



Kathy D'Agostino  
Chocolatá

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Michelle Little: Okay. This is Michelle Little interviewing Kathy D'Agostino at Chocolatá in downtown Birmingham, and today is Tuesday, November the 30th of 2021. So Kathy, to get started, will you just tell me where you grew up, where you're from.

Kathy D'Agostino: I'm from Ohio. I grew up in Ohio most of my young childhood life and we moved around quite a bit, though, within Ohio, and we moved to Indiana, lived in Florida, lived in Birmingham. Yes, I've traveled growing up as a child a lot.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Kathy D'Agostino: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Was it your parents' jobs or what caused all the moving around?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes. My dad, his job had us moving around quite a bit.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Kathy D'Agostino: He's in the trucking business and worked for different regions and different companies, yeah.

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Michelle Little: Okay.

Q2: I'm getting a little bit of feedback. Can you straighten the wire so it's not overlapping over itself? Yeah. That should do it.

Michelle Little: Is that better?

Q2: Thank you.

Michelle Little: Okay. You think that'll do it?

Q2: Yeah, I think so.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about your family growing up?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. I'm one of four girls, and my mother has quite a large family. She's one of twelve children. Actually, her mother had fourteen children. Two died very young, one at birth and one at four years old. They were farmers. And so our family reunions and our family is just a big part of our life. So, yeah, Mom loved to get together with family, and she loves to cook a lot.

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My dad also comes from a pretty big family. So, yeah, it was fun. We had a good childhood.

Michelle Little: Four girls! [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes. I'm still apologizing to my dad, I think, for putting him through what I'm sure we put him through in our teenage years, four girls all within six years of each other.

Michelle Little: Wow! So did y'all have family reunions every year?

Kathy D'Agostino: For a while we did it every year, especially when we were in Ohio, and then as the family started moving away and growing, we'd do it every other year. And we still do it. We haven't done it since COVID, of course, but we'll have another reunion this coming

summer. We basically rent out a whole camp in North Carolina to accommodate-- it's usually over a hundred people.

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It's been up to a hundred and fifty with all of the cousins and aunts and uncles. Yeah.

Michelle Little: That's incredible. Is North Carolina just a central location for everyone or is that . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. We have some family there and so that makes it a little bit easy for them to organize it and, yeah, it's pretty central.

Michelle Little: Is there lots of good food at the . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes. Everybody pitches in. Yeah, there's always lots of food, more than enough. [Laughter] As you can imagine, growing up in that lifestyle, my mom still cooks, like, three times the amount of food that she needs to cook because she grew up helping her mother preparing food for so many people. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: So what are some of your early food memories and dishes she made?

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Kathy D'Agostino: Oh, it wasn't anything fancy. I think her favorite thing to do is bake and sweets, and so the holidays there was always lots of sweet rolls, lots of cookies, lots of pies and kolaches and all that.

Michelle Little: So did you learn to bake and cook sweets from her?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes, I'm sure. She always made this special thing out of the leftover crust that supposedly my grandmother also made. And someday maybe I'll make it and have it in the case at Chocolatá. There's no chocolate in it, but maybe I can figure out a little tweak to it. It's called milk pie. And so she'd take the leftover crust and we each got to make our own in a little mini pie thing.

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And it's cinnamon and brown sugar and milk. And you bake it and kinda all caramelizes. And butter, there's butter in it. It's no recipe, you just put it in until it looks right and bake it.

[Laughter]

Michelle Little: That sounds amazing.

Kathy D'Agostino: It is. I made one this weekend for my boys. When they're home I try to make that for them.

Michelle Little: Now, you worked at a chocolate shop at some point, as well, correct?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes. Yes. When we were living in Jacksonville, Florida, I was in my teenage years and, of course, I'm one of four girls so we were always competing over babysitting jobs in the neighborhood. And I really didn't like to babysit anyway, so I walked down the street to this chocolate shop that's literally right around the corner from our house and they had a hiring sign on the door.

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And I was fifteen, and so they said that they could use my help after school for a few weeks to help do some special order that they needed to get all wrapped up. So I did that, and the owner said, "You're very fast and meticulous with your work." She said, "I'd love to have you stay on." And anyways, long story short, I ended up working there for almost four years. I'd go after school when I could and I'd work the weekends, and I always worked all summer long. It was a family-owned business, so at some point a few summers after I'd been there, I was opening and closing the shop for them. Yeah. They taught me everything. They taught me how to temper chocolate, how to make ganache, all of it.

