



Michele Bell

Stuart, VA

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Jessica Taylor: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing Michele Bell in Stuart, Virginia, on May 28, 2022. And ma'am, can you please state your full name?

Michele Bell: Michele Lynn Bell.

Jessica Taylor: Great. And ma'am, where were you born?

Michele Bell: I was born in Florida.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Okay. What part?

Michele Bell: Gainesville, Florida.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Interesting. And what were your parents' occupations?

Michele Bell: My dad was in the military and then my mom was a VA nurse.

Jessica Taylor: Really?

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And what are your earliest memories of baking?

Michele Bell: My great-grandmother would bake and cook and things like that, but because both my parents worked, I really didn't see anything with baking unless it was with my great-grandmother. So, she taught me a few things and things like that, but I learned most of it on my own.

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And I think I was—gosh, I seem to recall I was, like, five-ish when I would go to my great-grandmother's, and I would stand on a little chair, and she would help me cook. [Fan sound.]

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, if you don't mind that'd be great. [Laughter]

Michele Bell: No problem. There we go.

Jessica Taylor: Thank you. And how would you characterize your great-grandmother's cooking?

Michele Bell: It was really good. It was old-fashioned, southern cooking, that kind of thing. Lots of biscuits, cobblers, things like that.

Jessica Taylor: Where was your great-grandmother from?

Michele Bell: She was from Ohio. All my family is from Ohio, including my little brother. He was born in Ohio. I was the only one that was born in Florida.

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And so my family moved to Florida to be near my grandfather and that was how we ended up there.

Jessica Taylor: To be near your grandfather?

Michele Bell: Um-hm, my dad's dad. And he had moved there when he got out of the military and so that's where he settled at.

Jessica Taylor: So military family?

Michele Bell: Yes, um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. What part of Ohio?

Michele Bell: Columbus is where most of them were from.

Jessica Taylor: Great. Okay. So southern cooking like biscuits?

Michele Bell: Yes. Biscuits and gravy, biscuits, cobblers, peach. Real popular down there is blackberry, blackberry cobbler 'cause blackberries just grow wild on the side of the road. So we used blackberries, things like that.

Jessica Taylor: Can you talk about how your great-grandmother made biscuits and gravy?

Michele Bell: Sure. My grandmother did the old-fashioned type of shortening biscuits. Most people don't use shortening now, but the shortening biscuits. She would make up the biscuits, good flour biscuits with lots of butter and stuff.

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And then, to make the gravy, she would usually cook venison sausage or different types of sausage, pork, things like that and she would fry that up and then she would add flour and butter and lots of pepper and milk to it, buttermilk actually is what she would put in hers, buttermilk, and make a thick gravy to pour over top of it. It was really good.

Jessica Taylor: Do you remember where she was getting her flour from? You mentioned it was good.

Michele Bell: I'm not sure where she got it from. I imagine just local grocery store at that time. I do know when she was a little girl, they used to grind their flour themselves. But then modern

conveniences came around like the grocery store and stuff, so it was probably easier for her.

[Laughter] I do remember that she used to get King Arthur flour a lot.

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That was her favorite one from the store.

Jessica Taylor: And you mentioned that you learned by being on the stool right next to her.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Do you remember what kind of dishes you started with?

Michele Bell: Cobbler.

Jessica Taylor: Cobbler.

Michele Bell: Cobbler. That's the easiest one to learn. So there's that movie, *Steel Magnolias*, where they talk about a cuppa cuppa cuppa, you know, the good southern movie. And it's literally a cup of flour, a cup of sugar, a cup of fruit cocktail with the juice, and that literally is how you make cobbler. And it's basically the same thing, just a cup of flour, cup of sugar, a cup of milk, and then whatever fruits you want to add to it. And that was how we learned how to make cobbler.

Jessica Taylor: So, when you were a kid what was your favorite to make with your family?

Michele Bell: Biscuits was my favorite. I always liked biscuits. I'm not a huge cobbler person. I'm not really totally into sweets.

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I like the more starchy things [Laughter], so biscuits was my favorite. And I still make biscuits and things like that today, the older fashioned type of biscuits, so yeast biscuits is what I make.

Jessica Taylor: Really? Can you talk a little bit about how you learned that process?

Michele Bell: Well, that one I kinda just stumbled across. When my husband and I got married thirty some odd years ago, I could practically burn cold cornflakes, So I started getting recipe books and I started reading and things like that, And I kinda stumbled across this old cookbook and it had a yeast biscuit recipe in it, and it was so good! ‘Cause most of your biscuits don’t have yeast in ‘em. And the only drawback to it is it has to rise for a long time. [Laughter] So usually I make ‘em, if I’m gonna do ‘em, I do ‘em the night before and then for the next day. But those are my favorite biscuits.

Jessica Taylor: You said you could burn cold cornflakes when you and your husband got married.

Michele Bell: Yes.

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Jessica Taylor: It seems like the women in your family and you would learn how to bake really early on. How do those jibe?

Michele Bell: Well, like I said, my great-grandmother, she cooked because back then you didn’t have, when she was young, fast-food places. It was a luxury to go to a restaurant. And so pretty much they had baking with every meal: breads, desserts, cobblers. That’s what she specialized

in, was the cobblers. She would make cakes and things like that. And then, I think my mom's mom had passed away at a very young age, and so she didn't get the same kind of thing that came from my great-grandmother. So, all I knew how to do was just bake a few things.

[Laughter] So I had to learn all the other stuff to actually eat. So we couldn't eat biscuits and gravy all the time and that was pretty much it.

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Jessica Taylor: I wanted to follow up on—you said that the gravy came with venison. Where was the venison coming from?

