



Joe Phelps
Pilcrow Bar

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0:00:00

Michelle Little: All right. So this is Michelle Little and I'm here with Joe Phelps at the Pilcrow Bar in Birmingham, Alabama on Veterans Day, November 11th, 2021. And this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District in downtown Birmingham. So Joe, to get started with, will you just tell me your full name and when you were born?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Joe Phelps, 10/28/1984.

Michelle Little: All right. And where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Joe Phelps: I was born in Huntington, West Virginia, but I grew up in Southern Central Tennessee.

Michelle Little: Okay. So can you tell me a little bit about your family and how y'all ended up in Tennessee?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Well, my dad was a family practice doctor and originally from Tennessee. So we settled in Lynchburg, Tennessee, and grew up in the woods, very few neighbors, just in a really small town.

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Michelle Little: Okay. And did you have brothers and sisters?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Two older brothers.

Michelle Little: Okay. What were they like? What were they into?

Joe Phelps: Really outdoorsy. They both live out west now. One works for the National Parks. And with just super-active parents so just had to keep up with them.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah? [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Did you guys travel any growing up or what were some fun family memories?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. We grew up in a really great place. We were surrounded by forests, and it was mostly just my brothers and I going on long walks, following creeks, and raising animals. That's mostly the childhood memories I have.

0:02:00

Michelle Little: Yeah. What kind of animals?

Joe Phelps: Horses, dogs.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. Do you ride horses?

Joe Phelps: That was mostly my mom. I was the only one without allergies, so I took care of the horses and baled the hay and that kind of thing. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Shoveled stalls.

Michelle Little: Oh, glamorous, glamorous.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. Good stuff.

Michelle Little: Okay. And so I know you ended up at UAB for college at some point, but tell me how you . . .

Joe Phelps: Yeah. That's how I ended up in Birmingham. I actually went to Birmingham Southern for undergrad for four years. And then, once I graduated, I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee for a year and then came back and was working in bars and restaurants, and ended up going to graduate school at UAB for a couple of years.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: And then graduated and went to Tacoma, Washington for an internship, and stuck around out there working for a bar instead of the company that brought me out there in an internship.

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Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: And so got back into this world, yeah.

Michelle Little: All right. So to back up a sec, now what brought you to Birmingham Southern? Why did you pick Birmingham Southern?

Joe Phelps: That's a good question. Was looking for liberal arts schools about that size and about that distance from home. And a lot of my family had gone to Sewanee, and so I guess I just

wanted to do something different. And had never even been to Birmingham before that and, yeah, was glad I did.

Michelle Little: Never been to Birmingham. What did you think when you first got here?

Joe Phelps: Well, school was overwhelming.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: But I really enjoyed the city. I liked what Birmingham had to offer and the promise that-- the class I took freshman year focused on where the city was going.

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And we got to sit in on a lot of meetings. I can't remember what the name of the organization was, but it was the fifteen-year plan for the city. And so we learned a lot about the buildings downtown and Railroad Park before it ever had ground broken on that. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And that was part of your business classes or what . . . ?

Joe Phelps: No. It was an elective. Yeah. It was just "Experiencing the City," and it was with Philip Morris who-- I think he worked for Southern Living magazine, and Ed Lamonte. But they knew a lot about Birmingham's history. And I think that was a big part of why I stuck around afterwards, 'cause I knew where it was going.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I love that!

0:05:00

And then, is that how you decided to stay-- you went to UAB for graduate school, right?

Joe Phelps: Um-hm, yeah. I had always worked in bars and restaurants as kind of a means to an end and was looking for a career in something else for half the time. And then, once I got out into a career, just decided that-- I found myself working in bars at night just to balance things out, 'cause that's what I enjoyed. And then worked for a really great bar owner, small business, and realized I could do that, and so kind of shifted focus.

Michelle Little: What was the great bar owner that you-- where was that?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. That was out in Tacoma.

Michelle Little: In Tacoma. Okay.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. Great guy named Greg Troger.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

0:05:58

I saw his work ethic and how much his employees loved him, and just a business run the right way, and saw his passion for it. Yeah. And I'd already been doing it for fifteen years, so . . .

Michelle Little: Yeah. So now, what was your first job in a bar?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Well, it would've been my freshman year of college here in Birmingham. Of course, I wasn't old enough to bartend, but it was a restaurant. It was a steak and seafood restaurant all the way out in Hoover, 'cause I didn't know anything about Birmingham. And I worked there throughout college until I turned twenty-one, could bartend there. And I originally

got the job 'cause I got to college and was having trouble talking to people, so I figured I'd get a job where you have to talk to people, and just took off from there.