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Michelle Little: That's awesome. I grew up in Orange Park. Now, what was the name of this chocolate shop?

Kathy D'Agostino: San Marco and it was called Peterbrooke, and it was her children's names, Peter and Brooke.

Michelle Little: Oh.

Kathy D'Agostino: And Brooke owns it now, I'm pretty sure. And they're kind of like a franchise now.

Michelle Little: I love San Marco.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes. Yeah. So we just lived right around the corner.

Michelle Little: And so you worked there through high school?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes, all through my high school years. Um-hm.

Michelle Little: So was it at that point-- did that kind of plant the seed?

Kathy D'Agostino: Of course, I loved what I was doing there, or I wouldn't have stayed so long. And they were like my friends.

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And I always thought that it would be fun to have my own chocolate shop someday, but then life happens and I kind of let go of that for a while and did other things. And then, about maybe seven years ago, I just really started getting burnt out on what I was doing. And actually my husband said, "Well, what would you want to do that would fulfill you?" And I said, "Well, I always wanted to have a chocolate shop, but it's been so long since I worked with it." And he's, like, "Well, why don't you make a business plan and start playing around with it a little bit?" So I started ordering chocolate from anyplace that I order fine couverture from and using it in my own kitchen at home to experiment with recipes and just get refamiliarized with it.

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And I started doing some popups and realized pretty quickly that I would like to just have a place to go every day and sell the chocolate. And noticing, too, that there was a need in Birmingham for a chocolate shop. And so when I worked downtown previously, I would park on this block and walk over. I dressed the windows at Bromberg's, and I did their visual displays in their stores, but my office was here. And I always noticed these few little spaces here that were pretty small.

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And so I reached out to the landlord and asked him if I could look at this space, and he rented it to me as-is. And then it took me eight months, and I pretty much did all the work in here. Of course, I hired people to put a sheetrock wall up and the countertop in, but I scraped all the walls and patched 'em and painted 'em and did the floor. And I worked really hard for about eight months before I opened the shop.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I mean, I can't imagine the work you had cut out for yourself.

[Laughter] You said your office here. You mean your office was on this street somewhere?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. It was in Bromberg's.

Michelle Little: In Bromberg's.

Kathy D'Agostino: It was inside Bromberg's. I had my office in there and my storage for all of my visual props. And I did visual displays in their stores. At the time they had one at The Galleria, one at The Summit, and then the one in Mountain Brook.

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And then, they still wanted the downtown windows decorated, even though it was kind of a deserted downtown. But people still appreciated it that worked down here. There was nobody living down here, very few people living down here at that time. And it was sweet; Mr. Bromberg would get these letters and he'd share them with me from people that would write and say thank you for continuing to decorate the windows downtown. It takes me back to my childhood when we would go shopping at Pizitz or different places that there was life and retail. So it kind of gave them a sense of nostalgia.

Michelle Little: Um-hm, yeah. Now, what span of time was this that you were at Bromberg's?

Kathy D'Agostino: Let's see. I was at Bromberg's for I think eight years, until I opened the shop. I was actually still kind of helping them while I was working on this space, and it got to be a lot and that's when I finally was, like, I cannot help you anymore.

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I really need to focus on the chocolate shop. So that was 2017.

Michelle Little: Okay. And so how did you get into dressing the windows at Bromberg's, this magical job? [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: You know, I've always just had a knack for making things look nice. I was the weird child that enjoyed cleaning my room and rearranging it. I was always moving furniture around in our house. Lighting even. I asked my mom if I could buy a light to shine up on my wall a certain way. It's just weird! [Laughter] And so I think it was just part of my DNA to be interested in that kind of work.

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I didn't go to college. My mom had kind of pushed me a little bit into modeling when I was young. Actually, I was still working at the chocolate shop. And I would do these little modeling jobs in Florida, in Jacksonville, and that actually led to an opportunity to work in Japan. So when I was nineteen, I flew to Japan and worked there for over the course of two-and-a-half or three years. I lived there for a year-and-a-half, but I would come home for a few months in between

contracts. And living in Japan, I do give that experience a lot of credit to my sense of design because they are so hyper-tuned-in to the way things look, the way things appear, down to their food.

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It was a very-- I can't find the right word to describe it, but it impacted me a great deal in my interest for design and-- yeah.

