



Norma Castillo

Norma's International Grocery - Kenner, LA

Date: May 3, 2022

Location: Kenner, LA

Interviewer: Phillip Norman Reid

Transcription/Translation: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: One hour and eighteen minutes

Project: American Epiphany—King Cake Bakers of South Louisiana

*Interview Conducted in Spanish and Translated to English

0:00:00

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, today is the May 3, 2022. We're here in Norma's International Grocery in Kenner, Louisiana. I'm speaking with Norma Castillo. Senora Norma, could you introduce yourself for the recording?

Norma Castillo: [00:00:21] Yes, of course. My name is Norma Castillo. And I came here in the 1980s.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:00:33] And what do you do here in this business?

Norma Castillo: [00:00:37] Well, I am the owner of this business in Kenner and in New Orleans. With the help of my children.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:00:52] Okay, so to start, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your childhood was like.

Norma Castillo: [00:01:00] I was born in Honduras in the city of La Lima, which is close to San Pedro Sula. And I grew up in another smaller city called Villanueva. There I grew up with my mom and my grandmother. Because she had divorced my father. So my grandmother raised me. So I grew up there, went to school, I went to high school, and then, very young, I married my husband. We lived on a cattle ranch, you know, horses, and since I was a teenager, you know, I liked it. But during the night, I didn't like it, because it was too dark and quiet, and for a teenager,

that was kind of... [laughter] I didn't like it at all. And I lived--can I say this in Spanish?--and I lived there for seven years with my spouse.

Phillip Norman: [00:02:32] In that ranch house?

Norma Castillo: In that ranch house, yes. and our son was born in that ranch house. That's where my son, Jose, was born. In that ranch house. He was there until he was five years old.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:02:48] And at that point, you all moved to the United States?

Norma Castillo: [00:02:48] Yes, in 1979, around November, my husband got sick. We didn't know what it was because we weren't familiar, we hadn't heard of this sickness called polycystic kidney disease. And so my husband said, "No, I am going to the United States to get checked out." And he came here in December, and I stayed there at the ranch in Honduras with my five year old, and I was pregnant with my second child. And in December he came here, and they checked him out and told him he had this illness of the kidney. So he couldn't return to Honduras because he needed dialysis, and we didn't have that in my country. At that time, we didn't have dialysis. So he stayed here, and later I had to come here. We left everything behind in Honduras in the care of a relative, an uncle of my husband's. And we came here, he came here to Miami, and I came after, in January of 1980, and from there he said, "Well, we can't stay here because I don't know anyone in Miami, and I don't have any family here." So from there we went to New Orleans. And I didn't know anyone. For me it was my first time in the United States. And he said, "We're going to New Orleans. I have more family there, and that's where I grew up."

That's where he lived when he was a teenager, in New Orleans. So here he had friends, he had family. So that's why we came here. Then my son was born in March, on St. Patrick's Day. At that time, I didn't know what St. Patrick means, you know? I didn't know what St. Patrick's Day was. So my husband's aunt tells me, "Norma, your son was born on St. Patrick's Day! Name him Patrick." And I say, "Who is Patrick? What is that?" And I asked my husband, "Your aunt wants us to name our son Patrick. She says it's St. Patrick's Day?" But we already had a name for our son. But my husband already knew, and he said, "Ah, it's an Irish celebration." But we didn't call him Patrick. We called him Mariano. Later, like five months after having the baby, a friend told him about a bakery, a Cuban bakery. So my husband said, "Let's go check it out." So we went to see it in Elysian Fields, that's where it was. And in January, when you exit Elysian Fields to the right, in the front, there was a lot of apartments. Nowadays, they're not, they are commercial, it's like McDonald's, you know?

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:07:33] This is like, on the east side?

