



José Castillo

Norma's Sweets Bakery - New Orleans, LA

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Phillip Norman Reid: Today is Wednesday, April 13, 2022. We're here in at Norma's Sweets Bakery in New Orleans. I'm Phillip Norman, and I'm here with José Castillo. Mr. Castillo, could you introduce yourself?

José Castillo: Hi, I'm José Castillo, I've been living in New Orleans pretty much all my life. At the age of 5, I came here. I'm from Honduras.

Phillip Norman Reid: What do you do here at the bakery?

José Castillo: Norma's is a family business. We have two locations, one in Kenner and one in Mid-City. My wife and I run the Mid-City location.

Phillip Norman Reid: Got you, good deal. You mentioned growing up in New Orleans. Just to start, tell me a little bit about growing up here and what your upbringing was like.

José Castillo: New Orleans is like a little town with a big city heart. But I grew up here.

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My wife is from Costa Rica. She's like, "How do you know everybody?" Everybody knows everybody in New Orleans. There's a friend, there's a cousin, there's this person like that. It's just a small town. I've always felt that. People are really warm here, the hospitality's awesome. I think it's kind of similar to Hispanics because we're very welcoming to our family, and we show a lot of good hospitality when people come see us.

Phillip Norman Reid: You feel like New Orleans values line up with Latin community values?

José Castillo: I think so.

Phillip Norman Reid: And what was the neighborhood you grew up in?

José Castillo: They call it chilly Gentilly, but it's just Gentilly. I grew up there with mixed friends, a little bit of everybody. I was the only Hispanic. Then, a couple other Latin kids. But it was pretty mixed. I made some good friends.

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Pretty much know everybody from the neighborhood. Just grew up playing sports in the park.

Phillip Norman Reid: I was going to ask what y'all liked to do in the neighborhood.

José Castillo: At least back then, we played football, they call it pitch-up tackle, baseball. We were kids, we had fun. I don't see that too much today in kids. It's more inside now. But when we were playing, we were always outside.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, outside at the park and everything.

José Castillo: Yeah. Friends came over, parents told you, "Get out the house, go get lost somewhere." Now, parents want the kids to stay inside.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, being out in the neighborhood, enjoying the environment. Who raised you, and what did your parents do?

José Castillo: My mom and my dad. My father passed away when he was young, probably 49.

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He had kidney failure. My mom took over. We lived with my mom and my dad's mom. She had a little double, so my grandma was on the other side of the house. Every Sunday, she would knock on the door, kick the door in, and tell you, "Let's go to church." [Laugh] It's family. It's cool. I

had other family members in that neighborhood that lived there. I had a cousin down the street but on the other side of the block. She lived there, and her mother lived two blocks down. It was kind of cool, family was always close. Our house was one of those houses that when people came from Honduras, they stayed in our house, too. The house was always full. I always had to sleep with somebody. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Did you have any siblings?

José Castillo: I had a little brother. Grew up with my younger brother.

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Yeah, man, it was family. Things that people have to go through, especially when they come from a different country, they've got to start over. In Honduras, my dad had a little farm, cattle, stuff like that. They came here, my dad had some Cuban friends, and some guy, Julio Cortiza, had a bakery on Elysian Fields called Rosylouis Bakery. He sold it to my mom and dad, and from there, we came into the baking business. But we were little. Because they were taking care of the business, it was hard for my mom and dad to see us, too. And my dad was sick as well. It was really challenging to have a business at that time for my mom. She went to school and tried to raise us, too. Rosy Louis

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Later on in life, my mom went back to working at a store, Union Supermarket on Tulane. From there, she got back into the baking side.

Phillip Norman Reid: You said you were 5 when your family came here, right?

José Castillo: Yeah, 5 years old.

Phillip Norman Reid: You don't have too much memory probably from before?

José Castillo: Well, I grew up here when I was 5, but I would go to Honduras in the summers. To me, that was awesome because when you go back to a country like Honduras, you see the poverty that our country has, people are poor, but they still have that love, that family. When you get there, they'll do whatever for you to feed you. It's like, "Where do they get the money from?" But they make it happen because they're very welcoming. I loved it.

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Phillip Norman Reid: You go back most summers then?

José Castillo: When I was young, yeah. When I was young.

Phillip Norman Reid: Very cool. You were saying newly arrived immigrants would be staying in your house, but also your family's. Talk a little bit more about what those challenges looked like for your family being immigrants.

José Castillo: I don't really know much about Honduras was because I came here so young, but I do know my mom had to learn another language. It was hard for her to understand some of the stuff that was going on. She would teach us right and wrong in Spanish, then when we did some bad things, when people came to tell us, she didn't understand what they really told her.