Michelle Little:       What was that like at nineteen moving across the world by yourself?

Kathy D'Agostino:     It was terrifying and exciting. And I was always one that I had, I guess, maybe a little bit more of a sense of adventure.

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I actually bought a one-way ticket to LA when I was eighteen, and I went out there and I ended up living in a house with a bunch of surfers and learned a lot of lessons from that experience. I think I survived for three months, and my dad called and said, "I'm gonna be in LA this weekend." [Laughter] He said, "You wanna come home with me?"

Michelle Little:       [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino:     And I did. I was so poor. I just thought that I could do it, and I couldn't. I was working at a little restaurant on the beach and eating at the restaurant. [Laughter] It was not easy. I had no car so I couldn't drive into LA to get any work or go on any cattle calls for any modeling work.

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But I did have a big sense of adventure, so I guess I never really thought about not doing something if I wanted to do it.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So the LA experience obviously did not deter you from moving to Japan. Did you already have some work lined up in Japan or . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. So it was funny, 'cause then I came from LA 'cause I couldn't get any work. And about three months after I was home, the agency that I was with in Jacksonville got me a job in LA. [Laughter] So I went out there and did that job and the art director said, "You'd work really well in Japan right now 'cause you got the all-American look. And you should just send me your comp if you're interested, and I'll send it to the agency that a friend of mine owns."

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And so I did, and I didn't think anything of it. Not one iota. And I had a contract in the mail in a couple of weeks and so I went. Yeah. And that was a great experience. At the time, I really struggled thinking-- all my friends were going to school and thinking about what they were gonna do for their higher education. And I doubted whether I was doing the right thing. But in hindsight, I'm so glad that I did what I did. I think that I learned more from that experience than I could've ever learned in a classroom. I lived with girls from all over the world literally. I would live in different apartments, and they would put us with roommates.

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The different agencies that I worked with always had roommates with me. And, yeah, you just learn so much just from living in the culture and being exposed to people your age, too, that are

from different countries and cultures. Yeah, it was incredible. I feel very, very blessed to have had that experience.

Michelle Little: And what all did you eat while you were there? [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: Oh, gosh! I loved sushi. Of course, I was still a struggling young person, so I ate a lot of ramen, but it was like no other ramen you ever had. It's really good. Everything was so good. And like I said, there's so much attention to detail. So yeah, it was very inspiring.

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Michelle Little: So you're in Japan for four-- or did you say--

Kathy D'Agostino: About three years.

Michelle Little: So then where do you go from there?

Kathy D'Agostino: I came home for a friend of mine's wedding, and I saw my first sweetheart, my first love from high school, and we got back together, and before we knew it, we were getting married and having a baby. And so I have a 29-year-old son. And we moved around a lot during that time, as well, and finally settled in Birmingham. My parents were here.

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And we were not going to stay together so I decided to come home to where my parents were just for the emotional support and financial support. [Laughter] So that's how I ended up in Birmingham. Casey [sp] was two, so that was twenty-seven years ago.

Michelle Little: And now, what brought your parents back down to Birmingham?

Kathy D'Agostino: My father had a opportunity to work with a company here.

Michelle Little: Okay. So he was still working.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And is that when you started working on window dressings and design or what did you do next career-wise?

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah, I started working with McRae's department store. I actually started working in a floral shop. I was doing floral design.

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And through that, some people from the department store were coming in to buy flowers for their special events, and we just got to be friends and they said, would you like to come to work in the visual department? And so I did that. And that was back when the visual department was, like, you were building stuff. You were making sets. And I loved that. I loved working with my hands and with the tools. We even cut our own lettering with a bandsaw. Yeah, it was fun. So I did that for a while. It was a lot of work. I'm still traumatized by the Christmas setup in the department stores. And then I did people's homes. That led me into people asking me to decorate their homes for Christmas, and so I did that. Then I worked for a while doing interiors with a friend that was an interior designer.

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And during all of that time, I was still doing visual display for McRae's, and then went to Gus Mayer. The man who did their displays would come into McRae's to buy his shoes, and he was

always complementing my work. He said, "Do you want a job at Gus Mayer?" [Laughter] So I did that. And then he went to Bromberg's, and then, when he left Bromberg's, he said, "Do you want my job at Bromberg's now?" I was like his little duck, I just kept following him. [Laughter] And so I took that position. Yeah, I've always been doing something I guess creative.