Norma Castillo: [00:07:39] Yes, like in Gentilly. That area, that whole area, they call it Gentilly. So I said to my husband, "But, why a bakery if we don't know anything about bakeries?" We don't know how to make bread, we don't know anything about this, I told him. How are you going to get into a business that we don't know? So he told me, as sick as he was, "Mami, I know that you're going to learn." And I said, "No, I don't like that. I don't like to do breads." And he says, "I know you're going to like it. Because I know you don't know how smart you are." He told me that the only thing you have to avoid is being pessimist. You can't be pessimistic. You have to be optimistic. He always made me feel good, you know? He always told me you don't

even know how smart you are. He'd say that. And I said no, but I don't want to make bread. "But this is a good business," he told me. "Try it," he told me. "It's a good opportunity." And I said, "But it's that we have a baby, and you're sick, and we have another small child. How? How are we going to do it?" "We'll see," he told me. "Let's buy it." And it took all we had, a little bit of money that we had saved, because we had left everything else behind in Honduras. And well, he said, "Well, I'm going to buy a house for you. Because I don't want to die and leave you with nothing." That's what he said. And he bought a house over there near UNO. He bought it for me, and then he bought the bakery. And the Cuban, the owner, he was the one that was baking.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:10:37] Mm-hmm. Yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:10:38] And, my husband said to the owner, "Okay, I'll buy your bakery if you teach my wife."

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:10:48] Mm-hmm.

Norma Castillo: [00:10:49] So he said, "Okay! I can teach her." I was 23 years old. Or 24, then. And he taught me. And I started to like it. And he saw that I was a hard worker. And something else. Something he told me, "Calm down!". And he always told me, the Cuban man told me, ah, I don't know how to say in English, but, "Learn, learn, chica. Learn, because there's a lot left for you." And I didn't realize that, then. He always repeated that. And one day I said, "Goodness! What do you mean when you say, 'Learn. Learn. There's so much left for you?'" He said, "Ah! You don't understand yet." And I told him, "Mmmm, a little bit." "Okay. Learn, because there's

still so much to learn. Why? Because you have a sick husband that he can't do nothing, you have a baby, you have a young son, and you don't know anything. You don't know English, you don't know nothing." And I said, "Oh, yes, it's true." Okay. And that's when I started, you know, to work hard and to learn and everything. And he stayed six months with me. After six months, he left. And I stayed. And I thought that I knew, you know?

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:12:53] Yes, that's a crash course in learning!

Norma Castillo: [00:12:58] Yes. But when I was testing the dough, you have to... I had to do it by myself, to decide if that was ready. When he was there I'd say, "Carlos, come touch this. It's ready?" "Oh yeah, it's ready." So when he left, I had to—

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:13:03] Hmm. And what is the first thing to learn to bake? Bread?

Norma Castillo: [00:13:27] **Eh, to learn, first to learn to do little things like [...] , right?**

Make them pretty, to cut/ Things like that. Then, the mixes, you know? To mix them. The flour with the eggs, with this and that. And all of that was a process. And then after six months, he left and I had to do it myself. But then we had a person who admired us as well. And we started and we grew a little bit. And we sold bread to Schwegmann's, we sold bread to La Economica when they were in Gentilly, we sold to other supermarkets called Pops, that's no longer in business. Schwegmann is longer in business, too. And that's how we grew and kept doing well. But my husband kept getting worse and worse. And then he had a kidney transplant. And he couldn't

show up so I wouldn't be alone. So we stayed in business for almost four years. And then we sold the business because I couldn't do it. You know.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:15:17] And in what year did you guys start?

Norma Castillo: [00:15:18] We started in 1981. I remember that it was in June. June 1981, and we stayed, you know, we sold the business in 1984. 1984 or 1985. And Ronald Reagan was the President at that time. And I told my husband, "Ronald Reagan is going to make a World War." Then he said, "Why? Why do you think that?" I said, "Because he's an old man, and he doesn't care." But now I feel that Ronald Reagan was one of the best Presidents of this country.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:16:24] Why?

Norma Castillo: [00:16:26] Because he did a lot of good things. At that time I was hearing that the economy was bad.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:16:37] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:16:38] I didn't know much about politics. I wasn't into that. But I was hearing that interests were very high. Interest on loans, they were at like 8%. And a lot of things like that, but, for example, when in Panama, when he overthrew Noriega there, that was a good thing, right? When Reagan was in office, also the Berlin Wall happened, things like that fell

apart, or rather they got better. He made a lot of things better. And then he also gave amnesty to Hispanics, right? And I think he was one of the good presidents.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:17:46] After the New Orleans bakery closed, what did you do?

