



Ronald Leonard

Birmingham, Alabama

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Michelle Little: Okay. Today is February 20th, 2020, and this is Michelle Little, and I'm interviewing Ron Henderson [Interviewer's Note: His last name is Leonard, not Henderson] for the Southern Foodways Alliance Career Servers Project, and we are here at Episcopal Place in Birmingham, Alabama.

Ron, to get started out, if you'll just tell me your full name and when you were born.

[0:00:21.4]

Ronald Leonard: It's Ronald Charles Leonard, and 6/25/1964.

[0:00:29.2]

Michelle Little: Okay. And where did you grow up, Ron?

[0:00:30.7]

Ronald Leonard: I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the great state of Wisconsin.

[0:00:36.7]

Michelle Little: And did you have any siblings?

[0:00:38.7]

Ronald Leonard: Yes, I have one brother who's eleven months younger than I am, and, of course, we wrestled and fought, and then another brother who's five years younger than I am. And just to give you a little idea of what it was like, we lived right across the

street from the church, and my mother's neighbor said, "Those boys could use a little churchin'."

And my mom said, "We live right across the street. We're in there Sunday twice, Wednesday night, and Tuesday Bible Study."

And the neighbor said, without missing a beat, "Maybe you should get an extra set of keys." [Laughter]

[0:01:14.2]

Michelle Little: All right. And what did your parents do?

[0:01:18.4]

Ronald Leonard: My parents, my dad worked for Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, and then they had massive early retirement and midlevel management back in 1991 that they were clearing it out, and so they prayed together and they ended up twelve time zones away in Russia working with orphanages in Russian missionary working with the orphans for ten, twelve years.

[0:01:48.0]

Michelle Little: Wow!

[0:01:49.2]

Ronald Leonard: I said, "Dad, you're twelve time zones away. That means if you'd have moved one more time zone either way, you'd have gotten closer to me."

And he said, “Yeah, I know. We were basically as far as we could get, but we could still hear you.” [Laughter]

[0:02:01.7]

Michelle Little: So, now, you ended up in Atlanta, right, working in some restaurants there?

[0:02:10.2]

Ronald Leonard: Yes.

[0:00:00.0]

Michelle Little: How’d you end up in Atlanta?

[0:02:12.6]

Ronald Leonard: Well, I started out first restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, and it was 15th Street Fisheries, and it was an eight-million-dollar-a-year seafood restaurant. Mike Pinon and Michael Hurst, general manager Michael Hurst was the owner. Our general manager was the head of the Florida Restaurant Association and so was Michael Hurst. Then Michael Hurst became the secretary of the National Restaurant Association, the treasurer of the National Restaurant Association, then the vice president of the National Restaurant Association, and then the president of the National Restaurant Association, you know, hundreds of billions of dollars, a huge influence on the industry. He was as well known as

you can get. He spoke all over the world. They wanted to hear what he had to say because his profit margins were so high.

And in a competitive restaurant environment like Fort Lauderdale, and seafood restaurant, the first day on the job, he didn't do the training classes, but he said—took us to the Intracoastal Waterway—to the training class, “Look left up the Intracoastal. *They* have a view of the water. *They* have a beautiful restaurant. *They're* fine dining. Look to your right. *They're* fine dining too. They have a beautiful restaurant. Oh, they both have fresh seafood, grouper, snapper, stone crabs. So do we. We separate ourselves and we have our repeat customers by our customer service. That is how we keep these seats filled, and we do it better than anyone on this block or in this town or in South Florida.” There you go.

[0:03:54.0]

Michelle Little: So what do you think, what was it about his customer service that really helped him stand out?

[0:04:00.8]

Ronald Leonard: Well, he wanted people to be personal. A, you can't sell a cell phone if you don't know what all the buttons are for, so you've got to know the product. You've got to know preparation, you know, cook times. Some things, snapper en papillote, took longer to make than a few other dishes, so if you needed a rush on a snapper en papillote, unless they already had one cooking, you needed to talk to your customers or maybe put some sorbet down between their salads and the entrées to break things up, you know, and

kind of slow-walk the salads or sorbet and make it seem like it's a normal presentation, right? Maybe buy them dessert before they even know it and put it down right away when they don't even realize it's coming so that, "Oh, wait. The dinner that looked like it was going to take another twenty minutes because we had to wait for dessert, oh, guess what. We got free dessert. Bang! We're happy."

And they leave—he would always pour them a good drink. He'd say, "Ounce and a quarter. Guess what."

They say, "Oh, it's kind of light."

Pour them a two-ounce drink or an ounce and three-quarters, they're only going to have one and they're going to come back. They're not going to complain. They're only going to have one or two drinks, you know.

He did a million dollars' worth of early-bird business. Sat them at 5:00 o'clock; 5:15, no more early bird. People were lined up. They would sit in the restaurant downstairs in order to be ready to come upstairs. And when he was in town, Michael Hurst would run the front door. He was an owner that he wouldn't tell anybody to do something that he hasn't already done or still is doing or wouldn't do right then and there. So that was great about him, and, of course, his knowledge and influence and such.

And he kept the seats full. You know, it's a whole turn. If you're in an upscale restaurant, how much business do you do between 5:00 and—he would fill up a six-hundred-seat restaurant. They're gone, in and out, a limited menu, but fresh fish and a little salad, little appetizer that they could pick out, and it was bang, bang, bang, and they were in and out by 6:15, you know? He did a million dollars' worth of business when the

restaurant would have sat empty and the waiters would have nothing to do but cause trouble. [Laughter] No, waiters would never do *that*.

[0:06:35.8]

Michelle Little: So what was your first job there at that restaurant? What did you start out doing?

[0:06:39.7]

Ronald Leonard: I waited tables there. I worked at Ruby Tuesday's in the prep area before that. But my brother and the owner's son were friends and we used to play basketball and stuff together. He was just four years younger than I am. They went to high school together. So he was like, "Well, why don't you come down and work for Dad."