Michelle Little: And now, when did you meet your husband and all of . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino: I was working at McRae's department store. Yeah.

Michelle Little: So how did y'all meet, like through McRae's or . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino: No. We met in a bar. [Laughter]

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And I remember he-- I wasn't really ready to date and he came to McRae's. I didn't give him the right phone number.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: And he found me and knew that I worked at McRae's. This is not gonna be part of the interview, right?

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: And anyway, he came, and I was in with my goggles on cutting stuff on the bandsaw and a girl came in and said, "There's a guy outside looking for you." And I was, like, oh, my gosh. So I walked out. I have literally goggle imprints on my face. [Laughter] And he still wanted to take me to lunch.

Michelle Little: Aw!

Kathy D'Agostino: So I was, like, all right, okay, I'll give you a chance. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: [Laughter] That's so sweet. And so you're both creative. I've read a little bit about your husband.

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Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. So Kyle's an architect. And yeah, I'm really lucky to have had his work to also help me be able to have an outlet for my design stuff. So when he did the design work on El Barrio, and I did the interiors. So that was fun. It's not something that I could've ever gotten on my own. And then Mountain Brook Brick & Tin, I did the interior design on that 'cause he did the architecture on that. So those were really nice experiences to work together.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So he's been an architect in Birmingham for a--

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. He came here after college. Pretty much he came down for a summer gig.

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He had a minor in archeology and so they were doing some documentation work on the coke mines. And he came down just to work for the summer to do that, and during that time he met Brian and Chris Geattina and they offered him a position at Geattina Fisher Aycock at the time,

which is now GA Studio. Yeah, so he worked there for a long time, twenty years. Now he's with Poole and Company, who he also met John while he worked at GA.

Michelle Little: And he had a food business.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yes.

Michelle Little: Yes.

Kathy D'Agostino: Kyle, yes. And actually, I would say that it was Kyle doing the sausage business that gave me the courage to do the chocolate business.

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'Cause I was just watching him, like, you have a full-time job and you're doing this thing. And I didn't see him. He would go in-- actually, that was kind of like part of the little deal with El Barrio when he was doing the work down there was, like, could I use y'all's kitchen on Sundays to do the sausage out of? And that's what he did. He'd even be down there some Friday nights doing sausage. So when they opened, they used his chorizo.

Michelle Little: Awesome.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So you've seen a lot happen in the Central Business District here downtown.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. Since working at Bromberg's so many years ago and literally, I'm not kidding, y'all, there was tumbleweed rolling down the streets.

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There was nobody down here. There were people in the banks and offices, but there was no life down here. There were a few places you could go get a hot dog.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Kathy D'Agostino: So it's been really cool watching the revitalization. It's very exciting. And I think COVID definitely stunted that growth, 'cause it seemed to me like just before COVID, like it was rapidly changing. But I don't think that it's in any way squashed it, obviously.

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There's scaffolding on practically every road down here.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino: Of course, parking's a little bit difficult right now because of all the work on the roads. But, you know, that's just all signs of progress and it's very exciting to see.

Birmingham has so much to offer. We have so many beautiful historical buildings and such a rich history. So yeah, I'm just excited to be a part of it. And that's really why I chose to open the shop down here. I wanted to be a part of it. You could feel the energy moving. So yeah, I'm still surrounded by boarded-up buildings, but maybe one day! [Laughter] I do get glimpses of the life across the corner at ZaZa and Paramount and Café Dupont and Elyton Hotel and the Pizitz.

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So much is going on.

Michelle Little: Yup.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah, you're right in the middle of all those.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So what do you think were some of the turning points? When did you start to feel some shifts in the neighborhood?

Kathy D'Agostino: You know, when I started working on this space and people were just, you're crazy; why are you opening that there now? But you could already see that things were moving forward. They certainly weren't moving backwards. So I think it's just a matter of time. And I've always been one, I like to take the ugly object and make it pretty. It's just my favorite thing to do.

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And so I knew that this dilapidated little space, dirt floor practically, and crumbling walls, I could just see that with a little bit of love and attention could be really magnificent. And it needed it. It's like this building was screaming for attention. [Laughter] Yeah, I think it's been going on for a while downtown, maybe five years that's really been noticeable. Yeah.

Michelle Little: Did you consider any other store fronts or was there something about this space that spoke to you?