Norma Castillo: [00:17:52] After closing, well, we sold it. We sold it for a lot, more than we paid for it. And then my husband told me, "Well, since we don't have anything to do," he said—and he had already secured disability and they were helping us, helping with social security for him, and he told me, "Well, you're going to study English." I didn't know any English. And at the bakery I couldn't learn because everyone was Hispanic. So he told me, "You're going to go to Delgado, and you're going to learn English." So I entered into Delgado, learning the basics of English. And I stayed there, and then I said, Well, maybe I can take some business classes or something like that. And I did it. I completed my two years of college at Delgado. And at that time, my husband passed away. In 1991.

[00:19:21]

Then I started working, you know, for doing income taxes. And I also worked on a radio station, Spanish radio station, like a secretary. And then I worked at the Bally's Casino. Then there was a friend that owned a supermarket, the Union Supermarket. And he called me because he knew that I that I know about bakery and he called me because the baker that he had is in Fairmont, he got sick, and he couldn't do the bakery anymore. So he called me and asked if I wanted to run the bakery. And I said, "Wow." You know, that was something that I didn't expect. But I always had

that feeling that I wanted to return to the bakery. Because, well, I liked to be self-employed. I liked to know that I had something. And so I told him, “Well, I’ll see. What are the proportions and things like that?” And so he told, Well, this is what you can do, as far as money. You’re a young person, you can do better than the other one that I have.” He said that. And then I say, “Okay, okay, I will do it.”

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:21:21] And what was his name?

Norma Castillo: [00:21:23] His name was Tomas Orihuela. He passed away about, maybe, four years ago? And he, there, it’s like he refreshed me on everything that I had learned. There I got to practice again. And since I had kept all my recipes, because I told myself that maybe one day... okay? Yes. And so I kept everything, always, and everything that I had here in my head. How to make it and everything. And I was there some three or four years with him, and then I decided, right, to start my own business. And I opened here across the street. And that’s where I opened the bakery. Bakery only. Only a bakery. Not a supermarket or anything.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:22:27] And why here in Kenner?

Norma Castillo: [00:22:29] Why here? Because when I was there in the Union, working in the bakery, I knew that most of the customers came from Kenner. Everyone, when I was taking a cake order, when they called to order a cake, I always asked, Where are you calling from, and they would tell me Kenner. Kenner. Kenner. Kenner. So that’s when I think, Well, I might go to

Kenner. So I started looking around for a year, and I found this little place there, and it was up for rent. And then the realtor told me, "Norma, it's for sale, too."

[00:23:27]

"Oh really? Ah, well, I want to make an offer." Because I had saved some money in, and also I make a loan from my house, my house was payed off. So I had the equity. So I got a loan and I have about 30,000 in savings. And with that I bought the building, and I made a down payment, and then with the money that I had from the bank loan, I bought equipment and everything, and that's how I started. And I was shaking because I asked myself, "What happens if I don't do good?" You know? A lot of times the fear keeps someone from doing something. When someone is afraid, she feels... So, out of fear, I hadn't dared to start. I would've started much sooner. But I was scared. I was scared to lose my house. I was scared of not doing well. Yeah. But I remember that we'd put all our money in the little house. I only had a little bit left to get started. And so I said, Well, I'm going to hire one guy. And with him I got started each year, and I asked him, "How much do you want me to pay you?" And he told me, "Ah Norma, I know that you just started. Give me whatever you think is good."

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:25:52] Mm, wow.

Norma Castillo: [00:25:55] Yes! Yes, you never would find people like that. And he used to work with me at the Union Supermarket. His name is Chico. Francisco, but we call him Chico. And he is from Nicaragua. And when he told me that, well, I almost cried. Because, I thought, wow, There is a few people that have a heart like that. And I told him, "Well, okay, Chico." And

I started selling. And in the first week, I pay him \$300. And I asked him, I said, "Is that okay, Chico?" "Oh, yes! More than I expected! I didn't even expect that," he told me. So, yes, the first week I made money for him, and I made money to buy flour, product to continue.