And I was like, "Oh, yeah, that'd be great."

So I went. You know, I didn't just walk in, walk on the floor and start making money. We had full waiter's tests, you know, training class, and I didn't do very well on my first test. The woman who does the tests, she's like, "This is not gonna cut it."

I'm like, "Okay, okay."

And then I aced everything after that and then I did a very, very good job, was one of the top captains and waiters there, and I worked there for seven years.

We had a big wine cellar, not heavy French or Bordeaux, but a well-stocked wine cellar.

[0:07:44.1]

Michelle Little: And how long were you at Ruby Tuesday's before that?

[0:07:47.1]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, just six months or something, and I waited tables there, too, for a little while.

[0:07:53.2]

Michelle Little: Did you learn and pick up anything valuable from your time there?

[0:07:56.0]

Ronald Leonard: I knew I really didn't want to work for corporate anymore, because you spend more time filling sugar caddies and making sure the salt is topped off at the end of a shift than you do making *money*. So when you work for a single proprietor, it's great. And they can be tough. You know, he was the president of the National Restaurant Association and we weren't slack, but somebody didn't come by at the end of the shift after you were checking out and say, "You only have six pinks and you're supposed to have seven."

[0:08:27.9]

Michelle Little: Yeah. [Laughter] So tell me a little bit more about the training that you went through when you started there. Like, how long was that training period?

[0:08:36.6]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, it was two weeks, yeah, and it was five days a week for two weeks, and it was study-at-home, homework, learning the fish and the presentations and some things that we were unfamiliar with, like Australian bugs. They were small Australian-like rock lobsters that he had as a mainstay on his menu, was known for, and it was done in kind of a light Cajun seasoning. They were just these little lobster pieces. He bought planeloads full of the stuff and had them shipped over, shipping containers full of stuff, and had them shipped off. He got a great deal. So you'd end up with fifteen pieces of these little—all de-shelled, so it was easy and quick, and they were wonderful. They were called bugs. And then fresh swordfish and dolphin, mahi-mahi, and snapper, of course.

I had a little bit of an advantage because I was a fisherman and I was a diver also, so I had caught spiny Florida lobster, you know, where you reach in with a tickle stick and get them out from underneath the rocks and grab them by the antennas, and then they try to kick and get away, and they can really cut up your hands if you're not wearing a thick glove. You know, fun part of diving, right? I ate more than I sold [Laughter] diving, not at the restaurant. I sold them at the restaurant.

He had some influences, international influences, like New Zealand lobster tails also, and he liked to sell a New Zealand beer, Steinlager, and Kiwi beer with it and kind of combinations, kind of fun. Seafood of New Zealand, of course.

Anyway, it was right next to the Bahi Mar, *huge* harbor in Fort Lauderdale, and the Whitbread sailing contest stopped there one year when we were down there. So, I mean, it was nice, very nice and very pleasant, great atmosphere. Oh, and we worked

guy-girl teams, so there were like twenty guys and twenty girls on the floor at the same time, and you can imagine guys and girls working together at restaurants and getting off late.

[0:10:50.8]

Michelle Little: So it was large—I mean, how big of a—how many tables is this?

[0:10:53.7]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, 600 seats, so how many tables, whatever, 100 tables. Yeah, five different rooms, six different rooms, thirty to forty in each room or each section of the rooms, and most had a view of the Intracoastal Waterway. And they had this wonderful thing that they did at 5:00 o'clock for the early-birds. They would feed the tarpon. We had pet tarpon, which are five- and six-foot-long silver-sided fish with big shiny gills on the side of their face, and they were pets, and so they would jump out of the water. They would jump. The fish is known for being a sport fish, so they would jump when they got caught. Well, these fish, the little five-foot-tall blonde cocktail manager downstairs at the restaurant, she would go out at 5:00 o'clock, and for twenty minutes she'd hold scraps of fish up out of the water and have the tarpon jumping up at the fish and the pelicans fighting over their scraps. It was *fun!* It was too much fun. [Laughter]

[0:11:53.6]

Michelle Little: So what were the regular customers like that came in?

[0:11:57.0]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, well, the early-birds was—in Fort Lauderdale, it’s heavy Jewish clientele, right? You know, “You’ve got to get the Early Bird Special. We’ve got to get there early, honey.”

And, oh, they would steal our bread. We had this *wonderful* homemade bread, sunflower, wheat, rum raisin, and a rye, a good Jewish rye bread, and we’d serve it with a half sour cream and chive and cottage cheese spread or butter, and it was warmed. We had these little “bread girls” that would come around with a basket and serve it on each plate, and this bread was wonderful.

But the Early Bird Specials, you know, this is 1985, [19]86, and we noticed it happened, fairly regular basis, that people would come in and they’d put the grocery bag in their purse and they’d put the bread in their purse and take it home. The girls would be crying because they didn’t have enough bread. The whole restaurant was seated all at one time. They only had this little bread oven to heat it up. And I said, “You don’t worry about this. I’ll get their bread. Don’t worry. Don’t cry.”

Because when those women reached across the table, you saw the tattoos on their arms. They were Auschwitz survivors of the concentration camps. So, “Don’t say no. I’ll take care of it.” It was just shattering to realize, and I had to explain it. They’re sixteen-year-old little girls, right? And I had to explain this, what had happened. They weren’t getting it as much in school. I think in Fort Lauderdale, though, with a heavy Jewish—there was some of it in school, but they just weren’t *really* exposed to it. I had to say, “When they reach across the table and you see that tattoo, this is what they went through.” And I’m not even explaining it.

And we served seltzer water just because of the heavy Jewish clientele, so we'd serve "seltzah." [Laughter]

[0:13:53.9]

Michelle Little: All right. So were there any other restaurants you worked at in Fort Lauderdale?