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It was difficult for her as far as education, learning how things were here. It was good that we had an aunt who came here in the 50s. She raised her daughters here, and her husband, Uncle Bob, he was an American from World War II. She kind of also showed us different ways, opened us up to different opportunities as well. We had a question, we would go to her. She was great.

She was actually the first one to come here. When everybody came here, everybody went through her house. Then, later, everybody came through our house.

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I guess it was probably more challenging for my parents just because of the English than it would've been for me, being such a little kid, playing with all the kids. They had little slurs I would recall. But at the end of it all, I would make my friends. We grew up. Kids pick on kids, that's how it was. But once kids see you just want to have fun and play—I grew up from that. Now, all those kids are grown, and we still say hi to each other when we see each other in the neighborhood.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Your aunt who guided you all, what as her name?

José Castillo: Lolita Gibson.

Phillip Norman Reid: Cool.

José Castillo: From what I understand, she actually came here when Honduras did a lot of trade with New Orleans, the bananas.

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I think she came here with a lady called Mary Morgan from the islands of Honduras, its kind of British. Both of them were teachers. They came here, and they moved on. Lolita, that's my aunt.

Phillip Norman Reid: You told me last time that United Fruit Company is kind of the reason there's a big Honduran population.

José Castillo: Huge. This is the biggest population of Hondurans, here in New Orleans.

Phillip Norman Reid: In the whole US?

José Castillo: In the whole US.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, wow, that's interesting.

José Castillo: There are Hondurans everywhere else, too, but the biggest population is here.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's interesting. I didn't know that. I'll ask you a little bit more about that, but when your parents had the Cuban bakery, do you remember that? Did you go and help out?

José Castillo: I was, like, 6, 7 years old.

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Like I said, then they sold it. But my mom learned. Actually, the bakers that had it before, Cortiza, he told my mom, "You got six months to learn what I'm doing." She picked it up.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's crazy.

José Castillo: She picked it up. They managed the business, and they did really good with it. But because of us being so young, they decided it wasn't the right moment.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And your mom told me because your dad was sick, too, it was very hard.

José Castillo: Correct, it was very difficult, my mom being young, my dad being sick, us being little, it just wasn't the timing for it.

Phillip Norman Reid: How old were you when your dad passed away?

José Castillo: I was 15. And my brother was 10

Phillip Norman Reid: What was that like, the adjustment around that time?

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José Castillo: I always felt that my family had everything I needed. I had all the love that I could receive from my parents and family. Of course, we didn't have all the things other kids had, too, but I also hear other kids saying, "Man, you had this." There's always somebody else in a different situation. But I was blessed, man. My parents gave me what we needed, food, shelter, love. We had fun. To me, you could spoil your kids with everything, but what we really needed, I had.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Really positive childhood, it sounds like.

José Castillo: Yeah, I think so.

Phillip Norman Reid: Did you have a sense when you were a kid of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

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What did you like to do?

José Castillo: I remember as a kid, I wanted to be a police officer. I could never say it right because I would say pocolia. It's policia in Spanish. But I would say pocolia. I didn't say it right. My parents would laugh about that. But I started getting into school, I wasn't really the best student, unfortunately. But I got into a skill later. I learned a skill, and I did really well at that.

Phillip Norman Reid: What was the skill?

José Castillo: I became a plumber. Then, from that, I moved onto another opportunity.

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Katrina happened. I was like, "Man, this is my chance to open up my own business." I was going to go in full blast with the plumbing. I worked ten years for a company called Gallo Mechanical. It's a union company. I worked for them. I did really good. I really enjoyed working for them. Everything I had, I enjoyed it. But my mom was also growing, too. My mom needed help. I said, "I'm going to help my mom." It was a different opportunity, but I took it. From there, we opened up another store. I've been here ten years, put my kids through school. Can't complain. Thank God it's worked out.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Right, right. I was going to ask this earlier, your parents had the bakery, but what else was your connection to cooking, food, or baking as a kid?

José Castillo: Well, I liked to eat. Being so active as a kid, outside playing so much, food was always in our family. And there was something about all my other family members, they would come on a Sunday, and with what we could provide, we ate some really nice plates, traditional food. Nothing crazy, but it was just some good-cooked soups, seafood, tamales, even good breakfasts.

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And family members would come. I remember my uncle said one time, "Buen provecho." I was like, "Man, what does that mean? This guy's telling me it's a good opportunity for him to eat." That's how I understood it. But buen provecho is actually a custom you say when you're eating. It's like, "Enjoy your food." Whenever you see somebody in Latin America, we always have a custom to tell somebody—like being blessed. It's like a blessing. But I understood it differently.