Norma Castillo: [00:27:26] And so I got off to a good start from the beginning. Everyone came, everyone liked what we were doing. Everything took off. Everyone said, "How is there a Hispanic bakery?" And everyone was coming and all. But then, pow, Hurricane Katrina hit. Yeah. In 2005. I started at the end of 2003.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:28:06] The first bakery?

Norma Castillo: [00:28:06] Yes, here. Here. And we'd been open almost two years when Katrina hit. And I felt, Oh, my God—We evacuated, everybody evacuated. And when we were in Dallas, I'm thinking, Well, I lost everything. I lost everything, I said. Everything. And, well, just watching television and waiting on news and everything. Then, someone who stayed here, right? When finally the telephones started working and everything, then they told me, "Norma, the bakery is okay. No sign of damage, no nothing," they told me. "It's exactly as you left it." "Are you serious? Really?" I said. "Yes," they told me. And we cried from happiness and everything. Then I thought, oh, the house. They said, "Oh no, no, New Orleans is lost," they said.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:29:17] [laughter]

Norma Castillo: [00:29:27] There's nothing left there. There's nothing left. So, well, I lost my house. The water got it. Because it was...I don't know if you know about UNO? Do you know UNO? Okay.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:29:44] What's the name of that neighborhood?

Norma Castillo: [00:29:44] All of that, they call it all Gentilly. It's Gentilly.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:29:49] Oh, yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:29:50] So, there, the water rose above the roofs, over everything. And, well, we expected that they would open New Orleans. I started at six weeks, I think, that I started. We cleaned everything. Since, I didn't have meat, I didn't have anything, but I had eggs. I had all of that. And the air, everything smelled bad. The cakes were in the refrigerators, and everything was there, but everything had to be thrown out. And be cleaned and start completely over.

[00:30:40]

When they opened, when they opened New Orleans so that people can go and see, I saw my house. Wow. Terrible. Lost everything. And um, but I say thank God that I have my business. You know, I can make money in that. And so we started again. After three years I had rebuilt the house, you know? And my son lived in that house for about eight years after that. And that's all I can say about the story of everything that happened.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:31:30] Your son told me that during those first years of the first bakery, that your neighbors supported you a lot in the neighborhood.

Norma Castillo: [00:31:45] Oh, yes. Because the city needed it, right? That the neighbors were on board. And they held meetings and no one mentioned anything. And they approved of me.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:31:59] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:31:59] They approved of what we were doing. We don't sell alcohol over there or nothing.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:32:08] Let's see... Oh. When, when you all arrived in the United States, initially, what were your first impressions of the U.S.?

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:32:25] Ah, well, it was a mix of feelings. My sick husband, it made me, well, I was almost never happy. But when I started to see that Miami was such a beautiful city with such big, beautiful buildings, I said, Wow, this is what people say the United States is like. Everything is really beautiful, and then when we came here, everything is a little bit smaller. And my husband tells me, he told me, "I'm going to take you to the French Quarter." My son still hadn't been born then, when we came. "I'm going to take you to the French Quarter." "And what is that?" "No, it's the most famous place in New Orleans. The tourist part," he told me. And beforehand he started to tell me the history and everything. And we went on a Sunday, and we

went walking there. And I thought, How beautiful, how beautiful. My country is a lot smaller, and there aren't the buildings that they have here or anything. And so my spouse told me, he called me 'Mami,' it means 'honey.' Yeah, "Mami, you're in the most powerful country in the world, where there are opportunities at your front door. Open the door, and you'll see all the opportunities that this country offers us." He told me, "You only have to walk," as we say in my country, "with your feet straight." I don't know how to say in English, but it means, do the right things in this country, and you're going to succeed.