0:07:07

Michelle Little: Huh. And do you remember the name of the restaurant in Hoover?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. It was Flat Rock Grill. It's no longer there.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay.

Joe Phelps: It actually closed a week before I graduated, so it was kind of-- yeah, I saw the beginning and end of it.

Michelle Little: And so when you were in college and grad school, did you come to any bars and restaurants downtown?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. I think Carrigan's and Collins had opened before I left. So yeah, frequented those. I lived right behind The Garage in the Highlands area, and so was a regular there.

0:08:02

Michelle Little: Yeah. And at UAB, correct me if I'm wrong, but did you study data analytics, something, like, completely . . .

Joe Phelps: That was part of it. Computer forensics was the broad major, but, yeah, we did a lot of that, as well, and accounting forensics and things like that, fraud detection. And it was a great program. I would recommend it to anybody. They have this special guy running it named Gary Warner, and he's kind of, in that world, a big name.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Joe Phelps: And so Birmingham is really lucky to have him.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Joe Phelps: But ended up back-- not being for me.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. So you head to Tacoma. Now, what specifically brought you to Tacoma from here?

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Joe Phelps: So in the program, we always worked with this company called Internet Identity. That's what it was called at the time. And I looked it up one day and saw that it was in Tacoma and my brother lives in Tacoma, Washington, so I started reaching out and ended up getting an internship with them. And so moved out there to be with my brother and try to start a career that ended up taking another path, but glad it did. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And so, now, how many years were in Tacoma?

Joe Phelps: That's a good question. Three or four.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Not long. My wife and I had always-- well, wife by the time I left Tacoma, but she's from Birmingham, as well-- we had always wanted to come back to Birmingham and start a life here, so yeah.

Michelle Little: So y'all were already married?

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Joe Phelps: So we weren't married when I moved to Tacoma. We had started a relationship here in Birmingham. She moved out to Tacoma with me. We came back to Birmingham, got married, the ceremony anyway, and then moved back a year later.

Michelle Little: All right.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. But you had asked why I went to Tacoma, I guess? Yeah. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Internship and then you--

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: -- that's where you worked in the bar that you really loved.

Joe Phelps: Um-hm, yeah.

Michelle Little: And so when did you start thinking that you wanted to open a bar and . . . ?

Joe Phelps: For as long as I can remember, like, a little kid, I wanted to have a business. I was one of those kids that always had this idea, even as a little kid.

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And then as it went on and saw how terrible I was at writing resumes and doing interviews, I decided I'm gonna have to work for myself 'cause no one's ever going to hire me. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Oh, I think we might . . .

Joe Phelps: This is Clint [sp].

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Do you want to pause or . . . ? Yep. Okay. We're gonna pause here.

Joe Phelps: Perfect.

[Pause 0:11:20]

Michelle Little: Okay. So you're married, you've decided you want to open the bar, you're in Tacoma, Washington.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. You had asked how long I'd wanted to start--

Michelle Little: Yes!

Joe Phelps: But, yeah, I thought eventually when I was in my fifties or sixties I might, after a career of doing something else, open my own bar or restaurant. But I was talking to a friend back here in Birmingham while I was up in Washington one Christmas-- Christmas Eve, I think-- and was telling him all about what I was doing up in Washington.

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And he had become kind of a commercial real estate company here in Birmingham. And he said he had a space to look at. And I was, like, "I have no money to start a bar. There's no way I could do that." But he has a way of talking me into things. So I flew home, I looked at the space, and I loved it. At the time, it was just-- this is a 150-year-old building. It was just old, exposed brick and concrete from the original building. And I thought, as long as I don't cover that up this could be a really cool spot. And so we kind of worked it out as part of my lease they would do the build out and I would just pay it back as part of the lease. So I was able to get a stack of credit cards and start a bar.

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And I don't know if I could tell you how I did it, but it worked out. [Laughter] And so we've been open three years now. And, yeah, but that's how it happened.

Michelle Little: Wow!

Joe Phelps: Kinda fast.

Michelle Little: So tell me about that day when you first saw this space. Tell me about what you saw and what you remember.

Joe Phelps: Sure. Yeah. They, I think, at the time, were in the process of raising this ceiling two more feet, so it looked a little bit like-- I think in San Francisco during the earthquakes they had the big support beams and contemporary support beams, so that's what they were doing. They were pushing the ceiling up. But it was just such a cool space. It was covered in dirt, and it was just a basement, but you could tell you could put something down here. And I had been to bars in Europe that had really been these ancient buildings with low head room, and that's kind of where my thoughts went immediately.