[0:14:00.4]

Ronald Leonard: No. Then I moved up to Atlanta, and my friend Andy, who was the owner's son, he had done his internship—when he was at culinary school, he did his internship at The Abbey. So my general manager, Laura Rosalski [phonetic], knew Andy, and when I went in and said, "I'd like a job," she's like, "Well, what experience do you have?"

"Well, I worked at the Fisheries."

"You worked at the Fisheries?" Blah, blah, blah. "Oh, Andy was a—." Yeah, I knew. [Laughter]

So anyway, they had a *huge*, big wine cellar. They'd been around since 1968, I think they opened, and it was an old church, 60-foot stained-glass ceilings, in an old AME church that was just *beautiful*, converted into a restaurant. We had a harpist up at the front and then there was a big choir loft in the back where we had seating. Forty-four stairs from the kitchen to the choir loft. You know how hard it was on Valentine's Day, two at a time?

[0:14:55.0]

Michelle Little: Oh, my word.

[0:14:56.3]

Ronald Leonard: I had buns of steel, let me tell ya. [Laughter]

[0:14:59.0]

Michelle Little: So that was called The Abbey.

[0:15:02.0]

Ronald Leonard: The Abbey. And we wore monks robes. Yeah, we had the monks robes and the rope belt, and, like I said, we had an award-winning wine list, a *Wine Spectator's* Award of Achievement or whatever it was, many awards.

So I got familiar and I learned Kevin Zraly's book, and Kevin Zraly is the head wine steward and the head of Windows on the World. Windows on the World was at the top of the Trade Centers. All of his friends died in 2001. He was late for work. He had a meeting or something and he showed up at 10:00 o'clock after the planes had hit. Yeah, yeah, it was a top—anyway, so he wrote the wine books, and I basically memorized a couple years of his—and I would win all the contests that Laura would put out, our general manager. "Here's a bottle of wine. If you can answer these questions—" Oh, they got so mad at me, the other waiters. And, oh, "Here's fifty bucks if you can answer these questions," and I was just nailing them. And she did it on purpose to get them to

study, right? But I would do the tours of the wine cellar. We had some beautiful bottles, you know, old, old stuff.

One time, she was off and another manager was there. He was a jerk and he didn't know anything about wine either. So he came truckin' out of the wine cellar with a bottle of old Talbott, and I go, "You can't serve that! You can't serve it! It's been laying down for twenty-five years. The sediment, it's going to be all milky, cloudy. You can't serve that!"

"I can serve this. This is fine." He came running up with it like it was a football and he was going to spike it in the end zone. It was like his second day on the job.

And I turned to the other waiters that were kind of gathered in the hallway and I said right in front of him, "He doesn't know." And it was really embarrassing for him.

And then they all chimed in, "You can't serve that. If you open that 125-dollar bottle of wine, it's just going to be wasted. You have to go get another one."

So, anyway, Laura had some great Mouton Rothschild's. Mouton Rothschild puts out a different label every year from a different artist, a famous artist. One of the first ones they did was "V," 1945, for victory in Europe, Mouton Rothschild, France. So 1973 was a very special label and she only had one bottle, and it was hard to get. I mean, there probably were 1,000, 2,000 left in the world at that time, because they only did maybe 10,000 cases or something in 1973. Well, I sold it to a guy to-go. His wife really wanted it, and it was the Picasso label. You can't find it anymore. It's like \$500, a to-go bottle of wine, and, you know, I'm getting tipped on that.

She comes in the next day, and manager says to her, "Hey, Laura, guess what Ron did last night? Guess what Ron did last night?"

She says, “What? What’d he do? Did he screw up? Was he drunk? What?”

“No. He sold that 1973 Picasso label.”

“He did *what?*” That was her last bottle. “You sold my baby. You sold my baby.”

She chased me out of the—before we opened, she chased me out of the restaurant—she never told us not to sell it—out of the restaurant, out the front door. I went down the street and had a couple of beers at the local bar, gay bar right down the road. I don’t know why I mentioned gay bar, but we were in Midtown, downtown Atlanta. And I sat there for about an hour. You know, time heals all wounds. This didn’t heal very well. “You sold my *baby.*” I’m not kidding. She was a single Jewish woman living with her mother. I sold her *baby*, she said. So, anyway, that was an experience.

But, oh, like I said, we just had rare bottles of wine and that kind of thing, and I knew them all, so I would get tipped a lot extra. While they’re waiting for dessert, I’d take them down to the wine cellar, then get them back up before the dessert comes, drinks are on the table, coffees, and they come back and dessert’s served and they got a tour of the wine cellar.

[0:19:17.5]

Michelle Little: Nice setup, yeah.

[0:19:19.4]

Ronald Leonard: Like I said, if you don’t what all the buttons are for, how can you sell a cell phone?

[0:19:22.9]

Michelle Little: Right, right. So how big of a restaurant was that? I mean, it sounds—

[0:19:27.2]

Ronald Leonard: That was three hundred seats.

[0:19:29.4]

Michelle Little: Okay, so a little bit smaller than the other, but still—

[0:19:31.8]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, but busy, convention and business. You know, this is business.

This is a destination, yeah, corporate deals and all that kind of stuff.

[0:19:40.7]

Michelle Little: Yeah, so what part of Atlanta was it in?

[0:19:43.0]

Ronald Leonard: It was right downtown Atlanta on Peachtree Street, not in Midtown,

but a little closer to downtown, yeah.

[0:19:48.1]

Michelle Little: Okay. And how many people worked there?

[0:19:56.6]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, it was all guys, but women—well, a woman was general manager when all the bartenders and bar managers—we had cocktail waitresses in a chapel room, bigger than this one we're in, in a chapel room, and they would go in if they had to wait for tables or if they were waiting on guests, that kind of stuff. And it was neat. It had little confessionals that were converted into tables, so they were often the center—things went on back there sometimes in a dark room. I don't know if there were confessions or they had to confess after it. [Laughter]

[0:20:30.3]

Michelle Little: Is that restaurant still open?