[00:34:47]

And that's what I remember. That my husband always said that, do the right thing and you will succeed. Live the right way. Always, he told me, always. Because he was older than me, you know? And, and I was young. You know. And so he told me, this country offers us all the opportunities for every single person that wants to better their life. And better their family's life. And so, I thank God, right? For being in this country where we have freedom, we have everything. Everything to succeed.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:35:48] When you arrived in New Orleans, what were your first impressions of Mardi Gras? Had you ever seen it before?

Norma Castillo: [00:35:56] I knew, yes. No, I had never seen it before but I knew about it because I had arrived precisely in January. It was close. Already people were talking about Mardi Gras and about the parade. His aunts, they had lived here, they had come here, like, in the forties.

So they told me, they said, "Ah, Norma, Mardi Gras is coming up. Mardi Gras is coming up. You're going to see, Josecito." Because they called Jose, Josecito. Josecito. And they said, "You're going to see, Josecito. You're going to feel so happy when you see it, Josecito. And look, they throw candies, they throw—" I said to myself, What is this all about? I remember that the aunt lived here in Clearview and she told me, "Oh, today there is a parade in Veterans. Let's go." And from there, I started going to all those things that I had never seen in my life. And I loved it. I loved it. And afterward, when I had become more independent, when I could manage by myself, we would go to New Orleans, right? To the parades, and we liked that even more. And I saw a lot of things that I never imagined, but I became familiar with them here.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:37:58] And when you were little, was there a similar celebration in Honduras? What was the most popular celebration?

Norma Castillo: [00:38:06] No, in Honduras, but we knew that, yes, there is a similar one in Honduras in the city of La Ceiba for carnival, but it's more like the one in Brazil, which is more with people in the street, dancing and music and all that. I don't know now if they still do it with floats. I don't know. But yes, I knew what carnival was. Because [inaudible 00:38:52] talked a lot about Carnival in Brazil, too. But I didn't know about the one in New Orleans.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:38:46] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:38:47] My husband would tell me, "Mami," he would say, "it's the second most beautiful Carnival in the world," he would say. "After the one in Brazil," he said. "it's the

one in New Orleans." And he explained everything to me. Because he had lived here for many years as a teenager and everything. He went to school here, too, so he knew about all of that. When we lived here, I asked him a lot, and he told me all about it.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:39:23] Do you remember the first time you tried king cake?

Norma Castillo: [00:39:27] Yes, with the aunt, with the aunt, I remember that she bought a king cake at Mckenzie. It was the biggest place here making king cake. And so I remember that, well, I don't know if they did it on purpose, but I got the slice with the baby. .

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:40:02] Ah, yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:40:06] So they gave it to me, and I said, "Carmen!" I started to say, and I see everyone laughing because I didn't know the history. Carmen told me, and everyone was laughing because I said, "Carmen, look what came out of my cake!" So I remember that. It was all very sweet, all of that. Sometimes I have sad memories, but more happy ones.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:40:41] And what did they tell you about the meaning of the baby?

Norma Castillo: [00:40:51] About the little baby?

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:40:51] The baby, yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:40:51] Well, my aunt told, "Ah, Norma," she told me, "Look, whoever gets the baby has to make the next king cake. You have to buy it." "Oh, okay. Okay." Yeah. That's it. But, no it was just family, right? See, when I came here, I didn't have family here. Nobody. Nobody. Only his family. That was my family. Of his aunts, only this one is left, that is ninety years old. Carmen. Because I was alone, and pregnant, and with my husband and all. They always supported me, you know? And I felt this affection, this love. So when I remember them, I remember them so fondly. Because they were such a marvelous family. They taught me to live in this country. They taught me how to carry myself, how to—it was like a school. They were my school.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:42:59] What do you mean?

Norma Castillo: [00:43:00] I mean that I learned from her. Everything that I am. Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:43:12] So you're really, really grateful for the family that supported you.

Norma Castillo: [00:43:15] Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:43:16] When you got settled here.

Norma Castillo: [00:43:22] Yes. Yes. I'm sorry.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:43:31] No it's fine. You know, if you need a break, that's totally fine, too. No, it's beautiful how much your family was able to be there for you. And it sounds like every difficult time in your life, there was someone who really showed you a lot of love and supported you to help you get through.