That was my Spanish-English translation. I could say that our family ate very good traditional food. My grandmothers were there, and I learned that flavor. I've also learned the New Orleans side of cooking.

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I never thought I was going to get into the food business, but it's just something I grew up with, and I know it. When I brought that over to this, I applied it. I applied it with cooking and all that stuff, working with the ladies who also cook. I would say, "This is the flavor we're looking for. This is what we want." People understand, sometimes, the basics of cooking, especially when it's traditional home-cooked food. And that's what we're selling. We're not trying to be over the top. We're looking for just home-cooked food. Plate of rice, some beans, some type of meat, and a gravy or stew. And a tortilla.

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The customers I have, that's what they're looking for. That's what I grew up eating in my family. And I learned that flavor, and I've applied it to what we do here. It's done well because our lunch line is pretty good.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, that's what I was going to say. I'm always here around lunchtime, and it seems like a lot of people on lunch break or just from the neighborhood come here to, like you said, get that traditional meal. What are some of your favorite of those traditional foods and flavors?

José Castillo: I like the stews. A stew with a beef rib, some whole beans, rice, avocado. We do a bowl of green bananas with a little salt on it. It's good. With tortilla and some type of crema or cheese.

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That's one plate. In the morning, I love Latin breakfast. We do baleadas. Like, an egg with a little salsa and a little bit of fried green bananas. The first one was boiled green bananas. But in Honduras, we eat the yellow banana like you know, but when it's green and hard, we slice it up like a chip. It's, like, an eighth of an inch thick, and we fry it. Like a ripe platano, that's friend? But this is a green banana. Also, we fry the green bananas, the green platano, and ripe platano. In other parts of Central America, they don't eat that. That's something we eat in Honduras.

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Phillip Norman Reid: That's a distinctly Honduran thing.

José Castillo: And people love it. It's like a chip.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, I've tried them before. They're real good. You were touching on this, we kind of talked last time about how since you did the king cake, so you've gotten larger attention. But really, the point of this bakery and store, you were telling me, has always been to serve the Latin community in New Orleans with that traditional food.

José Castillo: Yeah. That's our biggest thing. We're named Norma's Sweets Bakery. We do traditional breads from Central America. We got into the king cake just because it's a New Orleans tradition. Pretty much it's the same bread as some king cakes you have, but we do a filling.

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We do a guava cream cheese filling. I think that's one of the big things. It's not overly sweet, you don't have all this frosting and sugar. It's lightly sugared, lightly frost. The guava and the cream cheese, it's a hit.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, which is also a typical pastry you find in Central America, right?

José Castillo: Yeah. When I go to Honduras, strawberries are not that common. But guava's huge, all through Mexico, all through the equator. All the Caribbean, that's their thing.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, one of the staple fruits. It's interesting because it sounds like you grew up with those traditional Honduran flavors, but you got to know the New Orleans stuff, so your king cake kind of combines those two.

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José Castillo: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: As a kid growing up in New Orleans, when was the first time you had king cake?

José Castillo: It had to be kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade. Kindergarten, I was still kind of little. I do remember we had king cake. But I could probably appreciate it more in the 1st grade. We played with it, somebody would get the baby. I was like, "Ah, I don't want the baby." Somebody else would get it. Then, I learned when you get the baby, you've got to bring the king cake the following time, the next one. I don't remember if I did get the baby, but I do know that it was kind of like, "Who's gonna get the baby?" It was fun when you were a kid.

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Phillip Norman Reid: And this is just at school, a Mardi Gras party kind of thing.

José Castillo: Yeah, because really, we didn't know anybody else. I only knew the king cake from school. My family didn't know about it. That was a New Orleans tradition.

Phillip Norman Reid: But you wouldn't really celebrate Mardi Gras too much?

José Castillo: We went to the parades because it was nice, but we didn't know. Also, my mom didn't understand the language, so it's not like she could just talk to people. But you pick up, you learn. You start putting it in your life, too. As we got older, then we were buying king cake. But when we were little, it wasn't something we did.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Your world was kind of the world your parents made for you, except when you had king cake at school.

José Castillo: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: One more question reflecting on childhood. You have really fond memories of where you grew up in New Orleans, but how have things changed in New Orleans since then, as you've owned the bakery?

José Castillo: Before Katrina, you had a big Central American population here, predominantly Honduran, you had some Cubans and Dominicans. But now, the population has grown. We only had one Latin store in New Orleans. Now, you've got three or four of them, many other stores that are around, too.