Michele Bell: My grandfather would hunt. We lived in the middle of nowhere. The nearest school we would have to drive approximately thirty minutes to get to and so that's where I went to school at. Our nearest neighbor was, gosh, several miles away. And so we lived in the middle of nowhere. We had a farm and things like that: chickens, pigs, that kind of thing. And we would grow pretty much all our food. And so my grandfather, he would hunt to get things like venison and stuff. And he took it to someone, and they processed it, made it into the sausages and things like that. Not the same kind of processing we have now. And that's what we ate when I was younger. So, venison, pork, things like that. Very little red meat. Chicken, 'cause we had chickens, so that kinda thing.

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Jessica Taylor: So, were you outside of Gainesville at this point, like in the area around it?

Michele Bell: Yeah. I was in more towards the Levy County area which is very rural. If I remember correctly, at the time when I was young, it was the fifth largest county in the state but

had the lowest population in the state, so it was very rural. I think my graduating class had something like, I want to say, fifty-two kids at the most and that was it. It was very small. And you went from seventh grade to twelfth grade. That was your schooling there, so it was a very small school, very small area.

Jessica Taylor: Having that space between stores and between neighbors, I'm assuming going to the store was kind of an outing.

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Michele Bell: It was, um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. How does that affect what you, for example, might bake for the week or might preserve for later?

Michele Bell: Well, usually my great-grandmother—and by the way, we had acreage and my family lived on one side of the acreage with my grandfather right there, and then my great-grandmother, which was his mother, lived on the other side of the property and so we could just walk to her place. But we would always have bread. Just about every day we would have bread. We would preserve things like when the blackberries were in season, we would just pick and pick and pick blackberries to make preserves with and things like that. And with our garden we would preserve things, can stuff. That's what my great-grandmother would do, she would can stuff. And that's how I learned how to can, as well, was from her. And so that's basically what we would do.

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And then, every once in a while, we would go to the store and get the necessities that you had to have, and that was pretty much it. And so we pretty much lived on what we could grow, what we would hunt for, like I said, my grandfather and things like that.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And once you graduated high school, what came next?

Michele Bell: Actually, I got married. I got married pretty much right after I got out of high school, and I did take some college. But every time I went to college my husband and I found out I was pregnant, so we decided to stop that. [Laughter] And so that was pretty much it. I did some college and that was pretty much it. I was a stay-at-home mom. Learned to cook and take care of a family and had three boys and that's what we did.

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Jessica Taylor: What was learning how to cook like on your own?

Michele Bell: It was kinda hard 'cause I didn't have anybody to ask advice to. I did watch the cooking channel because that's when now you could have the cooking channel. That's back when the Food Network actually had shows on it that were cooking shows. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter]

Michele Bell: And I would watch that. And I would just go to the library and just pore over cookbooks and things like that. And learn how to make things and keep trying and keep trying and keep trying until I got it right. There was a lot of failures, but I eventually learned how to cook and perfected my baking and things like that.

Jessica Taylor: Why was that important to you?

Michele Bell: Because to me baking meant home, meant family, taking care of your family.

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And I didn't have a great relationship with my mother because she was always working and so I didn't get to see her and so to me that's what that meant. That meant love, that you were giving love to your family by taking care of them and baking and feeding them and that kind of thing. So feed the body, feed the soul is how I am with that kind of thing.

Jessica Taylor: So, you learned the skill of baking. When did it go from a skillset, kind of following directions, to something that is creative for you?

Michele Bell: I think probably when we moved up here to Virginia. Really about ten years ago, it got to where I could do creative things with it. I did bake wedding cakes years and years ago, long before that, but I decided I didn't like dealing with the brides because it was so restrictive. And I wanted to start doing what I wanted to do.

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When we first moved up here, I was still working for a newspaper down in Florida and they asked me to continue working online so I did. And then, like a lot of the newspapers do, it closed down because there's just not published newspapers hardly anymore. Everything is online. And so I thought, "I'm gonna retire." And that lasted, like, two weeks and I was, like, "Nope, I gotta find somethin' to do." And so I started doing my creative baking. I started baking cakes and things like that. And now it's turned into I have people calling—Monday, for example, I have to deliver two dozen cupcakes and she wanted a very specific type of cupcakes. So she said, "You

can do what you want but I need this,” kind of thing, so that kind of thing. So I’ve got to be really creative with my baking that way, colors—I love color and so I love doing bright things.

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I like making cookies that I can decorate brightly, cupcakes. One of my favorite cupcakes I ever created was one that looked like a little tiny barbecue, and I literally cut up gummy bears and made little food out of ‘em and took little Red Hots and put little chocolate lines on ‘em, and that was my favorite cupcake I ever did. So I like doing weird type of colorful, fun, creative type of things.

Jessica Taylor: Let me follow up about the cakes then. So where does that fall—you said you were doing wedding cakes—where does that fall in your career trajectory?

Michele Bell: I was just doing them. Somebody on a lark asked me when I was younger, “Can you do a wedding cake?” and I said, “I don't know. I'll try.” ‘Cause they were on a budget. And so, I did, and somebody saw it and then that led to more jobs and more jobs and more jobs. And so, it was something that I could do with children home and take care of, ‘cause it was very important to my husband and I that I stayed home with the kids.

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And we made that decision together and that I stayed home with them until at least they were in school and that I would also be able to work till they got out of school, and I could be home with them. And when they were younger that was really important to us. And so, these were things that I could do to be able to do those kinds of things and earn a little bit of money for myself, just mad money. I could just take the kids somewhere or do something or that kind of thing. I also

fell into baking muffins for teachers and different people ‘cause I used to, when my husband worked at an elementary school—he’s a police officer—and when he worked at an elementary school I would bake them four dozen muffins once a month on a Monday and I would give them those things. And that just grew into a business of selling muffins until it became too much of a business for me. [Laughter]

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Jessica Taylor: By “too much of a business” you mean interfering with . . .?