Norma Castillo: [00:43:57] Yes, yes. And, and I think here, the family is very important. Because there are so few of us, that it's so important that we stay close together, always giving each other comfort, you know? I think that's very, very, very important so that a family stays healthy. I remember, the pastor always told me—because we were Catholic. And when we came here, we wanted to go to a Catholic church but when my husband got here and went to the hospital, and a Cuban pastor arrived.

[00:45:06]

And he invited us to church. It was a Baptist church. A Baptist church. And so he came to pick us up, and he took us to church. And so we went to the church, right? And we kept liking it more and more, and we stayed in the Baptist church. We saw a lot of honesty, and we got baptized there at the Baptist church. And my kids grew up with those beliefs. Believe in God, in Jesus Christ, and everything. And I remember one of the pastor's sermons—[Referring to background conversations]. They're talking about politics.

[46:39]

We were talking about the pastor. He was such a smart, smart pastor and well educated. He was Cuban, one of the first Cubans that came here when Fidel took over Cuba. He taught classes at Loyola, he taught classes at UNO And in Delgado College he taught sociology classes, he taught a ton of classes. He was very well educated, this pastor. And we liked that, you know? So in one of the sermons, he said, "Brothers and sisters," he said, "We humans are imperfect. But," he said, "we can have all those imperfections, all the defects in the world," he said, "as bad as a person can be. But," he said, "if that person is generous, that generosity covers all their defects," he said. And I believe that is reality. It's true. When you are generous, it tops everything. Right? It tops everything. You know what I mean?

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:48:02] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [00:48:03] So that thought from the pastor always stuck with me because it's true. Sometimes someone gives because maybe he wants to receive something. But that's not how it is. Right? When someone gives, they give with joy without expecting anything. And that's what his family did. They were very generous. They didn't expect anything from us in return because we didn't have anything. And I believe that's why He gave them so many years to live. You know? And to enjoy good health because all of them died with a perfect mind. There were three of my husband's aunts here. And they all died with a lucid mind. Lucid.

Norma Castillo: [00:49:31] [background conversation] He's talking about getting out the door.

[00:49:33] [Norma steps away to greet a friend who has come into the store]

Norma Castillo: [00:58:57] Sorry!

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:58:58] Oh, it's fine! Carmen's daughter is here?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:02] Carmen's daughter and her husband are here.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:04] Oh!

Norma Castillo: [00:59:04] Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:06] Could we shut the door?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:07] Ah, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:14] How is she?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:15] She's well, she's well. They don't speak Spanish. She doesn't. A little bit, you know, but no.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:28] I see.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:29] But your children?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:31] Oh, yes, both of them speak perfect Spanish.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:35] José and... ?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:36] José and Mariano. Mariano, he left at 12.

Phillip Norman Reid: [00:59:44] To go to...?

Norma Castillo: [00:59:46] Lunch. Oh, yes. He comes early in the morning at seven—

Phillip Norman Reid: I was thinking twelve years old. [Laughs]

Norma Castillo: And he's 40 now. He's 40 now. He was born here.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:00:02] And Mariano also works here?

Norma Castillo: [01:00:03] Mariano works here, too, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:00:06] Here in this restaurant, and José in the other?

Norma Castillo: [01:00:06] In the other one.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:00:17] And what is it like to work with your kids?

Norma Castillo: [01:00:19] Well, for me, I feel very happy to have them here, to learn the business, right? Because when you die, it goes to your children, no? And sometimes they say "Ay, Mami," they say that I am very...they say angry, but it's not that I am angry, it's that I want things to be done well.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:00:53] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [01:00:54] And sometimes the boys...but they have learned a lot. A lot. Mariano is more serious. José is more cheerful, yes. He chats and everything, but Mariano, no. Mariano is more quiet. He doesn't really like to chat.