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The Hispanic population is growing. You can see it just in the type of businesses all over the place now. I think all that came after Katrina because of the work, the construction workers, the

opportunities that came with it. Then, people enjoyed it, and they stayed. It was pretty balanced, the income with the rent, cost of living. And work was always available. As long as there's work, we're going to have people here.

Phillip Norman Reid: Is that around when you came to help your mom? It was due to that big boom in the Latin population that she was growing, right?

José Castillo: Right. After Katrina, I came in.

Phillip Norman Reid: What year was that?

José Castillo: Katrina was in '05. I probably came in '06, '07.

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Phillip Norman Reid: When she was really growing. When did this location in New Orleans open up?

José Castillo: We opened the New Orleans location 2011 or so. It was kind of a growing thing, too, because we found a location—remember, after Katrina, everything was shut down. Some people left. It was kind of like, "Do we really want to come back?" All those questions were up in the air. Finding a location was very difficult, too, because we wanted to be in a certain location. We were actually looking in the West Bank, too, but because West Bank didn't have the damage that New Orleans had, West Bank prices were high.

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We found this location in Mid-City, and this was perfect. The neighborhood was tough because they had a lot of homes that were still being repaired, people weren't living in them, houses were abandoned. People would break into those houses, hide out. But now, people are coming back.

You can see the growth here. Katrina was a horrible experience, but now, we see that the city's growing, different businesses are coming in. People want to be in this city.

Phillip Norman Reid: Something you were talking about last time is how after Katrina, you had the big boom in the Latin population. But you're saying more recently, there's kind of been more highly educated, wealthier, in some cases—?

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José Castillo: From what I think, there are a lot of people from different states, higher-income states, have come to New Orleans. And also, maybe, have given the value of these homes so much. Because New Orleans is small, so property value's expensive because of the demand, I guess. I've seen people from all over, California, Washington, they come in, and they're buying in different neighborhoods that were like, “I don't wanna go in that neighborhood”, you know? I guess they've given them a different value.

Phillip Norman Reid: You were saying, too, with the property prices going up, a lot of people are moving to Chalmette.

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José Castillo: Yeah, I was saying I've seen it in my customers, I see the construction, the breakfast and lunch line is really good, but I've seen it in the evening time, those customers have gone out to different areas, where rent's a little more affordable. Now, this area here, people are paying \$1,500, \$2,000 for rent when before, people were paying \$1,000. And they're fixing up the houses nicer, too. I know construction workers who will buy a property for \$200,000 or \$300,000 and put a \$500,000 house on it.

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All that's affecting— but also because of the problems we have in our countries in Central America, I've seen another rise in the Latin population. Again, now I'm seeing new faces here. The old faces, it's like, "Hey, where'd you go?" "I went to Chalmette, it's a little more affordable." Now, I see a bunch of new faces, and they like the fact that they're close to everything here. Because there's a convenience that we have here, too. You can take the little trolley, take the bus, and you're right in your work area.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, all those perks that come with living in the city. It's interesting, you kind of see ebbs and flows in the Latin population in particular.

José Castillo: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Any other influential people, places, or experiences you want to share that kind of shaped who you are?

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José Castillo: Man, I've always liked to see how other people are doing, and you've got to take a little from them, especially when they give you advice. You don't want to learn the bad things from people. You see somebody, you want to pick up all the good stuff from them. To me, my mom's been a rock. She's tough. She's worked really hard to put herself in that situation. I'm very proud of my mom. That's one of the biggest influences I've had, my mom.

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Also, just friends of mine who are doing well. I feel happy for them. That's pretty much it. When I was doing some type of job, and somebody tells you something, if you don't take that advice,

you lose out on an opportunity. You miss out on one opportunity, there might be two or three right behind that one. I tell my sons, "You want to see what's good in people, and try to pick up on that. We're not inventing the wheel here. You don't want to learn the bad things from people. Surround yourself with positive people, people who aspire to do well in life. If you can help somebody, that's your good.

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That's a blessing for you, to help somebody. Give good advice, be a good example." I think that's important. To me, that's important. I've been lucky that, growing up here, I still have some of the same friends from high school, from junior high. And we still talk every day. I might be aggravating because I might call a thousand times, but we keep in touch. I've also picked up some new friends in life who come from the same situation as me. A little different, but same places. I see that they're doing good. I'm happy for them.

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I feel like if you make good choices, and you try to pick up on good things, you can pick yourself up. I was lucky, I think I've had some good opportunities. When they did come, I put my part in. It's not like I had an opportunity and didn't care about it. I took my opportunities as far as I could take them.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit more about the opportunity to help your mom with the bakery. It's cool to learn about how she influenced you. Take me from the start, how she opened up her own place. The first location was in Kenner. How'd that develop?