[0:20:32.3]

Ronald Leonard: No. It was open till [19]99, I believe. And they closed it down for the Olympics and set it up as a bar because it was so much more profitable to sell five-dollar drinks for 1,000 people instead of 300 sit-down dinners, you know. But, yeah, it was very successful for thirty years or so, right, [19]68 to [19]98.

[0:20:54.6]

Michelle Little: Were you there during the Olympics?

[0:20:56.2]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, oh, yeah.

[0:20:56.9]

Michelle Little: You worked there in—

[0:20:57.4]

Ronald Leonard: And the bombing. Oh, we gave a bunch of free drinks and t-shirts away. Everybody was freaking out about the bombing, which was right down the road at Centennial Park, which was probably two miles as the crow flies.

[0:21:07.6]

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah. So tell me a little bit about the Olympics and what you remember from, like, the restaurant at that time.

[0:21:13.2]

Ronald Leonard: Well, he had a sister restaurant, so they had this open as a bar, right, and just banging out drinks and not dealing with food. So the sister restaurant across the street is called The Mansion, and it sits on one square block in downtown, right, in Atlanta, and it's this old Victorian home that was a mansion back in the 1800s, 1860s, right? During the slave days, right, it was there. So it was huge. The German government rented it out. Lufthansa rented it out. It was their VIP place. You could only get in with a badge and there was tight security all the way around, and *everything* was free. Lufthansa catered the whole thing. Whoever came in, free. So everything was free for the waiters and wait staff too. Yeah, imagine *that* over a two-week, three-week span, right? Holsten

was the beer, and I forget the wine people, but, you know, it was just huge. I mean, they brought train containers full of product, just beer and wine, because it was just—the Germans drink at 9:00 o'clock, 8:00 o'clock in the morning, right?

Oh, and special customers of mine were the South African people, and they were like—man, Atlanta ran this place like it was low-class. The mayor of Atlanta was on the take, and he sold chicken stands and everybody got—it was really kind of low-class the way they did it, because they sold these business permits for just the Olympics and they made a killing on it, and they didn't have to do anything except write out paper. Mayor Campbell got busted for corruption, him and his financial officer, was a friend of mine, Larry, regular customer of mine, but they all went to jail for that kind of stuff.

But anyway, but it was great. The Mansion was great. All the VIPs stopped by, got to meet all the Olympics. I met Carl Lewis. I stopped him in the middle of a small hallway, him and his entourage and all the cameras, and I bent over and I threw a pen in his hand and made him sign my hat. I stopped them all in their tracks. It was great.

[Laughter] And that was right after he set the record for the gold Olympics. He was the most decorated Olympian *ever*.

[0:23:38.4]

Michelle Little: Oh, wow.

[0:23:39.5]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, they couldn't get past me. It was awesome.

[0:23:42.2]

Michelle Little: So how long were you there at The Abbey? How long did you stay there?

[0:23:45.0]

Ronald Leonard: Seven years.

[0:23:45.3]

Michelle Little: Seven years there.

[0:23:46.1]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, seven-year itch, I guess, right?

[0:23:48.0]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I guess so.

[0:23:48.5]

Ronald Leonard: Seven and seven and seven. And then I was at Lombardi's, the Italian restaurant downtown at Underground Atlanta. It was on the street level at Underground Atlanta, and it was business casual, and we did all our business—the Fulton County Courthouse was right on the next block and the State Capitol was on the next block, so they were all our regular customers, and it was lobbyists taking out senators and representatives and all the courthouse people and all the big trials that went on in Fulton

County Courthouse, the Ray Lewis trial when Ray Lewis was busted. You know, there were two people stabbed when he was at the Super Bowl. Oh, that was a big one. And there was just all kinds of stuff, anyway.

So we knew all the defense lawyers and such, so one of my regular customers was Steve Kaplan. Steve Kaplan owned the Gold Club in Atlanta. It was legendary for the athletes and the VIPs. Well, he was a regular customer while they were on trial. There were six of them, and it's Mikey Scars, Mikey Scars from Philadelphia, he was a capo for the Philadelphia mob, and they were all mob hooked up. They took duffle bags full of cash up to New York, right? The capo was from New York.

So, first day of the trial, the defense lawyers are sitting at their table, six of them, and the defendants are sitting at my table, and his defense lawyer, who was a great guy, Dave, comes up to Mikey and puts his hand on his shoulder and he says, "You've already got the accent from Philadelphia. You've got to get rid of this suit." He's wearing like a purple Armani, 2,000-dollar Armani suit, like a gangster, mobster would wear.

Then just like this [demonstrates], he grabs his tie and kind of adjusts his tie around a little bit. He goes, "What? You don't like my suit?" It was hilarious! I thought I was going to die, anyway.

Okay. So that was Lombardi's for seven years, business casual, and I worked right upstairs from a Hooters.

[0:25:45.2]

Michelle Little: And how many people worked with you at Lombardi's? What was the staff there like?

[0:25:51.7]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, thirty, thirty or so. We had a really regular lunch clientele. We had the best lunch clientele because it was all business and suits and coming from the State Capitol and the Fulton County Courthouse and such. Oh, the Fulton County—the shootings, Brian Nichols, do you remember that?

[0:26:08.8]

Michelle Little: No.

[0:26:09.8]

Ronald Leonard: Brian Nichols, the shooting at the courthouse. He abducts one of the police officers that was bringing him in to go to court, steals her gun, goes in the back, kills the judge, shoots the court reporter, Julie, a friend of ours, a regular at Lombardi's, and was supposed to be killing the prosecutor, Gayle Abramson, and she was five minutes late to court. Oh, my god. He was running around in the parking garages all the whole time.