Michele Bell: Family life.

Jessica Taylor: Okay.

Michele Bell: Yes, um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: So, muffins. What kind of muffins are we talking about?

Michele Bell: My most popular one was Death by Chocolate and it had five different chocolates in it and people just loved it. And at the time I was only charging—I think I was charging twelve dollars for a dozen muffins and that was expensive at the time, but they would pay for it. I mean, I had to because there was so much chocolate and things in it, but that was my most popular one was Death by Chocolate. I like chocolate. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: And this would’ve been—this was when your children were young so during your twenties you were doing this?

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: How long did this gig last for?

Michele Bell: A couple years, and then my husband ended up transferring out of the schools and we just talked about it, and we just said it's a little too much.

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I can't do the family stuff that I want to do and all, and so that's why I just slowly tapered them off of it, the muffins. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: And the wedding cakes, that overlaps with the muffins? Is that the same time?

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: What kind of wedding cakes were you doing in terms of flavor?

Michele Bell: We would do a lot of lemon—I don't know, women love the lemon—with raspberry filling and things like that. Did have a few chocolates but mostly it was lemon or a white cake with some kind of filling like a strawberry or a lemon or a lemon curd or something like that. Those were the most popular.

Jessica Taylor: And were you able to be creative with the muffin and cake recipes?

Michele Bell: Yes. Yes. I liked doing that. I liked doing different things, mixing up different stuff, trying different things. My husband loved it 'cause he got to test it. And that's pretty much what I did with that.

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Jessica Taylor: What was the process like of developing those recipes inside of your own kitchen?

Michele Bell: Well, what I used to do, and I do it different now but back then, because I wasn't real comfortable with everything, I would start with a basic recipe and then I would start changing. I would think, "Oh, it needs a little more vanilla, it needs this and that," and I would start altering it until pretty much it would become a completely different recipe, but I always would start with some kind of base recipe, a general cupcake recipe. And now I can just do it in my sleep, creating new things.

Jessica Taylor: And you had mentioned that your great-grandmother and her family baked cakes.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Is the flavor profile similar?

Michele Bell: No. I think hers were a little more like a chocolate type of thing, just an old-fashioned chocolate cake or a pound cake or something like that. I really liked playing with flavors and stuff and that kind of thing, so that's where mine kind of developed with that.

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Jessica Taylor: So, for the decorating of the wedding cakes, you got to be creative with that, too, I'm sure?

Michele Bell: Yes, somewhat. Somewhat, 'cause brides can be very specific. But I did, I specialized in doing flowers and things like that. So, that was pretty much it, colors and things like that.

Jessica Taylor: At what point did you decide that baking was going to be a way that you were going to make money?

Michele Bell: Really, before, it was kind of more of a hobby until we moved up here, like I said. I worked for the newspaper for about two and a half years before it closed, and I started just baking. People kept asking me—I would take a cake to church, and somebody would be, like, “Oh, can you make me a cake?” And it just kind of grew from there. And I’m also an artist and an artisan soap maker, and I was doing those things at the farmers market.

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And when things started changing with the world and things like that and all, I shifted towards doing baked things at farmers markets and different things like that. I have baked goods in a local store, things like that. And that’s when I was, like, “Hey, I can actually make some money at this.” [Laughter] Not a lot of money but some money. So that’s what I started doing. And so, I baked for the farmers markets. I go to several different farmers markets, and I have my baked goods in a store here.

Jessica Taylor: What brought you here?

Michele Bell: About twelve years ago, my husband wanted to show me the area and we got up on the Blue Ridge Parkway and I found out I’m terrified of the heights and so I said, “We have to get off this.” And we were near Lovers Leap, which we went down Lovers Leap and that terrified me even more.

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And when we got off 58, I could've just kissed the ground I was so excited. And my husband—we turned down this road and he says, “Find me a street sign.” ‘Cause we stopped at a stop sign. “Find me a street sign so I can figure out where we are at.” And so it turned out it was Slusher Street, which happens to be my maiden name. And so jokingly I said, “We should just move here.” Well, it kind of stuck in our minds and we kept talking about it and talking about it. And my husband said he’s never gonna retire until they make him retire ‘cause he doesn’t like to not work. And so he says, “Why stay here when we can live somewhere where we really want to?” And so, we made the jump and moved up here. It was terrifying to be this far away from what I knew my entire life to here, but it was a great move. We love it up here!

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Jessica Taylor: And he currently works, correct?

Michele Bell: Yes. He works at the Patrick County Sheriff’s Department.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And what did you find interesting about the food when you moved here?

Michele Bell: In this particular area, it’s rather bland. I’m used to having spices in different items and it’s very hard—I actually a lot of times have to go to Winston or Greensboro to get the ingredients that I need for different things because locally they don’t have those. We like food. We’re foodies. We like spice. We like garlic. We like all the stuff, and it’s not as popular here. They did open a restaurant up here that actually does do that, which is really nice, finally. [Laughter] But that’s been in the last, I think, year and a half.

Jessica Taylor: Which one’s that?

Michele Bell: Pickles & Ash. And nothing against that, it's just we're used to something different and so I found it very different.

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And tea is totally different up here 'cause we call it southern syrup and it's sweet tea. Up here it's kind of like tea. It's not the same thing. So we've had to adjust to that kind of thing.

Jessica Taylor: I love that. And are there other bakers in this area that have influenced your work at all?