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José Castillo: She opened up on Georgia Street in Kenner. She found a perfect location. It was surrounded by these apartments. There was a big Latin population there. And they told my mom, "Norman, we're gonna support you." The customers were happy to have her. And my mom was selling a good product. Wasn't like she was trying to gouge people's eyes out with the prices. It was very traditional breads that really no one was making at the time.

Phillip Norman Reid: What are some of those traditional breads?

José Castillo: Well, we do the semitas. It's, like, a little pan dulce, sweet breads. Semitas, conchas. We do French rolls. I've learned there are all kinds of names for them.

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Sometimes people come to me and ask for a bread of water. It's like, "Bread of water?" Bread of salt." I've picked up on it that what they're really looking for is a little French roll. I call it a French roll just because people don't understand. But we call it bolillos. I think that's actually—Mexicans call it bollilos, from what I understand. Like I said, bread of water, bread of salt. Pan blanco. All kinds of names. Those are the breads people wanted. Semitas, that's our donut, I guess, if I had to compare it to something. It's just a little bread, baked, not fried, with a little sugar on top, and people like it.

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I had one restaurant, did a festival, and they actually ordered those and made some type of sandwich with it. It was pretty creative that they did that.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's interesting. So your mom opened up a location on Georgia Street.

José Castillo: She opened up the location in '03 on Georgia Street. It started really small. It just started growing and growing, to the point that she was like, "I need help." My brother was there first working with her, and my mom still said, "You want to come in?" So I came in, too.

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Because it was a little business, we saved up to get into another location. This was the location we started with. At the Kenner location, there's no food. It's just bread and the Cuban sandwiches. That's something else that's really popular for us. At this location, we did the bread, the Cubans, and the hot plates. The hot plate has really taken off.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, you said there's lunch and breakfast.

José Castillo: Traditional street food, like pupusas Pupusas are from El Salvador. We do tacos. Mexico gets the credit for the tacos, but we all eat a tortilla with some type of meat inside it.

Phillip Norman Reid: So that's a little bit contested? [Laughs]

José Castillo: Who should have credit. Mexico's known for great tacos.

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But I think really, all our countries might be different, but it's the person who's cooking that makes it different. Certain hands are not meant to cook. [Laugh] When I cook something, I enjoy it, and I really want to make you happy. If I didn't care, I don't think my food would come out the same. We're putting some soul into it, it's not a machine cooking it.

Phillip Norman Reid: For sure. With the bakeries, do you have the same cooks and bakers you've worked with over the years?

José Castillo: Yeah, pretty much. We've been family, same people.

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We're small. We're very happy for what we're doing, how we're serving it. The workers, once they come in, they stay with us. We take them in like they're part of the family, so however they can help me or I can help them, we're there.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Just with the history of the business, you were looking to expand, so you opened up the New Orleans location. Now, your mom's in that really big store in Kenner. When did that happen?

José Castillo: That happened last year. We actually bought a lot across the street from the original place, and we were gonna start building on that location. We were ready to go, had the plans, paid so much money. We were ready to move on with this, and we tore down an existing business to put our business there.

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We were going to do something within our means that we really felt good about. Right after we started it, boom, this corner location showed up that was for sale, like a little sign. And that was definitely a better spot, so we gave up on this and moved forward with the other location. And it worked out. Plans had to change, but we adapted to it, and we made it happen.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's so impressive to hear you tell the story of how your mom started out really small, to see how big that store is now in Kenner, it's crazy. It takes up a whole block.

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José Castillo: Yeah, she's got a good market out there. It was definitely a great opportunity to get into that building. You can see it from anywhere. Actually, when I give directions, I

sometimes say, "The old international building." People knew that building. It worked out good, man. Like I said, we had plans, we tore down an existing building. Actually, it was an operating car wash, and it was working. But we had our plans, too. We bought it with the intention to build on it, then "bam", this new location in, like I said, when I give directions I refer to the old international building. That was great.

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That was awesome. It was right there, it was close. It showed up right before we started. That was the opportunity for us to get into that location. She took it.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome, kind of dropped out of the sky.

José Castillo: Yeah, it did. It really did. You can plan all you want, but things could change on you. And that location wasn't for us, it was just a little corner location.

Phillip Norman Reid: And like you said, you always have your mind on when those opportunities come up. You're always ready for it. That's the good thing about being that way.

José Castillo: We had plans, we had money put into plans, money put into tearing down an existing business, and we could've just said, "We're going to stay on this path." But this worked out. I know it was better.

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Phillip Norman Reid: In the long run, for sure.

José Castillo: Yeah, in the long run.

Phillip Norman Reid: When you first started working with your mom, what were you doing? And how have you grown into the role you have now?