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And it was kind of like a catacomb, almost. And I hadn't seen anything else like it in Birmingham, so I thought I could do something new and unique. All the other bars around here do a really good job of doing their own unique thing, and I thought I could fit that, so . . .

Michelle Little: That's amazing! So the ceilings were lower the first time you came in here?

Joe Phelps: Um-hm, yeah. I would've had to walk with a hunch. With the HVAC coming down and everything, I don't even think it was quite seven feet. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: And so you were able to enter the same stairwell that--

Joe Phelps: Um-hm. Same stairwell. Yeah, yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Same stairwell. No handrails or they weren't painted, but, yeah, all the brick and everything you see is the same as it was when the building was built.

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And it tapers down like that because that's just how they built them back then. It just had to get bigger as you go down. People always ask if we did that, but, no, it was just like that.

Michelle Little: And when we met earlier, you told me there was a cart in here.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. So they had told me they were pretty sure originally this housed the first elevator in Birmingham, and they had said the cart was back there when they started construction and they moved it, and they didn't know where they put it. But after looking into it with your help, I think it was the first commercial building with an elevator in Birmingham. And so that was the first elevator cart in Birmingham, but I don't know where it is now. [Laughter]

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But I really wish it was down here.

Michelle Little: It's out there somewhere.

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: If anyone listening to this interview knows where it is, let us know.

[Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Right! [Laughter] Yeah. Yeah, I'd love to have it back.

Michelle Little: Okay. So what year was that when you came and saw this space for the first time?

Joe Phelps: 2018.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Early 2018.

Michelle Little: Okay. And so, then, walk me through what all was involved in actually creating this space from kind of the basement.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Right, right. Like I said, I didn't want to cover up any of the original stuff, I wanted to highlight it. And so we wanted spotlights going up that showed the walls. And I wanted to put something almost futuristic in such an old building, and so the lighting and the furniture is a little more modern or even futuristic.

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And I just wanted to add to-- when you come down those stairs, you don't know where-- you could be anywhere, any time. Funny enough, *Blade Runner* was kind of an inspiration. So we wanted to meld centuries, decades, and come out with something that was pretty unique and people would remember.

Michelle Little: And so how long did it take them to raise the ceiling? What was that process?

Joe Phelps: Like I said, that was done as I was looking at it, as they were trying to lease the space out. But it looked like the building had been hit by an earthquake or something. It was kind of crazy, the hydraulic posts and everything.

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Luckily, they agreed upstairs to have their floor raised two feet, so that was another hurdle I had to get over. [Laughter] But good neighbors, so . . .

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. So Cayo Coco was already-- were they already here?

Joe Phelps: I think they had signed the lease, but they hadn't built it out yet. So we actually had a really quick buildout here. Early 2018 I took a look at it, and we were open by August, so really quick turnaround.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Joe Phelps: Again, it moved so fast I couldn't tell you how I did it. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that is really quick. That's amazing! [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. It's probably for the best I didn't have time to think about it too much.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] And you had to relocate to Birmingham while you're doing all this.

Joe Phelps: Um-hm, yeah. Yeah.

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I came down and lived with my mother-in-law for a month while I found a place for my wife and I to move into and got started with the plans for the bar. We worked with a great company that I could tell them what I wanted, and they could show me what it would look like. And they added some nice touches themselves. So just going through that process working at another bar while I got this one set up. And, yeah, they got it done really fast and we moved in, found a couple of really great people to help bartend, and got it open.

Michelle Little: Who were some of your first bartenders?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. It's funny, I had one guy that was gonna move down from Northern Alabama, great bartender, but he backed out a week before we opened.

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And I was lucky enough to find a girl named Jojo [sp], who had been bartending in Birmingham for a while, and her brother is also a bartender, now bar owner. So she had really great experience, and she took it on like it was her own and helped me get it open, helped me through a lot. And then, another guy who hadn't bartended before but had a great attitude, we brought him in a few months later and now he's got bartending skills that match his great personality. So, yeah, I've been really lucky to find good people.

Michelle Little: That's great. Is he still with you?

Joe Phelps: Um-hm, yeah. His name's Yates [sp].

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. Yeah. You mentioned earlier that you feel like you kind of learned to talk to more people while you were bartending.

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

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I was painfully shy when I got to college, and just kinda had no idea what was going on.