Michele Bell: There was a lady named Miss Ingrid. She was at the farmers market originally—this was when I was actually selling soaps—and I would talk to her. And my husband absolutely adored her cream puffs. I would always make sure to get a cream puff for him and stuff like that, and so I would just talk to her. I think she was from Germany if I remember correctly. And I saw kind of the stuff that she did.

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She actually stopped coming to the farmers market and eventually her and her husband moved away. So my husband was, like, “You gotta figure out them cream puffs.” And so that's what I started doing. And she influenced me learning how to make cream puffs 'cause I'd never really done cream puffs and now I do cream puffs and things like that, as well.

Jessica Taylor: That's wonderful. So how did you get started with the store owners through which you sell the baked goods and the farmers market?

Michele Bell: Well, I was actually in the store. I was selling soaps and my art and stuff in there. And she approached me ‘cause she knew I did do baking and stuff like that. She’s like, “Would you like to put some cupcakes in our store?” And I was, like, “Sure!” And then she was, like, “Well, you can just put whatever you want in here.” And so that’s what kind of happened, and we actually have a little stand in the store, and every Tuesday or Wednesday, depending on what I’m making, I bring stuff in and that’s what we do for her. And she puts it on Facebook and stuff like that and so it helps draw people in and things like that, as well.

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Jessica Taylor: You also mentioned that you bake for church.

Michele Bell: Yes, for churches. Well, our church when we were going there.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Do you mind me asking which church this is?

Michele Bell: Oh, no. No, that’s not a problem. Grace Baptist is the one we were going to. And that kind of changed when COVID happened. Since everything was closed, we actually went back to our—not went, but they were doing online stuff from our old church in Florida and so we just actually kinda continued doing that. ‘Cause we miss that church and so we kind of continued doing that. But that’s where we went to church at, was Grace Baptist.

Jessica Taylor: But you’ve been baking for multiple churches it sounds like?

Michele Bell: Yes. Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. How did that get started and what is that like in terms of scale? I imagine there’s lots of people.

Michele Bell: Yes. It was pretty much when we were—we call it “church shopping,” when we were trying to find a church, and that’s how I make contact with people, not really meaning to, not like I was purposely doing that, it just kind of happened.

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And so, each church that we went to, that’s how it would end up. Someone would start talking to me about baking and could I bake this, could I bake that and that kind of thing for them. And so basically it was a way for women that didn’t bake could bring stuff to get-togethers and stuff like that. Like right now, my friend that’s daughter’s birthday is tomorrow, she doesn’t bake and so she called me and said—and she was from our old church—and she was, “Please, can you bake me a cake?” And she gave me—what kind can I make, and I was, like, “Well, chocolate is my most famous one, my most popular.” And so she said, “Chocolate then.” [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Wow. So how often do you bake for churches relative to the farmers market and things like that?

Michele Bell: Well, the farmers market I do every week, and that’s where I get the main amount of my extra sales from.

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So, I have people that come and see me and then they say, “I need something for this, I need something for that.” In this last week, I’ve made two different cakes for someone and, like I said, Monday I’m taking two dozen cupcakes to a veterinary clinic that’s local because they helped out someone.

Jessica Taylor: Oh, wow!

Michele Bell: Yeah. So that's it. And I get occasionally now different churches ask for things but it's not as much as it was. So, it's mainly I get my stuff from the farmers market now.

Jessica Taylor: And that shift is because of COVID [inaudible 0:27:41]?

Michele Bell: Yes, um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: How are the products that you're creating different for the farmers market than they are for churches?

Michele Bell: I do more of—for example, I make a Mediterranean bread and that's real popular there.

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I sell out of it every week and it's a really good bread that has calamata olives and sundried tomatoes that I dried myself that's from a local farmers market farmer—she gives me tomatoes and I dry them—and feta cheese, and it's really popular. So, I do things like that. I do more savory than I do as cakes and cupcakes and stuff like that, although my chocolate cake is pretty popular there, as well. I sell out of that pretty much—when I started going to the farmers market I only made one cake and that was for two markets, here and Martinsville. And now I am up to three. And I sell by the slice.

Jessica Taylor: Which cakes are those?

Michele Bell: That's the chocolate.

Jessica Taylor: Oh.

Michele Bell: Chocolate is the one that I sell the most of. I'm actually working on a carrot cake recipe now that I'm going to start doing—well, carrot cake and then also a coconut one.

Coconut's been asked a lot of so I'm going to start making coconut cakes for the farmers market, as well.

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Jessica Taylor: So, the churches, their get-togethers, are these major events or holidays or ...?

Michele Bell: It's just like they'll do a fellowship Sunday or something like that. Just a fellowship type of thing.

Jessica Taylor: Right. Okay. And you mentioned that you do multiple farmers markets. Can you walk me through kind of your weekly schedule?

Michele Bell: Okay. So, what I do is on—remember, you asked for this.

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter]

Michele Bell: So, on Monday I kind of plan my week and I figure out what I'm gonna need, that kind of thing, and then I go shopping for that. Then Tuesday, I do all my bags, boxes, and labels. I get those all set up for wherever I'm going, for all the places. Then on Tuesday also, I make the baked goods for the store. Wednesday, I do my deliveries and things like that for the store or if I have any other deliveries in the area, somebody's asked for something. Then Thursday is my major bake day.

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I bake from morning until night and that's for the farmers markets. I usually start in the morning and sometimes I've worked until two in the morning depending on what's going on. And then Friday I go to the Stuart Farmers Market. And then when I get done, depending on what I've sold, I then will bake again for the next day 'cause I like for my stuff to be fresh. You are able to freeze your products for one time and then sell them at the farmers market again. I don't like doing that, so I like to make everything fresh and so that's what I do. And then I do a farmers market on Saturday, and I try to reserve Sunday for not anything, but that doesn't always happen. So, like, tomorrow I'm making cupcakes. [Laughter] But I try not to do that if I can help it. And that's basically my week.