José Castillo: When you're working for yourself, whatever you need to do, from taking out the garbage bag, cleaning the bathroom, whatever slack you've got to take up, that's what we do. Just helping her with making sure everybody has what they need, helping her in any way we can help. Then, because I also had plumbing skills, I understood how a commercial kitchen could operate, what type of equipment, plumbing, all that stuff. All that helped me to set up this location.

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Phillip Norman Reid: So you kind of oversaw that opening.

José Castillo: Yeah. And I built this location with the idea we're doing now. And that's how we've gotten here. I'll repeat myself again. When you have a business, whatever needs to be done, that's what you've gotta do. And I'm not going to ask a worker to do something I wouldn't do. Sometimes, it's, "Who wants to clean the bathroom?" But that's something I can do, too. We're not here to make you feel bad with what you're doing, it's just that we need it done. It's just something that has to be done. When there's a mess, I'll clean it. If I see it, I'm not going to just stop what I'm doing, but I'll do it.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Running all over the place

José Castillo: Yeah. Also, when we first started this location, we started it small. It was a third of what we have in here now. We didn't have much employees. There were probably five of us. And I would work here, my wife would work there. We had to multitask. But the food was working, and we could bring somebody else in, the bakery was working, that was all consistent.

When you first start a business—and it's not like we had all kinds of money to pay all these salaries. Whatever we could do to save money, that's what we had to do.

0:46:00

Phillip Norman Reid: You do it yourself.

José Castillo: And I tell my sons, "Just because you're in business for yourself doesn't mean you're not going to work for somebody." [Laugh] You've got to know what you're selling, and you've got to be able to sell it. But if you go into business, and you don't know what you're selling, that's tough, man.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, you're gonna get lost pretty quickly.

José Castillo: You're gonna get lost. And everybody here has a skill, too. Everybody is important. As far as what they need and what the kitchen needs, what the front needs, that's what we have to pick up on.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. It's really impressive how y'all have grown.

0:47:01

It's cool to hear the story from the one small bakery to two pretty big locations, serving a lot of people.

José Castillo: Thanks, man. I thank God that he put us in this position, but my mom, she sacrificed a lot. She sacrificed a lot to help put us in this situation. Like I said, I look up to my mom a lot. And it was very hard for her because she was a lot younger than my dad. She struggled to give us the best.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, being a single mom and that kind of thing.

José Castillo: Single mom. My wife appreciates my mom, the hard work she's put in.

0:48:01

And she's also been a big part. She works, she helps me with my kids. We've got five kids total. She has two, I have three. I helped raise her kids, and she's helped me. She's been such a positive influence on my children. It's been a family effort, man.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. What's your wife's name?

José Castillo: Karina.

Phillip Norman Reid: How'd you meet?

José Castillo: She was a customer. I was going through a divorce, and she came to the store. I was like, "Man." I asked her all kinds of things, and she said, "No." I said, "Oh, you go to the gym?" She was like, "No." "You want to go to the gym?" She was like, "No." But I had her phone number. But I wasn't going to call her until she said I could call her.

0:49:02

She came in for a cake. I liked her from the first day we saw each other. She's sweet, she's great.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, I hear a lot of good stories about family bakeries. People usually meet in the bakery. I talked to another guy where it was the same thing.

José Castillo: That could be another story, but I was going through a divorce, a year and a half separated. I was probably even giving up on relationships, I was going to focus on business and my children. I said, "God, that's what I'm gonna to focus on." That one day, she just came up from nowhere. My uncle said, "José, come help her." I went over there, and I helped her. She had

a little key thing. I said, "You go there?" She was like, "No." I was like, "Ah—" Everything was no. [Laugh]

0:50:05

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, trying to start a conversation, and it wasn't working.

José Castillo: It didn't work out. I went out that night, and I had a great night. I told my cousin, I was like, "Man, tomorrow morning, I've got to go give this cake to this person." She showed up, and that's when I asked her again, "Hey, can I call you?" And she finally said, "As a friend, yeah, you can call me." Later on, I called her. Man, we've been together since. It's been good. Her daughter's about to graduate from UNO. She's blessed, she's a blessing, and I'm very proud of her. She was born in Costa Rica. I know we've played a big part in her. She's a good girl. We got good kids. They all got good hearts. So they gotta be good.

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Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome, man. The cake was your in. And now, you've got a family bakery.

José Castillo: I liked her, but I still made her pay for it. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, can't lose that business.

José Castillo: Can't lose that business. I said, "I'm gonna sell you this cake." We were both separated, like, a year and a half. Exact same story, man. At least our situations in that respect. But it's been good. But I was lucky.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's a cool story. Thank you for sharing that. Growing the family.