[01:01:21]

But he works well with me here. He's in charge of all the purchasing, of opening accounts with new vendors. He's in charge of pricing and everything. That's how he helps me. If there's a problem with the city, he goes and works it out, everything like that. And that's his function. My function now is to be here, things more related to the bread. I do more with the bread, with the cakes, with the sweets, with that stuff. That's more what I take care of. They don't know very much about making bread, nothing like that, but they do like the supermarket.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:02:22] And José is in charge of...?

Norma Castillo: [01:02:24] Jose is only over there. He and his wife manage that one. And I almost never go over there.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:02:36] He's got it under control.

Norma Castillo: [01:02:37] Yes, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:02:41] So I think I only need ten or fifteen minutes more about when you started to offer king cake in your bakery.

Norma Castillo: [01:02:53] Well, we started here. Since I opened, we did it. We did king cake. Because we thought that we could do something different. You understand? To contribute something to the culture of the city. So I invented something that we could do using the same bread from king cake, the same recipe, but with a different filling. And we added guava. In Spanish "guayaba." Guava is a tropical fruit, right, that you can cook, we cook it. You know? We take out the pulp, the fruit, we cook it and we make the jelly. In Spanish we call it "jalea." And that's what we put in the king cake. And people liked it. Because we Hispanics like guava. But it seemed like Americans weren't very familiar with that fruit.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:04:26] Yes, Jose told me that guava in Honduras and in other countries...that guava is like strawberries here.

Norma Castillo: [01:04:30] In the Caribbean. Yes. Exactly. Exactly. It grows in the mountains. There where nobody pays attention to it. It grows everywhere. It's a little tree, a little tree like these little trees I have here, when they grow, that's more or less the guava.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:04:55] Oh...

Norma Castillo: [01:04:55] That little tree. So it puts out fruit, it falls to the ground unless someone picks it. I owe a lot of elite and history to la la fruit. Have you seen it, have you seen guava fruit?

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:05:07] Yes, yes.

Norma Castillo: [01:05:09] So you cook that, right? With other ingredients, and you make the jelly, and you enjoy.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:05:18] So in what year did you start to offer this?

Norma Castillo: [01:05:22] We started when we opened the bakery in 2004.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:05:23] 2004.

Norma Castillo: [01:05:23] In 2004 here. Then there was a lot of demand. There was a lot of demand, so the gentleman, the baker, that made it, complained to me and said, "Oh, I can't do

this anymore. I can't do it anymore." And there weren't a lot of people to work in a bakery. And I couldn't just bring people in to work a few months to help me. So, many people complained, and that's when I said to my son, "Do you want to start to make it there in New Orleans and bring it here to me so I can sell it here?" And so that's how we started. And that's how we make the king cakes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:06:30] Describe to me a typical week in the bakery during Mardi Gras.

Norma Castillo: [01:06:38] Well, here in Kenner, there's not a lot of— I don't see a lot of enthusiasm. Because here there aren't floats, there isn't anything. In Metairie, yes, there's a little more, you know, enthusiasm because the floats are going by and everything. But we honestly, Carnival doesn't bring us very much [business] here in Kenner. But there in New Orleans you see much more movement. It's more joyful, the king cake is more popular. There my son sells more than what I sell here.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:07:35] Yes, the last time we talked you said you all make all the king cakes in New Orleans?

Norma Castillo: [01:07:43] Yes, yes. And we bring them here, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:07:50] In your opinion, what does a king cake need to be authentic?

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:07:59] I think that all the bakeries, you know, have their own taste.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:08:10] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [01:08:10] Their own recipe.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:08:10] Yes.

Norma Castillo: [01:08:11] And the decoration on top, right? They could make changes, little things that are more attractive. But in reality, originally, what a king cake is, for example in Mexico, they make king cakes a lot, which are totally different than the king cakes we make here in New Orleans. Right? The Hispanic king cake, or let's say Mexican, the decoration on top is different, you know, than here. It has little things like skulls and little fingers and things like that. But every bakery has its own style. And that's good. To me that's good because for every taste, there should be varieties.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:09:35] Yes, that's what interests me. That every bakery's king cake reflects the culture of the bakery.