Gayle and some of the people at the court, they came into the restaurant and they had security guarding them all around because he could have come in looking for her. He steals some trucks, goes up to Buckhead, abducts a girl there. She talks him out of killing her and himself. She gave him some drugs or something, and then finally he turned himself in. But, yeah, he's in prison for life. But, oh, he shot a sheriff on the side of the

building as he was running out of the courthouse. I mean, it was a big, big deal. What year was that? 2004? I don't know. Oh, it was horrible.

So, anyway, the clientele. Okay. Business casual, Italian, of course. I am a very good Italian cook. Our whole kitchen staff was all Mexican. It was great. [Imitates Mexican accent] "Ronnie, Ronnie, you know, you make the best guacamole. Please. It's Saturday afternoon. Nobody's here. Make us some guacamole."

[0:27:33.5]

Michelle Little: So when did you start learning to cook? Did you kind of pick that up along the way?

[0:27:37.6]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, when I first started at the Fisheries, you have to learn meal preparations, and I was friends with the cooks and stuff. We'd go out, so I learned from those guys and I watched them, you know. So you learn the difference between braising and sautéing and roasting and baking. You just learn all the presentations, right? So I can cook. Yeah, some girl's going to be really lucky to get me. [Laughter]

[0:28:06.0]

Michelle Little: So then did you also bartend at some of these restaurants?

[0:28:08.4]

Ronald Leonard: Yes, yes, I bartended, not at the Fisheries. I bartended at The Abbey, and like I said, I did the wine cellar tours and all that. I made more money, though, waiting tables there than I did bartending, yeah, because it was just our bar was set up for overflow or people waiting for—so it wasn't that lucrative. The money was on the floor, fifty, sixty dollars a person, you know, plus wine sales and all that, right?

[0:28:36.1]

Michelle Little: So do you feel like at all these restaurants you were able to make a living with the tipping and the—

[0:28:41.9]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, yeah! I made forty to fifty thousand dollars a year. I just was blowing it, you know, running around. I lived in Fort Lauderdale in the [19]80s. If anybody's seen the show *Miami Vice*, well, that stuff was all around everywhere, and people are in their twenties and going to the beach and running around at night, you know. I was in shape. I was a power lifter. I was a state record-setting power lifter. There's my Al Bundy moment for you. So I was in really good shape and stuff.

[0:29:11.8]

Michelle Little: So, yeah, you were able to make a living and—

[0:29:12.5]

Ronald Leonard: And run around during the day, and I didn't go to school, kind of stopped doing that after a while. Oops.

[0:29:19.2]

Michelle Little: So how long were you at Lombardi's? How long did you stay?

[0:29:22.6]

Ronald Leonard: Seven more years.

[0:29:23.7]

Michelle Little: Seven more years. Seven, seven, and seven. And then where did you—

[0:29:27.1]

Ronald Leonard: God's perfect number.

[0:29:28.4]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah. Then where did you go from Lombardi's?

[0:29:30.6]

Ronald Leonard: Well, then I decided that it would be good for me to go to rehab, so I went for a ninety-day rehab, not court-ordered or anything, voluntarily, and that was 2007. I met a friend there, and he had some court issues. So Vernon Andrews [phonetic] and I moved back to his place in Trussville. That's Trussville, Alabama. So he lived on a

farm, 40 acres on a farm, but right in the middle of Trussville. His grandfather wouldn't sell out, and it was right on the Cahaba River. I'd grab the dog and my fishing pole and go stomping up and own the river. It was fun.

And I worked at Costa's over there, and it's Costa's Mediterranean, not the Costa's Bar-B-Que place. So I was familiar with all the food, Italian style, Greek, Mediterranean. I didn't really learn—I taught a lot of people stuff there, because I had worked for the president of the National Restaurant Association, and these girls, you know, they're coming from Alabama and they may have worked at a Waffle House or something, not that there's anything wrong with that, and there's a lot of money to be made. Those girls don't leave those jobs for a reason.

So, anyway, I had my accident then. So I was on a bicycle, got run off the road, laying in a ditch for thirty hours. My friend Vernon, he's taking his clothes out of the washer, putting them in the dryer. God told him, "Go find Ron," after thirty hours.

I was laying there. You know, I was praying. I was thinking, "You know what, God? Whatever happens, happens. If it's spinal shock, great. I just pray that my mom and dad are comforted and I'll see them in the end for eternity." And then I said, "Do I need to be praying this?"

And he said, "No. Vernon's coming to get you."

While he was putting his clothes in the dryer, God told him to come get me. He got a flashlight in his van—he's a carpenter—got his flashlight in the van and found me in ten minutes, and I was *way* down in a ditch. There were trees blocking me. I had a little flashlight, but nobody driving by would see. There's no driveways or anything. It's by Alabama Power over there on an off-road.

So he comes and gets me. It takes him forty-five minutes to cut the trees down, get me on the backboard and get me up the hill. They got my feet in the back of the paramedics' truck and the helicopter's waiting to Life Flight me out there. I've got my head in the neck brace and everything stabilized, and it's starting to rain. And they gave me some medication for the pain so I wouldn't go into shock, and it's all sparkly, right? Vernon, I didn't see him, but there was eight paramedics and firefighters standing off about ten, fifteen feet away, and I go, "Where's Vernon? Where's Vernon?"

They stopped talking and they all looked at him. He was telling a tale or whatever. They looked over at me, and I couldn't really turn my head, but I looked out of the side of my eyes and I smiled and I gave them thumbs-up, and I go, "Thanks, man."

And they go, "We've got to go," and they slam me into the truck.

But as they were doing it, I heard a firefighter say, "I think he's going to be okay."

It was awesome. They all started laughing. You know, I'm in a neck brace, paralyzed from the chest down, thirty hours. I could have been dead three times over. I thought, like, coyotes were going to eat me. And the ants got me. There were ants in the emergency room for three days. They said they were picking them out at UAB. So, anyway, like a football player's being taken off the field. It was awesome! So, yeah, thank God, right? Yeah, amen.