0:52:02

Let's talk about the king cake and when that came in. When did y'all first start making one?

José Castillo: We had a baker working with us, and they were doing king cakes at the other location. He was a big part of it.

Phillip Norman Reid: What was his name?

José Castillo: Garto. He was a big part. Really great guy. He came in, and he worked with us. He shared stuff with us, we shared stuff with him. The king cake just started growing from there. Then, we actually had a good review on a king cake one year. I was like, "Man, we had a writeup on our king cake." That's when we were at the Kenner location. The write-up was good.

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Believe it or not, the following year, we didn't even do king cakes. After a good write-up. But the king cake was just one time a year. This is something we do every day. We just don't have the manpower to keep it up. But this other location, we came in, and I said, "We've got to do the king cakes here." We've done really well with the king cake. We do it just for Mardi Gras.

Phillip Norman Reid: Like you said, it takes a lot of manpower.

José Castillo: Yeah, it's not like we're mass producing king cakes. We do so many a day, and our customers tell us what they need, we try to meet that demand. But we did the king cakes, and some people like the plain ones, or the traditional strawberry, and we just did guava and cream cheese.

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From there, we did coconut, pineapple. But the guava's been the favorite. Tropical fruits. To me, that's the only way we could make it ours. If you want traditional king cakes, there are so many

places that do good king cakes still. But ours was the guava and cream cheese. We did the tropical fruits, and people liked it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Do you find that it's popular both with your typical customers, and does it also bring in new people?

José Castillo: Mostly, our main customers will get our king cakes. But, what I'm trying to also say, there are people who immigrated to this country when we immigrated, let's say 40 years ago.

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They picked up on the same traditions as New Orleans. But a new immigrant who came here five years ago, he isn't as familiar with that king cake. It's not something that he wants. Those customers that I have that have been here such a long time, and American customers who know and like what we do, because they like our Cuban sandwich, that's kind of the gateway into what we do. We have a really popular Cuban sandwich. They decide to try a king cake. It's just as good as the stuff that we do. But different. When they try the king cake, "Oh, man, can you give me another one? Man, brought it to a party, and your king cake did really good.

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Everybody voted for your king cake." Or, "It was one of the top three." It's like, "Wow." It's nice, man.

Phillip Norman Reid: Feels good.

José Castillo: Feels really good. That's how we got into the king cake. Like I said, we try to maintain the demand on it. But it's still kind of on a smaller level. But we're happy with it.

Phillip Norman Reid: You're comfortable keeping it there, not trying to sell it year-round like some of these bakeries.

José Castillo: Maybe if we were set up for that, but that's not what we're doing.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. You're talking about how among the community you traditionally serve, those folks are getting the king cake. People like me, this is the first time I ever came to this store, to try the king cake.

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Do you get a lot of people like that?

José Castillo: Mostly, it's word of mouth. People come in, they like the Cuban sandwich we're doing, and they see the king cake in a Latin store. It's like, "Well, he does good Cuban, he's got a whole lunch line, he's doing good at that. It's called Norma's Bakery. Let's try it." So they try it. Then they bring it to a party, 20 people try it, and they like it also. Of those 20 people, five of them are going to come to buy that king cake. It just spreads like that. I've had customers call me before king cake season, "You gonna do the king cake?" "Yeah, we're gonna do it." We do the king cake right after the day of kings. We do the rosca reyes.

0:58:00

I think that's a Mexican tradition. We do that king cake. And it's different.

Phillip Norman Reid: What's that one like?

José Castillo: If ours is simple, this is even simpler. [Laugh] What they do, they put a little dried fruit on top. We do it like that. And people like it. I think in New Orleans, we tend to go

over-sweet on everything. And in Central America, Latin America, that's the thing, if I go too sweet on things, people don't like it. They complain a lot. They don't want it to be too sweet.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's why you balance that guava with the cream cheese, right? To balance it out.

0:59:00

Got you. Seeing the king cake tradition grow, what have been some of the challenges and surprises of bringing that into what y'all do?

José Castillo: The surprise, I guess, would be how people really like it. You get people from different places to come. But I shouldn't be surprised because I know it's a good king cake. I guess what impresses me is just how people have responded to it. It makes you feel good. We share that with everybody. Like I said, we've never really put it on a massive level, so it's been really simple for us to do. But this year, with COVID and all this stuff that's been going on, we had a little bit different of a challenge getting things we needed for the king cake. It was a little frustrating.

1:00:05

Phillip Norman Reid: Supply chain?