Kathy D'Agostino: I was really looking for just, like, the-- I would always park right over here and so, of course, it was just right in front of me.

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But the size is really hard, and I just wish there were more places like this downtown. I know so many people who have come into my space that have small businesses or cottage industries that want to have a place to sell their wares, and there's so few small spaces downtown. They're all 2000 square feet and up. And if we could just get more infrastructure in that could support that need, I think you would see a lot more retail and small businesses downtown, but it's just not here. So yeah, maybe city planners could think about that.

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It would just serve the community so much better to have that downtown. And I do think that there has been a huge shift just in the past five or six years to people wanting to buy local and support the local businesses and not buy everything online and through big corporations. We have a huge art community, and I feel like they're supported. People in Birmingham appreciate art and creatives, and they just need a place to set up shop.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So kind of walk me through the process of when you kind of locked in on this location.

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What all is involved in opening a storefront like this in downtown Birmingham?

Kathy D'Agostino: It's quite a process that I wasn't even aware of. So I didn't have a general contractor. I was pretty much doing everything on my own. And even though Kyle's an architect, he could guide me a little bit, but he's not a general contractor. He knew you had to get this

permit, that permit, go through these channels to make all of that happen, but it was very hard. There's a lot of red tape and it's not easy. The City was not set up to make that an easy process. There should be-- and maybe there is now-- a liaison to help small businesses and guide them through that process so that you can do it without losing your mind or losing all your money.

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I had put in the ceiling. At one point the inspector came and I had put up the firewall too soon. I didn't realize that I needed the inspection prior to putting up the final layer of sheetrock, so they made me take it down. And I even had pictures. I had been documenting every single step of the process. And I said, "But I have these pictures. Here's what the ceiling looks like. Here's the wiring. Here's the-- all of it." He wouldn't even look at it. Said, "No." So I had to call people to come and take my ceiling down. I mean, that's a lot of money when I had no money. I went to the bank. I was actually turned down for my loan.

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And a few days later, after they had reviewed it, the guy at the bank had called me and said, "I took your proposal to another meeting, and we've decided to give you a line of credit." So I had a \$50,000 line of credit for one year to make it happen. So for doing an old building like that, it wasn't enough money. We even mortgaged our house, and so it takes a lot and it's stressful. I don't know, I think in that time, I was so-- I don't really know how to describe it. There was just something that just kept pushing me. It's like I just knew that it was gonna work out, so I just was going with the flow.

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Michelle Little: And because this is a historic building, were there additional steps or processes?

Kathy D'Agostino: No, there wasn't, 'cause I don't think that there was anything put in place already through the landlord as denoting this as a historical landmark. Now, had that been the case, then, yes, there probably would've been a lot more to do.

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So it was really just a matter of knowing how to structure and line up and schedule all of the inspections and permits. For somebody asking I kind of wrote it all out. It was a whole page and a half of things, people to call and things to think about, and what you would need to do before you had that done, and how much money this might cost or that might cost, and how much time all of that takes just waiting on inspections and stuff like that. It's not easy, and I wish that that would change. I think that the city could maybe find a way to make those processes go a little bit smoother and not feel so daunting. [redacted]

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Michelle Little: So tell me a little bit more about this building. I know you've explored a little bit in the rest of the building, or what are some things you've discovered?

Kathy D'Agostino: Oh, well, there's quite a-- I guess you could just call him a Birmingham icon, Gus at Pete's Famous.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Kathy D'Agostino: So still there's people that come and take photographs of the door and just stand there for a while and, you know, they're definitely having a moment.

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So he was a big part of this building during, I guess, my lifetime. And actually I have a sweet little story that, while I was working in here, I didn't have power in here yet. And there was a line next door that was still hot, so I was drawing power from his space. I just thought that was kind of cool. So I'm over there one day and I open the door and there's a little tomato plant growing between the cracks of what stone is left in there. Right now it's a lot of moss in there. But there was a tomato plant growing.

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The light must have just hit it perfectly through the door. And it just made me think that his spirit is still here, 'cause he had this tomato sauce or some kind of famous--

Michelle Little: Signature sauce.

Kathy D'Agostino: --or his signature sauce that he took the recipe to his grave, supposedly. Anyway, I just thought that was kind of like, oh, he's still here.