[0:33:08.2]

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah. Thank goodness for your friend.

[0:33:09.8]

Ronald Leonard: He told me, “Vernon’s coming.”

And, oh, I’m so ungrateful as a flawed human, what did I say? Thank you? No. I said, “When?” That was my first thought, was, “When?”

“He’s coming to get you.”

“When?”

Well, it wouldn’t be after I’m dead, would it, if he said he’s coming to get you? Isn’t that awesome?

[0:33:31.4]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that’s an incredible story.

[0:33:33.0]

Ronald Leonard: He came about three hours later. I said, “I realize what I said. I’m sorry, and I can wait. I’ll make it.” [Laughter]

Then he saved my life *again!* Can I say it? Can I tell you real quick? Because I’m wearing the shirt. This is the shirt I was wearing. I had real bad spasms. We’re watching the football game, Brett Favre, New Orleans Saints, Minnesota Vikings. All of the sudden, I have these real bad spasms, I’m choking. He says, “What do you want me to do? Throw you on the ground?”

“Yeah.” Puts me on the ground.

I start turning blue. The paramedics are on the way. I start turning blue. They’re not there. He takes out a Dale Earnhardt black pocket knife, takes a pen, takes the guts

out of the pen, cuts a hole in my trachea, puts the pen in there, blows air into me. I wake up, I go, “Oh, my god! Oh, my god! What happened?”

He says, “Oh, my god. You were turning gray and blue and you were gone.”

And I said, “I didn’t see the light.” And I go, “Oh, wait. I didn’t see the light.”

[Laughter]

Right then, the paramedics come in and they go, “Oh—.” And I still had the pen in my throat. They go, “Oh, my god. We’ve heard about this, but we’ve never seen it. I’ve been a paramedic for twenty years. I get eight calls a day.”

He saved my life *twice!* How many friends can—

[0:34:48.0]

Michelle Little: You’ve got a good friend in him, yeah.

[0:34:49.9]

Ronald Leonard: No, no, that’s the thing. I’m only dying when he’s around. [Laughter]
Hey, it’s not that funny. She’s laughing.

Okay, go back, back to the restaurant.

[0:34:59.3]

Michelle Little: So, I mean, were you able to go back to work after that?

[0:35:01.0]

Ronald Leonard: No, I didn't, I didn't. I got Social Security. I had worked on the books. See, a lot of waiters don't work on the books, so their Social Security is going to be screwed if they wait tables, because they were cheating on their cash tips and they were not declaring all their credit card tips. Now they made rules where you have to declare all your credit card tips legally and at least 8 percent of your cash tips, because the IRS was clamping down on them, yeah.

[0:35:26.6]

Michelle Little: When did that change happen?

[0:35:27.9]

Ronald Leonard: That was probably twenty years ago, eighteen, twenty years ago, right when I was getting out of it. But I had declared my tips, so my Social Security was a lot more than most people would get, so I've been able to survive. Look. I can cook. You can tell. I'm wearing black right now for the slimming effect. I need to be wearing a black hole. [Laughter] Okay, go ahead.

[0:35:54.1]

Michelle Little: So now tell me a little—how long were you at Costa's?

[0:35:58.0]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, just five, six months.

[0:36:00.9]

Michelle Little: Not long. Okay.

[0:36:02.6]

Ronald Leonard: I worked in construction with Vernon, and then something happened, it was like right around 2007, so the business was drying up because of the contraction on the market. You know, the money had dried up, so people weren't refinishing their homes. They didn't spend—there was no disposable income. They weren't buying homes, they weren't selling homes. Everything just stopped. So I went and did what I knew how to do, right? Stick with your strengths.

[0:36:27.4]

Michelle Little: So you said you got to do a little bit more training more when you were there.

[0:36:31.1]

Ronald Leonard: Well, see, I could have done training the whole time, because I'd worked with Hurst, the Fisheries for such a long time. Oh, I did work at McCormick & Schmick's at CNN Center for a while.

[0:36:41.2]

Michelle Little: Oh, when was that in all your—

[0:36:43.7]

Ronald Leonard: That was between some Lombardi stuff, that seven years. I worked there for about a year, and that was *heavy* corporate, right?

[0:36:52.0]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that's what I was about to say. That's going back to corporate.

[0:36:52.0]

Ronald Leonard: So I go in there and I had all the seafood background, and their tests are 100 questions each test and then a 500-question test about all the kinds of seafood and stuff. I aced it. I think I only got my name spelled wrong. And I asked the management and general managers, and I said, "Well, how'd I do on the test?"

"You did well. You did well."

And I'm thinking, "No, I did better than well. I *know* I did." Because you know when you're prepared for a test and you go in and it's bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. I'm maybe questioning one or two of my answers, and it's swordfish profiles, it's flavor profiles, texture profiles, that kind of stuff, the different types of oysters and their flavors and textures, because they do a lot of oyster—they have twelve-, fifteen-dollar oyster plates, three dollars apiece for oysters there, yeah, Blue Point Oysters and some Prince Edward stuff, and there are quite a few of them. But I knew it all, man, and they were mad at me because I aced—the management, the general managers and chefs, didn't do that well.

So, anyway, so I worked in the corporate for a while, and then one time I waited on the Z-93 people, which is a *huge* restaurant. I waited on them the night before. *Drive Time* business, I'd taken really good care of them and they loved me. They mentioned my name on the radio while they were doing the broadcast. They said, "Well, we went and ate at McCormick & Schmick's, but we *really* loved Ron." And they mentioned my name three or four times and they mentioned McCormick & Schmick's like twice.

And the general manager was like, "Well, what'd you do?"

"Oh, I was just being me," right?