[Laughter] And I remember my high school girlfriend at the time would go out to eat in her little hometown and had made friends with this waiter, and I was, like, sounds cool. Maybe I should do that. And I don't know how I found the job, but, like I said, it was all the way out in Hoover. Just found the first thing that would hire me and got in and was forced-- forced interaction.

[Laughter] And it became second nature pretty quickly. Yeah, you do things long enough you get at least okay at them.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: I hope I'm okay at it. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Clearly. I think it's going well. [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

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Michelle Little: Did you consider any other space-- did you look at any other bars or . . . ?

Joe Phelps: I really didn't. If this wasn't available, I probably would've kept talking to the same friend and seeing more of his properties eventually. But it went from me not having plans to do this for another twenty, thirty years to, okay, there's a space, let's do it. [Laughter] So honestly, I would probably still be out in-- well, I wouldn't say that. But I wouldn't be a bar owner right now, yeah, had this space not come available at the right time, I don't think. Because, yeah, probably wouldn't have fallen in love with another space that didn't already have so much going for it.

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Michelle Little: That's amazing! That must've been a powerful day.

Joe Phelps: Yeah, I know. Things move kind of quickly and you don't have time to think about it a whole lot, but, yeah, sometimes I do. And it's, like, man, this is crazy. This is what I always wanted to do. I shouldn't get so frustrated at the day-to-day, because problem solving is all part of what I wanted to do, so happy to be here.

Michelle Little: So was it this physical space or is there something about this part of town, about being in the Central Business District, or is it both for you?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. That was another really cool opportunity. So I saw what they planned for the future on Morris Avenue in this area of town.

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And I had the opportunity to get in kind of early on it and just be part of its growth, and so I liked that opportunity, as well. Morris Avenue is one of those things in Birmingham people come down to look at, take pictures, but for decades it hadn't had any businesses. And I think Carrigan's and The Essential and Atomic, it all kind of moved down in this area first. And I just really thought highly of those businesses and glad I can be neighbors with them.

Michelle Little: And I think you mentioned the other day that the man that owned the bar that was in a caboose--

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Could you tell that story?

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

0:25:01

I forget his name, but I think he was the original downtown bar owner. I'm sure that's not true. But he came down in the [19]80s or [19]90s when I think there was a serial killer on the loose that would ride the train in or something like that. And he opened a bar in a caboose down here on Morris Avenue called The Station. And I think that would just be a really interesting time to be able to go back and see kinda like a gritty Times Square version-- Birmingham's version of that. So I got to talk to him and just all the fun he had running a disco in downtown Birmingham when there was no other bars around, getting people to come down here, and what it is now.

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It's pretty cool.

Michelle Little: Do people stop in that have little pieces of history of . . . ?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. They kind of come out of the woodwork, people with little tidbits. Yeah. This used to be a bank drive-through or a little alley up there, which I don't even know how that was possible. And, "Oh, these bolts here used to hold a safe," and, "My law office used to keep our files down here," and things like that. This basement didn't have too many interesting things going on in it. I think it was file storage for most of its life. [Buzzing sound] Sorry about that. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Maybe it's a one-off. I don't know if we need to pause or . . . ?

Joe Phelps: I think it'll be--

Michelle Little: Okay.

Joe Phelps: Yeah, it'll be okay.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Yeah, sorry.

Michelle Little: That's fine. That's fine.

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Joe Phelps: But I had another thought about Morris Avenue. I'm trying to remember it, but it'll get there.

Michelle Little: And you said someone brought you that typewriter, that it was . . . ?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Someone brought this typewriter down 'cause it kinda fit our typographical theme, but they had found it rummaging through one of the old buildings that surround us.

There's just all this old history in these buildings and it's kinda fun for people to bring those by sometimes. An artist in the area, a guy named-- he goes by Papa D [sp], owns Rail Studio, and he made this for us, and made some of our tables. This area is just packed with people like that that just come out of nowhere. I needed something done and there they were. [Laughter] Like, I can paint that, or I can make that.

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So it's an area really rich in personalities like that.

Michelle Little: Right. And just to shift a little bit, I did want to ask you about when the pandemic hit, how did this space kind of guide you through or determine what-- I didn't mention

it when I met with you the other day but you're one of my early pandemic memories. The week you guys started selling the deconstructed cocktails I saw it on Instagram.

Joe Phelps: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And that was just maybe a week after the shutdown.

Joe Phelps: Uh-huh.

Michelle Little: And I came down here and I remember you were out in the alley, and you had the table, and that was one of my moments where I was, like, oh, this is going to be a different game.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. And we were in the same boat. We didn't know what to do so we tried that, and it wasn't gonna work for us.