Jessica Taylor: So, the farmers market in Stuart. Is there another—I feel like you mentioned two.

Michele Bell: Yes, Martinsville.

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Jessica Taylor: Martinsville.

Michele Bell: Uptown Farmers Market up there, um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And on your bake days, what is your kitchen setup?

Michele Bell: Well, basically what I try to do on Wednesday night before I start baking is I try to get everything all set up and ready for it; if I have to have butter out, all those kind of things. I also take the time to put out pans and things. So, I know I'm gonna use this many pans for this recipe, I put out all the bowls for it and I get out all my towels, my cheesecloth covers, all that

stuff. I get it all set up in different areas. And then I get up and I just start baking. And I only have one mixer, so I've learned how to work with that. And eventually I think I'm going to buy a second 'cause it's a lot sometimes. And then I just start getting stuff rising. And so my entire dining room table and I have another table that's against the window that gets covered with stuff rising and stuff like that.

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And then, a lot of times the kitchen counters get covered with stuff. And so once everything's ready and going, when everything's rising I'll start making the cakes and things like that that I'm gonna take. So I'll bake those until things are ready and then I'll just start baking and going through the process of taking something out, putting something in, taking something out, putting something in. And sometimes I remember to eat and sometimes I don't 'cause I'm so busy.

[Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: The equipment that you have including pots and pans, did you buy that specifically for what you're doing or how do you accrue those things over time?

Michele Bell: I bought some things that were specifically for this business. Before I would only have two nine-inch round pans and now I have several.

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What I find that makes my life easier—I think most people have one loaf pan. Well, I have eight because it made it easier and it just kind of gradually grew. And so, I try to keep my baking stuff separate from my home stuff, so it has its own little home and own little area which happens to be in my dining room, so I just put everything in there. I have drawers and things and all that. I

also do chocolate stuff, like hot chocolate bombs, hot chocolate shots, things like that, and so I have all the molds, all the chocolate, everything in there, so I try to keep it separate from that.

Jessica Taylor: And how does your oven situation work? ‘Cause you have to use that I’m guessing for both home and—

Michele Bell: Well, I’m actually a once-a-month cooker. I used to do where I would cook on Sunday four to eight hours depending on what I’m making and that would be all the meals for the month.

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And so, I try to schedule my meals to where on Thursday is a crockpot meal so it’s just a crockpot meal, so I don’t have to worry about baking. And so I don’t have to warm up anything. It’s usually a soup or something that I can just throw in the crockpot in the morning and just leave it be. And I have that plugged in a separate room, so I don’t have to worry about it so it’s not in the way. So that’s pretty much what I do with that.

Jessica Taylor: And how does the schedule vary seasonally, because there are holiday markets and then there are also seasonal dishes?

Michele Bell: It gets a little crazy starting in September. Because I am also an artist and do soap and things like that, I also do festivals. So, those have to be thrown in there, as well, and so it gets a little hectic. September through December is just insane. I usually have stuff going on, a festival every weekend, plus the baking and stuff. So, that gets a little hectic. So, it takes a lot of planning, a lot of that kind of stuff to work it out.

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And I'm very happy when the season's over so I can take a break for a little bit. [Laughter] And I always tell people—'cause usually we go to Florida at Christmastime to spend with our grandbaby and my kids that are down there—and so I tell people I don't bake for a month. And I'm done for a month and just relax and all that. And then it kind of starts up again.

Jessica Taylor: For the fall season, 'cause that sounds what we're talking about here, how do you incorporate seasonal elements—like the apple is really big in this area—things like that?

Michele Bell: Um-hm. I make apple dumplings when it's apple time, things like that. I'll make apple bread. Strawberry is real popular around here, so right now I make strawberry cakes, a strawberry cream cheese bread, and that's real popular. And I get the strawberries from a local person here. I try to use local whenever I can.

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And Mabe's has amazing strawberries, so those are the ones I get, so that's what I try to do with it. I actually literally have a list of what comes in season and when it is, and I try to incorporate my baking around that. June is blueberries. My husband's cousin, when they moved up here, they bought some acreage and they found thirty blueberry trees on their property that they did not even know were there. So, I get blueberries from them. I go and we pick blueberries. And so, we'll have blueberry cobbler, or I'll make blueberry jam or something like that for the farmers markets, incorporate blueberries. I have a red, white, and blueberry loaf that I make, so that's what I try to do is incorporate those things. Peaches, when they did have the Peach Festival, I

always entered the Peach Festival contest and things like that. So, I liked doing that kind of thing.

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Just add more to my plate. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Can you tell me a little bit about your strawberry cake?

Michele Bell: Sure. My strawberry cream cheese loaf is—basically, it's this amazing batter. I could make myself sick on eating this batter. Now, I'm actually allergic to strawberries so I don't put the strawberries in yet and I take a little scoop out for myself and then I mix in fresh strawberries, cut them up, mix in fresh strawberries. [Laughter] It has cream cheese, lots of eggs, so it's really good. Buttermilk's in it. It's this nice little loaf. Half loaves is what I sell of that. I found that half loaves sell better than whole loaves, which is really odd, but I guess there's a lot of elderly people around here and so they can't eat it all. I do also try to make freezer friendly loaves and things that they can freeze and take pieces off, like my yeast rolls.

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I sell 'em in a pan of six and they can pop 'em off and cook 'em that way. But that's how the strawberry bread basically is, lots of cream cheese. It's really good. It has a little icing on top.