I know the menu and I set them up with the desserts so they didn't have to bother with ordering it. I got dessert plates ready for them and I picked out their appetizers. I said, "I'll give you a real nice portrayal of the appetizers that we have, the beautiful seared scallops and Thai sauce and these oysters, and then a mushroom appetizer, crab."

And they were like, "Wow! This is great!"

Then they picked out their entrées, of course. Then I had the dessert plates ready for them. So, I mean, everything came out just boom, boom, boom. We did the wine, and then I think they paid for some wine or something. No, I think we comped their whole check.

So then they go out, and it's *Drive Time Atlanta*, 4:30, when everybody in Atlanta is stuck in an eight-lane highway for hours, right? They mention my name at 4:30 *Drive Time*, like \$10,000 a commercial to have that advertising, because people are stuck in their cars, and they mention my—so the chef says right in front of the general manager, "Hey, you want to hear Ron's commercial?" [Laughter]

It really got under his skin, and he said [imitates Boston accent], “One time doesn’t make a pattern.” He was from Boston. “One time doesn’t make a pattern.”

I got a commercial, free commercial, for *Drive Time* for a couple hundred dollars’ worth of food cost. He never really liked me because I didn’t always do things *exactly* the corporate way. Well, I knew how to do things well. “Oh, I like what you did there.”

“What? Six ladies shared some appetizers and I got an extra \$10 apiece on their check, building their check up. You like that? Well, that’s what I do.” And I walked away. He was not happy about that, but he had been giving me hell for a bunch of stuff. I don’t know. Enough of that.

[0:40:22.2]

Michelle Little: So how long did you stay there then?

[0:40:22.8]

Ronald Leonard: I was there for about a year, but I knew I was going to quit after he said [imitates Boston accent], “One time doesn’t make a pattern.”

I’m like, “Are you kidding me? Not, ‘Thank you’? Nothin’?”

Then again, I didn’t thank God for saving my life right away. I did say it afterwards.

So, okay, go ahead. Ask questions.

[0:40:38.2]

Michelle Little: So that was in between The Abbey and—

[0:40:38.2]

Ronald Leonard: That was in between Lombardi's, and Lombardi's was [19]98 till 2006, 2007. Then I went into the rehab for ninety days. Then I got out and did the construction and then Costa's with—and then had my accident in October 2007.

[0:40:58.1]

Michelle Little: So, I mean, this is twenty-one, twenty-two years—

[0:41:02.2]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, twenty-five, almost.

[0:41:03.7]

Michelle Little: —in the restaurant industry.

[0:41:04.5]

Ronald Leonard: Sure, yeah. I saw everything.

[0:41:06.3]

Michelle Little: I mean, yeah, have you noticed any—

[0:41:08.2]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, I had a running bet with a friend of mine who was in the business for twenty-five years, tall black guy, dreadlocks, really good. He worked fine dining and he was working as manager at Lombardi's, and I had a running bet with him, "Okay. Anything you see or hear that you've *never* heard before in a restaurant—" We've got a standing five-dollar bet or something just for something, and, "Anything you see in here—."

It would take us three months before we knew we could go to the other person and say, "All right. I got one. I never heard this."

Four ladies, and I said, "You guys want to put the bartender to work?"

They kind of looked at me and wrote on my check at the end, "Don't ever refer to ladies as 'guys.'"

I'm like, "Oh, my god. Have you never been to the Midwest or New York?"
Right?

[0:41:51.0]

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah, yeah.

[0:41:52.2]

Ronald Leonard: "I'm sorry I didn't say 'y'all.' What am I supposed to do, switch up now? I'm forty years old."

So, anyway, but they said—answering the question about put the bartender—
"We're water people."

I said, “Oh, that’s great,” not because I couldn’t sell them—because I could go to “Zanni” and say, “I’m gonna win your five bucks right now!” [Laughter]

“We’re water people.” What the heck? Are you kidding me? Like Kevin Costner?

Okay. Go ahead. Aquaman.

[0:42:20.5]

Michelle Little: So what changes did you see in customers over that period of time? Did you notice anything?

[0:42:20.5]

Ronald Leonard: Well, I mean, I saw everything. I saw international guests in Fort Lauderdale, and then the early-bird heavy Jewish clientele, the Holocaust, and then late-night dinners and people going out to enjoy New Year’s Eve stuff, Mother’s Day, oh, my god, the biggest day *ever* in restaurant history. I mean, 1,500 dinners at the Fisheries, almost 1,000 dinners at Lombardi’s and The Abbey, right? And if Mother’s Day was on a Friday, then you’d have the whole weekend. Yeah, it just depends. You know, if it’s on a Wednesday, you don’t get as much on the Saturday before or the Saturday after, but when it’s on a Friday or a Thursday or a Monday, then—no, it’s always on a Sunday, so, yeah, what am I thinking?

[0:43:13.1]

Michelle Little: That’s another holiday, yeah.

[0:43:14.6]

Ronald Leonard: So, yeah, that whole weekend is slammed.

[0:43:16.5]

Michelle Little: Slammed, yeah.

[0:43:17.1]

Ronald Leonard: So, yeah, I saw all that kind of customers. Oh, one guy comes in. He and his girlfriend got engaged. He had me present the ring on a dessert plate, and I had all these wonderful edible flowers on it and these desserts, a nice variety of desserts, and I went up and I had the lid on the plate and I put it in front of her. He said, “Oh, honey, what’s this? You didn’t order this.”

She’s like, “Well, what is it?” And they were going to the Fox Theatre, which was right next door. She goes, “Oh, I don’t know. Oh, yeah, looks like a surprise. Sometimes it’s like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get sometimes.”

So she opens it and there’s a ring sitting on a bunch of all these flowers and desserts. So she gets it, she puts it on, and they finish their desserts and coffee or after-dinner drink and they’re on the way to the Fox. She *loses* her ring. She comes back and she’s crying, from the theater. “I don’t know if I lost it in the theater. I don’t know if I lost it on the walk over.” She’s freaking out.