Norma Castillo: [01:09:46] Yes, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:09:50] So, what does it mean to you to add your own king cake to the Mardi Gras tradition? It's a very long and popular tradition.

Norma Castillo: [01:09:51] Yes, yes. Popular.

Norma Castillo: [01:10:07] Well, I feel proud. Of that fact that one day maybe I don't even exist and someone might keep making it. The guava king cake. It would be, it would be beautiful. Maybe I won't be around to see it but my grandchildren will see it and they'll comment, they'll say, "That's the king cake my grandmother invented." Right? Yes. I would like that if the tradition continued. And that it would be in magazines like the New York Times, you know? I'm proud.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:11:03] How did you feel about the New York Times wrote about your king cake?

Norma Castillo: [01:11:06] I couldn't believe it!

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:11:08] You couldn't believe it?

Norma Castillo: [01:11:08] I truly couldn't believe it! I'm telling you, my son Jose told me, "Mami! Mami, look! It's here in the New York Times!" I said, "No way, I don't believe it." He said, "Yes, Mami, look," and he sent it to me. I felt—you understand? I felt like part of the culture of the city of New Orleans.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:11:40] Is there anything else you wanted to say about the king cake or about the bakery in general?

Norma Castillo: [01:11:48] Well, if there were a message for everyone that has an idea, that has a plan, and they think that it is difficult, I would tell that person that, yes, you are risking a lot of difficulties, but everything with perseverance, right? And courage, you can achieve it. And don't let fear hold us back. Because of fear, I waited 25 years to open my own bakery. Yes, this is a message I would like to give people, that everything in life can be achieved, though you have to run through so many obstacles. But everything can be achieved in this life when there is health. And I think sometimes, too, I remember that in my case my husband told me, "Mami, we have to sell this bakery because you never see the kids." And it was true. I was leaving the house at five in the morning. And I was getting home at ten or eleven at night. So, who helped me? My mother-in-law took care of the children. And I remember that my husband always said, "You have to leave the bakery. You have to leave it because the children, you don't see them. And what good is it that you're working if these children don't have the love and affection of a mother?" And I think that's very important. One time my son told me, "Mami," he was one of the ones that told me, "this is something you should do because if you stop, you might lose the ambition of a young person." I told him, "No, papa, it's that for me, family is very important."

[01:14:51]

I told him, right, I told him that if we have small children, wait a little bit. Wait a little while until the children grow up, right? And now it's not so, so—it's always necessary that the mother and father be there, but there's an age when one can begin. You understand? But I was a baby, and he was a five year old boy. So I think that you have to wait, you know, until the kids grow up a little to begin to make a plan. I think that for someone who wants to have their own business. Now for someone who is a professional, that has a job and everything, they already know their function.

But when one is going to go into business, one has to give one hundred percent. If not, it won't work. So it is. So when you have—Do you have a family? Do you have children?

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:16:18] No. I don't have children.

Norma Castillo: [01:16:21] Well, when one has children, one has to wait.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:16:24] Yes, yes.

Norma Castillo: [01:16:25] You have to wait.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:16:29] Yes. It's like an old saying, “Don't give up on your dreams. Sometimes you have to wait a little while.”

Norma Castillo: [01:16:39] Yes, exactly. I waited, I think, here, I think I was fifty years old. No, I wasn't fifty when I started here, I was about 45 when I started this business here. So I no longer had little children, it was just me, no one else. I would leave the house, at six in the morning I was here in my bakery, I left whenever I felt ready, I didn't have a husband to tell me this and that. So I gave it one hundred percent to the business that I opened. And I think that has been very fundamental to succeed.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:17:42] Anything else?

Norma Castillo: [01:17:44] Well, no.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:17:47] In that case, thank you. Thank you very much—

Norma Castillo: [01:17:49] No, thank you, thank you.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:17:52] —for sharing your story.

Phillip Norman Reid: [01:17:53] I really enjoyed it. We have to leave 30 seconds of silence on the end of the recording for that for the editor. So it's just 30 seconds and then we'll be all done.