José Castillo: Yeah, just little things. "Hey, do you have this?" "No. We don't have it. We're not gonna have it until I don't know when." We tried to make it work out with what we had.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Well, just talk about growing up here as a kid, eating king cake, and now you're, like you said, part of this tradition. You helped create one of these really popular king cakes. What's that like?

José Castillo: As a kid, it was cool when somebody brought something to class, everybody liked it, we got away from a math problem or some science equation to take a little break and relax, have a little sweet juice or something with a king cake, just laugh with your friends.

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That was cool, especially when you're a kid. From there, going to friends' houses, now that I'm older, people have king cakes, then now me offering a king cake, and you see that people like it, that's blessed. That's good. That's really nice. There are so many choices for people, especially in a city like New Orleans.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's the capital of king cake.

José Castillo: The flavor that this city offers, and to meet that, stay in demand, you know you're doing something nice.

Phillip Norman Reid: And to be at those parties where people will sample king cakes, and to win the contest, be one of the favorite.

1:02:03

José Castillo: Just to be modest, just to be part of them is great. When your customers come back, and they're happy they brought your king cake—I heard one guy say, "I don't want to tell them where I got it." "What you mean?" [Laugh] I liked it when I go to good places to eat, I'll bring it to an event or something like that. "Where'd you get this from?" "It's my secret." I had a friend who was like that, too. But, you know what, you've got to share what you know. [Laugh] You've got to. It's cool. Growing up with it, not even knowing you were gonna be into this, then doing it and having such positive feedback from it, that's awesome.

1:03:08

All I've got to do is keep it up, continue to do what I'm doing.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. Really interesting turn that your life has taken. And you got interviewed for the New York Times about this king cake. What was that like?

José Castillo: That was special, man. That was awesome. They mentioned a couple other bakeries as well. But they came in, and they took the time to ask about where we come from. To me, that's good. There are so many people who come to this country and offer good things. Share that. What you're doing right now, asking me where I come from, I appreciate that.

1:04:06

All I want to do is just be part of it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. That's something you said last time we talked that struck me, this is a good opportunity to share the best of your culture. And you also said, "To show people we're not so shitty." I don't know why you said that [Laughs]

José Castillo: I said what?

Phillip Norman Reid: You were like, "It's a way to share the best of our culture, show people we're not so shitty," or something like that.

José Castillo: I don't know if I said that. I don't know what I meant by that. I don't even know if I said that. But I do know it's good to share the good about where we come from. I don't know how that was said, there's so many things that we go through. But I think it's important that people see the good in everybody.

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Because as people, we tend to judge others just because of the little bad things we see. And nobody's perfect. Let's balance it out. Let's not just judge on the little bad things you see. But I do know I feel good about what we're doing, and to me, that's important. Important to give back, to be a good influence on my kids, tell them about the work values we have to have. That's what I'm trying to instill in my kids.

1:06:07

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, I won't hold you to that statement.

José Castillo: Yeah, I don't know how it came out.

Phillip Norman Reid: The way I took it is what you're saying, sharing the best of a culture. Also, you're in a city that's so diverse, there are stereotypes and prejudices. I kind of took it that way, knowing where we come from, showing more of your community than what people hear in the news, or whatever.

José Castillo: Right. But I'm just happy, man. Just try to show the best side of us.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. Well, I appreciate you sharing everything with me. I don't want to keep you too long. But is there anything we missed or that you want to add about king cakes, the bakery, what have been the joys or challenges of running this business, anything like that?

1:07:04

José Castillo: This is our baby. It's been a joy because of what we do. It hasn't been easy, it's definitely challenging. But I think in life, nothing's gonna be easy. I took it like this was one of my best opportunities I could have, and I've got to make the best of it.

Phillip Norman Reid: What are your hopes for where the business will go?

José Castillo: Time will tell. Raising five kids and having a business to run, trying to manage people, all the stuff that we've gone through, not just us personally, but a city, a country, a world.

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All I could say, if another opportunity comes, I've got to see how we can put it into our lives. But as of right now, this is great. I'm really thankful, really blessed, and very proud of what we do. It's not easy, but I know people could do it. I didn't have this experience. I took this opportunity with no experience. Just picked up from my mom, picked up from some other people, picked up words, what people were doing, picked up consistency, and that's why we're still here. It's definitely not going to be easy, but it's a life.

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It's a good way. Anybody that wants to take advantage of opportunities, work hard at it. Be blessed. Be thankful. I think good things will come. And blessings come in different ways.

Phillip Norman Reid: That feels like a powerful place to stop for me unless there's anything else.

José Castillo: Yeah, I just want to say thank you.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. And thank you so much, Mr. Castillo. I really appreciate you sharing your story. We're just gonna leave 30 seconds for the recorder here.

1:10:22

[End]