and bartending. Really, whenever and wherever they need him, they add him in there.

Angelica Mazé: That’s a lot of money, and that’s a lot of working. And working through chemo, too.

Jesselyn Back: Fun.

Angelica Mazé: So, take us just generally in whatever way makes sense through to now. You said you finished chemo in—when was it?

Jesselyn Back: In August.

Angelica Mazé: In August last year?

Jesselyn Back: Mm-hmm.

Angelica Mazé: And then what did the rest of the year look like in terms of your health, and how much you were able to work, and how you were feeling about being in service, and just how life felt? That’s a huge change to go through [Jesselyn laughs] and then to kind of come

back to your job full time, I'm assuming. But anyway, what did it look like for you?

1:05:05

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, so whenever we reopened, we officially—well, let me preface this. I never wanted to stay in the service industry. [both laugh] I did not want to manage. I've done it at every job I've ever had. I'm not tooting my own horn, but I am a people person, [laughs] and I always get promoted. And it's not my favorite thing in the world to do. Mind you, I love the business, and I love the family, so I said I would stay, and she's always helped me out, you know, so I didn't want to just leave her behind anyway. So, I was like, "OK, I'll manage." Me and my other manager, Angel, we're co-managers of the restaurant, essentially. So, whenever I came back after chemo, I was just managing full time instead of serving.

1:06:00

I just didn't physically have it in me to serve, because I came back to work as soon as I felt good after that last chemo. I was back in working full time.

Angelica Mazé: That's very physical, I would say. Right?

Jesselyn Back: Oh yeah. I'm still running food, rolling spring rolls, everything. I'm the manager, but I'm still like a floater employee, essentially, because we're a really small business, so everyone's doing everything in there. And it is labor-intensive work, for sure. I don't know if you've ever tried to carry around a thirty-two-ounce bowl of pho.

Angelica Mazé: I have not, but it sounds hot and dangerous.

Jesselyn Back: [laughs] And heavy.

Angelica Mazé: [both laugh] Hot and heavy.

Jesselyn Back: So yeah, where was I going with this?

Angelica Mazé: Just what life looked like when you came back after going through chemo and cancer diagnosis and all of that.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, so after I was done with that, I came back, I was manager. I'm getting paid \$20 an hour to manage, which is great; I can live with that.

1:07:02

So, with that, I'm able to afford to live, but only because I also do social media on the side. So, just to clarify, even though you're making \$20 an hour, it's still not that much in the grand scheme of things. But luckily I do have those other side jobs, and I don't have to be at Clay Pot forty hours a week doing that. I can get away with working thirty hours. But, saying that, I don't have a savings. I still have all this medical debt. I probably should work more, but after going through something like that, you really don't want to spend your whole life just working, working, working. I try to enjoy things as well. Everyone should be able to do that, and they can't, and that's the sad part.

Angelica Mazé: How are you feeling these days?

Jesselyn Back: I feel great, thankfully. Yes, I've been doing good. Everything, all the stuff has been coming back clear and good, so I'm just trying to be as healthy as possible [laughs] and as positive as possible. I'm just trucking through it.

1:08:04

Angelica Mazé: I know you originally had plans to—and I think you were rethinking this. I don't want to put words in your mouth. But, before the cancer diagnosis, before even the pandemic, you had plans, dreams maybe, about having your own social media company or working for yourself. Obviously all of these things happened, starting with the pandemic on down, to rearrange those plans. Where are you at now in terms of—I know you said you didn't really want to come back to service, but you need the money and you like this family, so various obligations brought you back. Are you at a point yet where you're making plans for what comes next? Or is that not even on your horizon right now? Where are you in terms of—

1:09:00

Jesselyn Back: Oh no, I'm definitely making plans. [Angelica laughs] I do love where I work, who I work with, but working in the service industry is very emotionally exhausting for me, and I just don't think it's meant for me forever. I feel like I'm coming close to the end of being in there in the field all the time. I really do want to start my business. I mean, I do have my two clients, but I really want to expand on that and focus my time on that, but I also want to make sure we're set up for success at Clay Pot before I do that. I don't want to just be like, "All right, I'm done, see y'all later!" Because I want them to succeed, because they're amazing, and they should. I think there's a fine balance between trying to figure out how to help, and how to help myself more in the end. How to make it a positive thing for everybody.

1:10:03

Angelica Mazé: And you and your fiancé did buy a house?

Jesselyn Back: We did. Got cancer and bought a house, woo! [Angelica laughs] And

we're only able to do that thanks to our parents, so we're really lucky in that they were able to help us for that down payment. Just going through that whole process is so crazy how expensive everything is and how many fees they have for this, this, and that to even be able to want to purchase a house.

Angelica Mazé: [laughs] Right, even to think about it!

Jesselyn Back: Literally, one thought here? Pay for the inspection. Another thought? Pay for this, pay for that. It was just crazy. Crazy crazy. But thankfully, yes, we're somewhere secure and safe, and that also gives you big peace of mind. You're not just throwing all your money away to rent, which a lot of people have to because it's a ridiculous process trying to buy a house.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah. Equity and credit and savings, which many of us d—

Jesselyn Back: Don't have, yeah.

1:11:01

Angelica Mazé: We're kind of getting close to wrapping up here. What are your thoughts about when people are talking—because it sounds like we're both reading or listening to the same kind of media about how people are upset about tipping, and at the same time there's been people pushing to raise the federal minimum wage. I don't know if you saw, but California just raised fast-food workers' minimum wages to \$20 an hour. It's causing a big uproar; apparently restaurants are closing and also menu prices are going up. You can imagine all of the hubbub.