Jessica Taylor: And what about the apple dumplings which is really a staple here?

Michele Bell: It is. It is. I do mine with extra cinnamon and nutmeg and things. I happen to really like that. And I make these dumplings up with fresh apples. We have a friend that has an orchard and so we get apples from her. And that's what I make for it. And I like really juicy

apple dumplings. Not everybody likes that, but I like the ones with lots of the filling and juice and things like that on it.

Jessica Taylor: I wanted to talk to you about your ingredients also. You said that some stuff you go to Greensboro or Winston-Salem for.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: What are you going there for?

Michele Bell: One of the things I get is I get vanilla pods.

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I make my own vanilla and so I don't like using—the only thing I use storebought vanilla for is frosting because your homemade vanillas will break the icing. And so that's the only thing I use it for. But otherwise I use all my homemade vanilla. Some spices. It's hard to get fresh nutmeg, like the nuts. You can't find them here and so I have to go over there to get them so I can grate it myself and things like that.

Jessica Taylor: What stores are you going to in Greensboro and Winston?

Michele Bell: I usually go to Fresh Market. That's where I usually get a lot of my ingredients from because they have the vanilla bean pods. Oh, and I make vanilla sugar. I forgot about that. And then the nutmeg and things like that. They have a nice selection of those.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And how did you develop the relationships with suppliers of ingredients? I mean, the blueberries make sense. [Laughter]

Michele Bell: Um-hm, um-hm.

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It pretty much was people from the farmers market. I got to know the farmers and, for example, Linda—when COVID was going on my husband and son had to take over selling at the farmers market ‘cause I couldn’t go out because I don’t have a really good immune system. So they had to take that over. But we’ve known Linda and stuff, and so she was just, like, “Well, I have these tomatoes left over. Will your mom use them?” And so that’s kind of how it got started. And so she did that. And then, Debbie’s also someone at the farmers market and we got to know her and so we would come out there. And we just discovered a cherry farm that’s up here and so my husband—we’re going to start trying to develop a relationship with them for cherries, ‘cause they’re supposed to be really good cherries. I didn’t even know there was a cherry farm up here. Oh, and the lady that has the apples, she also does peaches, too.

Jessica Taylor: Perfect. Perfect. Let me make sure I got everything on that.

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Another thing that’s really great about Patrick County is the history of the area.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: How does that inform your baking, if it does at all? What are you aware of and how does it influence you?

Michele Bell: I try not to step on anyone’s toes. So, for example, if Ms. Ingrid was still here and she was still making cream puffs, I would not make cream puffs ‘cause I try to be respectful of that. And I used to not make apple dumplings until I moved up here, and since that is so popular

up here, I started making them 'cause I wanted to make apple dumplings. But I don't sell them at the Apple Dumpling Festival because there's a church here that does it and that's their thing.

And so I try not to step on people's toes. I try to be respectful of that because some people really like doing that and just to me it's not nice to do that with it. I have had to learn how to sometimes not be as spicy.

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I learned that spice cake is not real popular up here. At least in this local area people don't care for it. And you would eat that on Sundays in Florida. So, I've had to adjust to those kinds of things. But I do try to find local stuff and I'll hear about something and I'm, like, "Hmm, let me see if I can try to make my take on it with it."

Jessica Taylor: How do you find that your take is usually different? It sounds like there's always more spice.

Michele Bell: Yes, there always is. [Laughter] There's always more spice. I like things spicy and by spicy, I don't necessarily mean hot but with good spices and stuff. I've also found that I use different ingredients, I think, than other people. By that I mean I don't necessarily use the Walmart type of ingredients. I do travel to other places to get what I feel is the best ingredients, the best quality ingredients for my products.

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And yes, it does cost a little bit more, but I figure it's well worth it because you want to take pride in what you're doing, not just slap something together. You want to take pride in that. And so that's one other thing. I know someone who has chickens, so we use local eggs, things like

that with it. So, I think that's a little bit different than what other people do around here. Like I said, a lot of times it's a little bit blander type of thing.

Jessica Taylor: Who supplies your eggs?

Michele Bell: It's a local friend of ours that has it. Yeah. We have lots of friends with things. [Laughter] Like-minded people like us that like a little slower paced more homey type of life.

Jessica Taylor: Absolutely. You mentioned customers influencing the size of the good that you're selling and the level of spice.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Are there other ways that customers over the last ten years have influenced what you're producing for the farmers market?

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Michele Bell: Yes. It's kind of funny. Sometimes I'll come up with something that I think is gonna be fabulous and it just doesn't take; they don't like it. For example, cornbread. In Florida we do sweet cornbread. Up here it's not sweet. It's just a plain cornbread. And so, I ended up stopping selling cornbread because I would have very few people—and those people that came were people that were not from this area that bought it. And so I ended up eventually not selling cornbread because of that. And I try to pay attention to what people are buying. I make a list of how much of what I make and then how much I have of it, and I keep track of what sells and what doesn't sell and then I make adjustments accordingly. And I don't mean in a business aspect, I mean of what people like and don't like.

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So, when I was thinking about adding new cakes, I started asking my regulars, “Would you prefer carrot, or would you prefer coconut or some other kind of cake?” And I’ve been doing that for the last five weeks and we’ve kind of come to that coconut cake ekes out carrot cake so that’s the one I’m going to be working on to start incorporating into the farmers market and things like that. I also try to be careful of elderly—I also try to remember about allergies and things like that. I’m very careful about not adding usually nuts to my ingredients because there’s so many people with allergies and stuff. And so those kind of things have influenced me. The older people, they don’t eat as much, so I make smaller portions. And I do make sure I have things that are not super spicy for some people, those kind of things.