Michelle Little: Yeah. His little tomato plant, maybe.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. Yeah. And then, yeah, I've heard that the back part of this side of my space was the old saloon in the city, so that's kind of neat to know. Looking back at historical pictures of this block, it's kind of hard. You can recognize some buildings. But, yeah, it's interesting to think of it as a really thriving street.

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There was a lot happening on this street at one time in our history. Yeah. And I've always felt really good here. It feels like a special space.

Michelle Little: It is definitely special. Can you explain sort of if you walked-- 'cause you sorta can access the rest of the building-- what does it look like now?

Kathy D'Agostino: So, like, Pete's they've completely taken out the ceiling. They came in and did a lot of demolition.

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The owner of the building is going to be doing renovations on it, and I think in order to get the quotes on work to be done, he needed to have it pretty much cleaned out so they could see what they were dealing with. So there's been a lot of demolition in the building, so there's not a lot in here. The back side where the saloon was, the two stories above it are gone so it's just one big open space. There's still remnants of the tile in there that's really beautiful on the floor and the walls. Unfortunately, I don't think it's enough that you could really refurbish and use in any way, but you can tell that there was a business in there that was very old.

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And yeah, I don't know, I think we're lucky in Birmingham to have all these old buildings, and people that are interested in restoring them. It's beautiful. We get a lot of people from the Elyton Hotel and the other hotels, the Redmont, that are visiting Birmingham, and they all talk about how beautiful this city is with all the old buildings. And hopefully one day, when they ask the

question they always ask, "Where should we go shopping?" I'll be able to tell them, besides the very few spaces that I was able to tell them before to go to, we'll have more life down here, more business. That's my dream for it.

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There's so much potential.

Michelle Little: Yeah. How do you see the role of shops? We've got restaurants and bars, but how important do you think it is to have shops spread throughout this section, this neighborhood?

Kathy D'Agostino: I think it's very important. I think that as we see the growing amount of loft dwellers down here, people that want to live downtown and work downtown, to provide them and people who are coming to visit our city-- and if you think about it, when you travel and you go to a city and you're staying downtown, you can eat for-- what would it take, thirty minutes to sit down and eat a meal? But what are you going to do the rest of the time? Thank goodness we have the theatres, the Lyric and the Alabama, and the Sidewalk Film Center.

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All of that is part of what makes a city a place to enjoy, to be entertained. And I just think that the shops, the retail aspect of it is only going to add to the value of downtown.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I know we talked about this a little before the interview, but can you tell me a little bit about the impact of COVID on Chocolatá and maybe how the neighborhood felt during the depths--

Q2: Can you turn your bodies a little bit towards me?

Kathy D'Agostino: Oh, sure.

Q2: Just a little bit. Yeah, that's fine.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Q2: I'm losing your face. [Laughter]

0:45:50

Kathy D'Agostino: So COVID, yeah, obviously there was a time where it was very sad, very scary. Nobody was downtown. Everybody had gone home to work. Most of the restaurants were doing-- all of them were doing curbside pickup. We did that for a while here. I ended up closing the shop during the summer. We're very slow during the summer anyway, so to add the factor that nobody is actually downtown during the summer working, I closed for, I guess, three months in 2020, and then reopened the fall. I survive on holidays. If I didn't have my holidays, there's no way I can afford to have a brick and mortar.

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So I did a big push to do the curbside through Easter and get through my Christmas. And I'll tell you what, the local support during that time was remarkable. I did so much more business over Christmas than I ever imagined that I would do during a time like that. It was very heartwarming. And the letters from people, or the emails that were very supportive and encouraging, and just really made me feel like we are part of a community here and people want us to survive. And I

think that, too, made I know myself and I imagine everybody else-- that kind of support makes you want to survive.

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It hasn't been easy on any of the restaurants. This has been very difficult. And they're still struggling with-- the employment situation with the service industry is very hard right now. But they're all sticking together. This community is so supportive. It's been kind of neat to see. And the City has been allowing the Eat in the Streets, all of that. They have also really been doing what they can to help the small businesses get through what could be devastating times.

Michelle Little:        So what was it like in a more compact space trying to operate during a social distancing . . . ? [Laughter]

0:48:56

Kathy D'Agostino:    Yeah. Yeah. I really tried to do the curbside as long as we could, and I think I just took the mask sign down literally two weeks ago. It's hard when you're preparing things right in front of people, and there's a lot of unknowns, I think, still where we are with it. But we're all just doing what we can. We're all vaccinated. Going to get my booster shot in a few days. Doing everything I can to stay healthy and keep my customers healthy.