Jesselyn Back: Been through it, yeah.

Angelica Mazé: Obviously we've been painting this picture a bit the whole time. You've

offered some opinions, but how do you feel about the fact that we still have this \$2.13 wage and the \$7—oh gosh, what is it?

Jesselyn Back: The \$7.25 that's been the same since what year?

1:12:01

Angelica Mazé: Yeah, it also has not been raised in a really long time. And of course, cost of living, and especially since the pandemic. And people talk about Biden economics, whatever the cause. [Jesselyn laughs] Whatever that is.

Jesselyn Back: Don't get me started on that. [both laugh]

Angelica Mazé: We know prices have gone up, so life has gotten more expensive. What are your thoughts on that? And I think also interesting because you are close with the family that employs you and have a glimpse into what running the business from their end looks like. And also they are good people, it sounds like, who want to care for you, but can't pay more than \$3 an hour. So, what are your thoughts?

Jesselyn Back: So, I think it's complicated. [both laugh] I'm trying to think of a good example. Oh my gosh, I had it on the tip of my tongue and now it's gone.

1:13:00

Angelica Mazé: That's OK, we can come back.

Jesselyn Back: [laughs] Hold on, ask me again. What did you say at the beginning?

Angelica Mazé: Well, it was a really long-winded question, [Jesselyn laughs] which is my fault, I apologize. Basically, neither of those wages in Texas have been raised in a long time, so

how do you feel about that?

Jesselyn Back: Well, I think that's BS, and it needs to be raised, [Angelica laughs] for sure. Like, absolutely ridiculous. I remember my first job at Pizza Hut, I was getting paid \$6.25 an hour, and I saved up \$700 and I thought I was the richest person ever, and then I blew it all, and I was like, "Wow! What am I gonna do now?" [both laugh] How are you gonna build up anything with \$7.25? It's just freakin' impossible, and I think it definitely needs to be raised, regardless. It just has to happen. But I also understand, coming from a small business owner, how hard it is to make ends meet in this day and age, literally right now.

1:14:02

With everything being so expensive, your cost of goods is up like 50 percent at least, a ridiculous amount. Everyone's gonna wanna go out and eat no matter what is going on, people are still gonna wanna go out and eat. But if they're are not coming out as much as they used to, or they can't afford to spend how much you have to charge to make any money, it's not gonna meet in the middle. And the places where you can save is labor, so you're either gonna have less people, start using robots—

Angelica Mazé: [both laugh] Robots...

Jesselyn Back: Stuff, it gets messy, and it's really sad to me, and I hate that. But with competition as well, Waco's growing so fast, there's so many more options. It gets hard. You want to pay everyone as much as you possibly can, because you want them to be successful with you.

1:15:00

And there just comes a point where you can't, and you have to figure out: What's your bottom line, and what do you want to do to survive? That's the same for everyone that's coming to work. They have their reasons why they want to work where they work. Either it's because they have a great boss, or maybe because they get paid really, really well. That's usually not both and the same for most people, unfortunately. So, I think it's just like life: It's a big old game, [laughs] and you've got to figure out how to make it work for you.

Angelica Mazé: And in the service industry in particular, and we didn't super-cover this, so correct me if I'm wrong here, but you're also so dependent on external factors like how many people come in or don't come in. So, we talked about that in terms of the pandemic, but just on a regular day as a server, if tips are making up the difference between your subminimum wage and the minimum wage, and then hopefully you're going to make a little bit on top of that that is an actual tip, an actual gratuity, it all depends on if your customers are happy, if you're healthy, and if people are coming in and feeling generous and flush, I guess, right?

1:16:06

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, seriously. [thinking] Why is my brain not working anymore?

Angelica Mazé: Was it fluctuating a lot? Did you experience that?

Jesselyn Back: Yeah, definitely. Since 2020 and now, it's gone up and down and up and down, and I feel like that's how it's always gonna be depending on the time of year, what's going on in the economy, all that kind of stuff. And if you're able to come to work, what if everybody calls out that day? Sure, you're gonna be the only server on, but are you gonna give good service to get good tips? Are you gonna be running all over the place, runnin' ragged, and then you have

nothing left to give to the customers? So, there's also that fine line of how can we save money on labor but also be staffed enough to have good service so they can actually make money? Which is always—I mean, it never fails: If we're short staffed, it's gonna be busy.

1:17:01

[Angelica laughs] I don't know what the universe is out there doing, but every single time, it never fails. And of course, most of the time people are understanding and kind, but sometimes they're not. And all it takes is one person being mean to ruin your day, and then what are you gonna do? How are you gonna try to fake being happy the rest of the time to take up all these people's money? It's just a very complicated balance, I feel like. I don't know.

Angelica Mazé: Well, we're just about out of time here, and I want to ask if there's anything else that I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about, or if there's anything else you'd like to add?

Jesselyn Back: Not off the top of my head. Just be grateful for what you got.

Angelica Mazé: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for taking time to sit down with me today and share what is a very personal story. I really, really appreciate it.

Jesselyn Back: Of course.

1:17:58

Angelica Mazé: I wish you and Don the absolute best, and I'm crossing my fingers for your social media business to just take off—

Jesselyn Back: Thank you, I need that. [both laugh]

Angelica Mazé: —so you can follow your dreams and leave the service world behind you and spread your wings. Thank you so much, Jesse. It was such a pleasure to talk to you.

Jesselyn Back: Yes, thank you.

[End]