Jessica Taylor: What kind of differences are you noticing between tourists that are maybe coming down the parkway or something and then your regulars?

Michele Bell: The tourists tend to—they love to take things home.

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And so, I start making larger—a whole loaf instead of cutting a loaf in half for those times ‘cause they like to take them home and things like that. They like to get what is in season now. So right now it’s strawberries, so if there was a tourist that came by it would be something to do with strawberries, and that’s what I sell mostly to the tourists is things like that, whatever’s in season. In October, of course, it’s peaches and apples and things like that and those sell the most to the tourists, I’ve found.

Jessica Taylor: Wow. I wanted to follow up on something else. You mentioned your schedule and how it's very regimented now.

Michele Bell: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: When you had kids at home and you were doing this work, how did your day look different?

Michele Bell: It was mass chaos.

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter]

Michele Bell: I had to learn to be very structured in it because when you have kids that are six and under, you're constantly, "Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy!"

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They need your attention and so I had to work around that and so naptimes, things like that, staying up very late, two big things, or getting up super early to bake the stuff before they got up. And that's how I would have to adjust with that. I had to learn to make items that I could cover up and let it sit for a while, those kind of things, because they take precedence.

Jessica Taylor: And you mentioned you have three sons. Are you teaching them how to bake at all?

Michele Bell: Yes. My youngest son, he actually wants to be a chef and so he really gets into it and he's always calling me up, "Mom, what do you think about this? What do you think about that? I'm at the store. What should I make? Can you give me a recipe?" That kind of thing.

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My oldest son, he doesn't cook really, but he has a list for when I come down to Florida, "Mom, can you make this? Mom, can you please make that?" Because they don't get that kind of thing. And my daughter-in-law, I've tried to very much help her out. When they got married, one of the things my husband and I did for her was we stayed at their house while they were on their honeymoon to keep an eye on their house, and I literally went out and bought two weeks' worth of supplies for meals and I wrote up recipe cards for her and put all the ingredients with it so when they came back they would be able to make meals and things like that for them. So that's basically how that went.

Jessica Taylor: Oh, that's great. What are the things that they're asking you to bake when you come down?

Michele Bell: My one son is chicken lasagna. Actually, all my kids ask about chicken lasagna.

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And I'm really open about sharing my recipes, but I don't share my cake recipes and I don't share my chicken lasagna recipe. Those are my one recipes that I don't share. But if somebody comes up to me at a farmers market and goes, "How do you make this?" I'll tell 'em. I don't care. And so, I just want to share the joy of cooking with someone. And so anyways, they ask for chicken lasagna usually. Usually there's a cake involved. My one son loves biscuits and gravy and so we do biscuits and gravy usually one morning and stuff like that, so that kind of thing. And so, they all kind of go around the same things. When my kids were growing up, we gave them three items that they could not eat. They could choose three items and everything else you had to eat. So, they pretty much all have the same kind of tastes and things like that with those

kind of things. My one son loves fettuccine with lots of vegetables and things like that, squash, zucchini, asparagus, broccoli and all, and so I make that for him.

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Jessica Taylor: So, at home with or without your children, what are you baking for yourself that you're not selling?

Michele Bell: Usually Mediterranean bread. It happens to be my family's favorite, although I do make biscuits and gravy. I don't eat pork and so I had a hard time trying to find a sausage that was not pork. I finally did find some. Now, when we go to Florida my husband's dad always gives us venison sausage 'cause he's a hunter and so I will use that until we run out. [Laughter] But I did find a turkey sausage. But we do biscuits and gravy and Mediterranean bread. I make a very dense bread where a lot of people like real light and fluffy breads, but our family likes the dense breads and so I'll make those. Also, beer bread. It's something I make here. I don't make it for the farmers market, and my family just really loves it.

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I tend not to make things like cakes and things like that unless it's someone's birthday because I'll eat it, and I don't want to eat it. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: I wanted to also ask about the festivals. What's been your experience scaling up for festivals, 'cause I'm assuming that's high volume right away?

Michele Bell: It is. It is. I do very little festivals with baked stuff because it is such—for the quality that I want to do and the freshness that I want to do it would be almost impossible to do

that for a festival unless I had a commercial kitchen, which I don't. So, I do very little of that. I tend to go more towards my art and things like that for that part. But I have done that, and I do things like hot chocolate bombs, the hot chocolate shots, things like that, and some baked goods at those, and those do really well at the Christmas Festival and things like that.

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Jessica Taylor: Okay. Do you have any role to play in organizing events, kind of thinking through them or anything like that in this area?

Michele Bell: No. The city manager and I kind of—I shouldn't say city manager. Billy is his name and he's the one in charge of the festivals here. We kind of shoot the breeze about stuff but that's about the extent of my being involved with that. When I was in Florida at one time, I was actually a chamber director and so I got involved on the other end of helping plan things and stuff like that. And I try to be very respectful of that 'cause it's hard work doing that, planning all those things. And they do so many festivals up here! It is insane how many festivals there are. [Laughter] But that's pretty much the extent of it is us just basically shooting the breeze about stuff, not really planning or anything.

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Jessica Taylor: Do you have relationships—it sounds like you are between Stuart and Martinsville. Do you ever go up to Floyd or anything like that?

Michele Bell: No. No, I don't do the Floyd thing. My mother-in-law lives up there. In fact, her family has a store up there. The New Mountain Mercantile is her store up there. And so she has that and stuff up there and we don't really go up to the markets and things like that as much. It's

just too busy for us with that. It's a little bit better in the summertime because my husband is able to take a little bit more time off of work 'cause school's not in and so he can help me out with stuff like that.