I didn’t know who they were. We didn’t have a number or anything like that. I said, “That’s all right. I found it on the stairs on the way down.”

[0:44:27.1]

Michelle Little: Oh, thank goodness. My word.

[0:44:28.2]

Ronald Leonard: Thank goodness one of those other guys didn't find it, yeah.

So, a variety of customers, international, all kinds of international guests at The Abbey. Of course. I learned how to say "Thank you" or "Get out" in like ten different languages. [Laughter]

[0:44:45.2]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And did you get to have control over your schedule at some point?

[0:44:51.7]

Ronald Leonard: Oh, yeah. I could have whatever schedule I wanted. Yeah, oh, yeah. I never had to work on Sundays, that kind of thing, yeah, unless there's a big convention in town. But like during football seasons—and most waiters don't get weekends off, right? Mother's Day, of course, we worked, but I didn't have any problems getting whatever schedule I wanted.

[0:45:12.6]

Michelle Little: Oh, good, yeah, because I'm sure that can be—

[0:45:12.6]

Ronald Leonard: I was an asset, you know, and so any days off I needed, any vacations, not a problem.

[0:45:22.2]

Michelle Little: Okay. Are there any other restaurants that we didn't cover anywhere else?

[0:45:26.7]

Ronald Leonard: No. That's it.

[0:45:28.8]

Michelle Little: We've talked about the Fisheries, Ruby Tuesday's, The Abbey, Lombardi's.

[0:45:33.5]

Ronald Leonard: McCormick's.

[0:45:35.3]

Michelle Little: McCormick & Schmick's.

[0:45:36.2]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah, that's it.

[0:45:37.5]

Michelle Little: And then you wrapped up at Costa's. I think we've covered your career.

[0:45:40.3]

Ronald Leonard: Yeah. Isn't that great? How much time do we have?

[0:45:43.0]

Michelle Little: So, I mean, we're right at forty-five minutes, which is good, so we did good.

[0:45:48.4]

Ronald Leonard: Okay. Well, I've had so much time, right, but I was drunk and high on the opiates. I was alcoholic for thirty-five years. God healed me five years ago, Super Bowl, done. I haven't had a drink since. That was the Peyton Manning Super Bowl. And then I was on the opiates. I was taking five or six Lortabs a day. Waiters know painkillers and alcohol. I went to bed after twelve beers, five or six painkillers, and eight muscle relaxers, because I have spasms with the paralysis. Two thousand times I went to bed like that. I could have never woken up. I mean, Heath Ledger, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Brittany Murphy, I mean, Tom Petty, go down the list that alcohol and painkillers—they didn't wake up.

Yeah, so God really saved me on this one, and so I'm returning the favor. So I've really been studying the scriptures. I wrote out a sermon for the homeless guys that I saw

yesterday that told me two weeks ago, “When you left those sandwiches and Cokes and chips on the table and a note that said God told you to do this, well, we came up and we hadn’t worked in three days because it’d been raining, and we didn’t have any money and we didn’t know where we were going to eat that night.” And there was food sitting on the picnic table under the shelter for them.

I said, “I told you, God told me to do it. That’s why I wrote it on the note.”

The week before that, a guy’s having a really bad day. Black guy, he’s walking down the road. So I kind of roll past him on my electric chair and I went to the McDonald’s and I got him some stuff and I brought it to him as he was coming up on the intersection of the McDonald’s, and he started crying and he sat down. I said, “God told me to do this for you.” And he started crying.

I saw him two weeks later right around the corner of where I live at Episcopal Place. He comes around the corner, he says, “Hey, remember me? You got me the McDonald’s.”

I said, “Wow. You look a lot better.”

He said, “Ron, you restored my faith in humanity.”

I said, “God told me to do it. I told you then, I’m telling you now, it was God.”

So I invited him upstairs, and I had already—I had to go to the pharmacist for some prescriptions, and I went back past the Arby’s and I picked up some extra stuff. I didn’t know why. There he was standing on the corner. I invited him up to the apartment, and we’re not supposed to really have homeless guys here because it’s mostly for older people, you know, and you can’t have single old ladies seeing homeless guys stomping around by themselves late at night, whatever.

So he came in, Greg, and we talked. I talked to him about his salvation and salvation plan, and, “Your soul is just as important to God as Donald Trump’s is or anybody out there,” as the pastor—and I told him about he’s coming soon, the end times. I said it’s going to be like the birth pains of a woman. First they’re going to be contractions, are going to be mild and far apart, then they’re going to be closer together and closer together, they’ll get more intense, more intense, more intense, and suddenly he comes. So I told him about this.

[0:48:54.8]

Michelle Little: So you’re still practicing hospitality now.

[0:48:56.7]

Ronald Leonard: God’s! And you know what? My treasures are in heaven, and God’s a really good tipper. I know who to put the check down in front of, right? And I feed the ladies here. James Chapter 1:27, “God considers religion pure and faultless that takes care of the orphans and old widows in their distress and keeps the world from polluting oneself.” So I feed all these women. I’ve been feeding them for *years*, right?

[0:49:26.6]

Michelle Little: That’s great.

[0:49:27.5]

Ronald Leonard: Man. Sometimes they don't return my Rubbermaid plastic, though. Then I put them on the "Do not feed" list.

They always write "thank you" notes, old ladies, right, and I'd leave them on the fridge for my mom, and she would come in and say, "Look at all these 'thank you' notes."

I said, "Yeah. You know what, Mom? I used to just do that so you would be impressed, you would know I'm taking care of the old ladies, but really those are my deposit slips in heaven." [Laughter]

Okay. I'd like to finish up on that.

[0:49:56.0]

Michelle Little: I think that's a good place to stop. All right.

[End of interview]