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It really is one of those times where we really are all in this together, so you can't think selfishly. You have to think about the well-being of everybody, so hopefully we'll all get through this pretty soon.

Michelle Little: I hope so. How has your customer base maybe shifted over-- 'cause I know a lot of people were working from home and are slowly coming back into downtown.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah.

Michelle Little: I don't know how the hotels have been during all this, but how has your customer base shifted or evolved?

Kathy D'Agostino: So it's definitely not back to where it was pre-COVID. I got a lot of walk-in traffic. My lunch hours were pretty busy.

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People, since they came back, I guess, a couple of months ago, definitely have some of that back, but it's not back to what it was. But I'm just lucky. I'm lucky that I was established for as long as I was for a solid two years before COVID so that I had already had my clientele that has continued to support me whether it's through online orders or just knowing to come down. I hear it every day. People say thank you for sticking it out; we're so glad that you're still here. People are very grateful, very aware of what I think small businesses are going through, at least my customers seem to be very supportive.

0:51:53

So we'll get back. And like I said, there's construction going on everywhere, so I feel like we're still moving forward. But I do miss-- there was an energy that was here prior to COVID, and I don't really feel that energy yet. And I don't really know how to describe that any more than it's

just not the same, but I think it'll get there as people are feeling, I guess, safe again and when everybody is back to work.

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I still don't think it's 100 percent. But yeah, it's been a lot of lessons learned these past two years. Good lessons, too. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And what about Sidewalk Film Festival? And we may need to explain that a little bit. But you opened during Sidewalk, right?

Kathy D'Agostino: I did. I kind of like wasn't even ready. I was, like, I could use a few more days here, but people were knocking on my window, so I just opened the doors. I started making chocolate popcorn like there was no tomorrow. And I had people, friends coming to help me make popcorn just to have enough to sell. It was huge! It was very exciting.

0:53:51

Yeah. Yeah, like I said, we're so lucky to have establishments like that in our community.

Michelle Little: And that came back this year, but I know we went one year without it.

Kathy D'Agostino: Yeah. I mean, it wasn't the same, but I'm really excited but they have the theatre open. But, yeah, it wasn't the same as the two years previously that we were open during Sidewalk. Yeah.

Michelle Little: All right. Well, is there anything that we didn't talk about that you want to say about the shop or anything we didn't cover that you wanted to talk about?

0:54:59

Kathy D'Agostino: No. I think I'm always stressing, like, when I'm talking to City people, the importance for a focus when there are-- and I don't even know if they have a city planner-- that they somehow can encourage the building owners, the city planners, the people who are part of all of that, to create more spaces for small businesses. I think it's vital to the overall health of the city.

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It's just part of it, to have restaurants, entertainment, and retail. And to have affordable living, and that's another thing that I don't think we have downtown. If you can't work in a restaurant and live downtown, there's a problem. That's not a healthy system. And I think if you want a healthy city that's what you would have, you would have affordable living for the people who work in the businesses downtown.

Michelle Little: What's your favorite thing about being down here every day?

0:56:55

Kathy D'Agostino: So when I lived in Tokyo, there's an energy that comes from living in a city. Of course, this pales in comparison to all of that. [Laughter] But there's still an energy, and you kind of see it all. You see a little bit of everything. It's not in any way-- there's no gated community. It's all of it, and I like that. I like being a part of all of that and knowing the people from all walks of life.

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I'm not afraid of people that are transient, and this is their home. So I don't know, I just like being down here.

Michelle Little:       What do you think's kept you and your husband in Birmingham all these years rather than moving to a bigger city or . . . ?

Kathy D'Agostino:    I liked it just 'cause I felt like there is something special in Birmingham. It's a good community. It's a good place to raise a family. It does have things to offer with the arts and the small town, and kind of a bigger city feel.

0:58:56

Yeah, I think we both question sometimes, like, why are we still we here? [Laughter] But we love it! We're still here. We are, we're here. We love it or we wouldn't be here.

Michelle Little:       You're invested in it. [Laughter]

Kathy D'Agostino:    Yes, definitely.

Michelle Little:       All right. Do you have anything?

Q2:    Did you get--

Michelle Little:       All right. Thank you.

Q2:    --room tone?

Michelle Little:       No. I'm gonna to get some room tone.

0:59:30

[End]