Jessica Taylor: So in terms of the future of your business, with the jewelry and art and soaps and everything, how do you want to see it grow over time or how would you like to see it change?

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Michele Bell: Well, the soaping industry has changed. Because of inflation and things like that, I've had to really scale that down. So, I pretty much only do it for the store and my few select customers, my regulars. That's pretty much all I do soap and stuff for because it's just gotten so expensive. And the price that I would have to sell the bars for, it's just not feasible. But with my art and jewelry and things like that I would like to see those grow. My husband really wants us to open a bakery. The town vice-mayor, she's talked to me about opening a bakery but I'm just not ready for that yet. And so eventually I may do that, I'm not sure. It's a lot of responsibility and I don't want it to become a job job. I want it to be still fun and enjoy it and just the actual art of baking, not slaving over a stove all this time.

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I want it to be enjoyable.

Jessica Taylor: When you imagine a storefront, what do you see?

Michele Bell: I see a place that has cute little chairs and a nice little counter that people can come in and look and get, and they can sit down, and families can come and just enjoy a treat. Not super expensive because I know how it was to be on a budget and that kind of thing but you just like a nice, homey place. I see bookshelves so people can come in and get a book, sit down, read, eat something, drink a glass of hot tea, something like that. Something quaint, very quaint, like an old-fashioned type of bakery.

Jessica Taylor: Would that hypothetically be in Stuart then?

Michele Bell: It probably would, yeah.

Jessica Taylor: I guess one of the things that I've been noticing is that I'm primarily accidentally talking to women that are doing this work.

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Do you have a sense of why that is?

Michele Bell: I think it is because—several things. I think, one, it is expected more of women. Not saying that men can't do it because my son is an amazing cook. It's just it seems like people expect it more from women than men, which I think is a shame, and so I think that's part of it. I think women as a general rule seem to be a little bit more artistic than men and they have the patience for it, especially if you've had kids, so I think that's part of the thing with it. And I'm a little old-fashioned myself, so I kind of feel like the women do that and the men are the ones that go out to work and things like that, but I'm also a lot older so that's why I think that.

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But I also think women, they want to teach their kids stuff, and so they've learned it from past generations, and it gets passed down that way so I think that's part of the reason for that. Not saying men can't do it. Like I said, my son, he's an amazing chef, it's just it doesn't seem to be as popular. And I'm not overly sure why that is but whenever I talk to someone it's usually a woman about baking.

Jessica Taylor: You mentioned briefly your values and I wanted to give you a chance to mention also your faith briefly. I wanted to give you a chance to talk about that if that does intersect with cooking and baking.

Michele Bell: It does. Like I said, I try to keep Sundays free because I believe that's the day that we're supposed to read our Bible, worship God, things like that, and that's just part of my faith and my values and things like that. My husband and I are rather old-fashioned.

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I know that's not normal for this day and age, but we believe in old-school things. We believe in respect, and we believe in yes, sir; no, sir; yes, ma'am; no, ma'am. It's a southern thing. You would be Miss Jessica, so that's just what we do. So, I like to have that part of that old-fashionedness in my baking. I like to do the old-fashioned recipes and things like that. [Phone ringing.] That's probably my son calling me. [Laughter] And so anyway that's basically what that is with that.

Jessica Taylor: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to discuss whether it's a specific dish or hopes for the future or a specific memory you wanted to share?

Michele Bell: My absolute favorite dish is pear honey and it's a recipe I developed when I lived in Florida.

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In Florida we have these trees that grow pears that are these hard pears that you cannot eat. They're just super hard. And I started making a pear honey is what we called it and basically you cook down these pears and you add sugar and a few other things to it and when it's done it actually looks like honey. And you get this honey taste with this aftertaste of pear, and it's just amazing! And I had to redo that for here and so now I make a peach honey up here, so it's basically the same process, it's just I use peaches up here, so you get this aftertaste on the tip of your tongue, this peach flavor. And that's my absolute favorite recipe that I love making, and it's really, really good. But it's very labor-intensive though. It takes a long time to make it.

Jessica Taylor: What do you have it with?

Michele Bell: Usually on bread. Yeah, usually on bread. It's great on pancakes, too, but usually on bread. But it's very sweet and very rich.

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But it's really good on biscuits and bread. My husband loves eating it on biscuits. But that's my absolute favorite thing to make with it.

Jessica Taylor: I'm so glad you shared that.

Michele Bell: Oh, thank you.

Jessica Taylor: Anything further? And we have tons of time for whatever you'd like to . . .

Michele Bell: I don't think so. I think that covered just about everything. You did very good with that.

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter]

Michele Bell: I would like for more people to bake. I would like for more people to cook. We live in such a day and age that everyone does fast food at restaurants and things like that and we've kind of lost that. We've lost the sit-down family meals. That's what we're having tonight. The whole entire family is coming over tonight and we're gonna eat dinner and we're gonna play board games and things like that, and that's what we're gonna do. So I think as a society we've gotten away from that, and I think it's important because it shows that we're connected, that we're a family, that each other loves each other.

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Where you can just pick on each other and love each other and sit down and laugh and have fun. My husband and I are very big on laughter. We love to laugh. I try to look at the positive in everything and so every job I've ever had I've loved—except for one—I've loved my jobs. Even if it wasn't the greatest job I tried to find the silver lining in it. And you have to stay positive and it's kinda hard in this day and age to do that with everything that goes on in the world, especially with my husband's job 'cause he sees the negative side of it. Which also I end up seeing that, as well, through him, and so I try to stay as positive as I can with that. Which faith helps that, too.

Jessica Taylor: Well, thank you very much.

Michele Bell: You're welcome.

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[End]