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But we wanted to find ways to still be part of the community, and we did that for a couple of days. And then we just tried to find other ways to be active. But yeah, we did, we sat out there, my wife and my dogs, and sold little to-go containers full of juice. [Laughter] And there were some other bars that were doing that a lot better than we were, and I could've learned but it would've taken a while. And I just left it to the ones that were doing a better job with that and tried to focus on finding side jobs and work for me and for some of the bartenders that were out of work. We were all just searching for some way to keep going.

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It was scary in the time, but things have worked out since.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I saw where you put together kind of a service where people could find a bartender that was out of work and--

Joe Phelps: I tried. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: [inaudible 0:30:18] great. I loved that idea.

Joe Phelps: But I think everybody was in the same boat in their life. We got a couple of little odd jobs out of it for a couple of bartenders, but I think people just didn't know if they wanted anybody in their house, and so it was kind of a hard sell to get anybody to hire anyone at that time. But it kept us busy for a little while, yeah.

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Michelle Little: And how was shifting back into this space after the pandemic? Do you think of it differently or . . . ?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. There's this weird thing when you start a business and you're putting so much work into it, it's so scary that you almost hate this thing you've been-- you don't hate it, but the fear does something to you where you kind of dread being down here and doing what you obviously love. It doesn't last long but it was like starting your business all over again, and at a time where things were a lot more uncertain. So there was a lot of dread involved, and I think it was everybody, not just bar owners, but it was weird coming back to jobs.

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And you just kinda had to work through it and find what was normal again. And it just kind of happened naturally. But, yeah, there was a lot of weird feelings coming back.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I think we all think, like, can we do this again? [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: Yeah, exactly. And it was like running a whole different business, too. There was just things you had to pivot to. And this is a bar, we want people to have fun, we don't want to have rules. Obviously, there are certain things you don't do in a bar, but you don't want to police people, like, hey, don't sit there, don't come down without a mask.

0:33:00

That was really hard 'cause we were in the business of being welcoming and giving people an escape but couldn't escape from any of that, so it was hard. But people were really understanding. Birmingham has been great from the start. They really support small businesses, creative businesses. They really want to get out and enjoy new things. And other cities that I've lived in aren't like that. Tacoma was full of burger joints. Anybody that tried something new, it was hard to be successful. But Birmingham makes it kind of easy, I will say that.

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Michelle Little: And so we don't end on the pandemic-- I don't want to end on-- so what does being part of the Central Business District now mean to you going forward?

Joe Phelps: [Pause] You can edit out that. [Laughter] I don't know. I have to think about it.

Michelle Little: Take your time. [Laughter]

Joe Phelps: It's exciting, yeah. I think this is gonna look totally different in five years. It looks totally different from five years ago, from ten years ago, and it's definitely heading in the right direction. Before the pandemic I think our numbers were higher than they've ever been, and tourism was the highest it's been probably ever in Birmingham.

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And it's obviously gonna come back. I think that's not a trend that's gonna be knocked off course permanently. And so I'm just excited to see where it goes and just happy I'm here in a comfortable spot, my little bunker.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah, it is a bunker. I don't know if you have somebody-- I did hear the door.

A2: I didn't hear any footsteps [inaudible 0:35:25].

Michelle Little: Oh, okay. Maybe--

Joe Phelps: Yeah. It's all right.

Michelle Little: Okay. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about about this bar or about you? Is there anything we didn't cover about your story?

Joe Phelps: Yeah. The name of the bar is something a lot of people ask about. So Pilcrow is the paragraph symbol. Originally, this area housed the Caldwell printing press and so we wanted a typographical name to honor that history.

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And Pilcrow is what we ended up choosing because the long history, if you were to write it all down, of this building, of Morris Avenue, this area, town, we're just this small section of text, a little paragraph. So the Pilcrow was fitting, I thought, and it also honored that typographical history. So that's how we chose that. I'm definitely not an English nerd by any . . . [Laughter] But I think, other than that, yeah, nothing much else.

Michelle Little: I love that! Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with me today.

Joe Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. Thanks for coming down. Yeah. Yeah.

Michelle Little: All right.

A2: Can we get more [inaudible 0:36:47] with the water?

Michelle Little: Yes. With the-- okay. Yeah. Let's pause for another . . .

Joe Phelps: This is ice coming through so they might need a little space.

A2: Yes. So that'll mean . . .

Joe Phelps: Perfect timing.

0:37:04

[End]