



Meghan Medford

Summer Avenue Merchants' Association

Memphis, Tennessee

Date: May 3, 2021

Location: Medford Roofing Memphis, TN

Interviewer: Simone Delerme, Kelly Spivey, and Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Annemarie Anderson

Length: Twenty eight minutes

Project: Summer Avenue Memphis

Simone Delorme: Ready.

Annemarie Anderson: You want to get started?

Simone Delorme: Yep.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Simone Delorme: This is Simone Delorme and I'm recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance Summer Avenue Documentary Project. Today is May 3rd, 2021, and I am here with Meghan Medford on Summer Avenue.

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Could you please introduce yourself?

Meghan Medford: Meghan Medford, President of the Summer Avenue Merchants Association.

Simone Delorme: And for the record, can you tell us when and where you were born?

Meghan Medford: Memphis, Tennessee, 1979.

Simone Delorme: And when did you open your business? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Meghan Medford: Sure. I started Medford Roofing about ten years ago. My husband at the time was working for another roofer and I saw a need in the market. And so I went and took the contractor exam and we started out at the house, and we didn't even have a ladder. We had to borrow my dad's ladder every time we needed to go to a roof, which is pretty sad. And we just

started doing small repair jobs and kind of grew from there. And now we are licensed in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, and have an office in Memphis and Nashville.

Annemarie Anderson: Can you put that in your lap? Sorry.

Meghan Medford: No Worries.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

Simone Delorme: Was this your first business?

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Meghan Medford: Yes, the first business that I owned myself. Yes.

Simone Delorme: And how did you end up on Summer Avenue?

Meghan Medford: Well, we actually lived not too far away, and we were looking for a place that had space that we could store our equipment and that was convenient, because we kind of drove all over town. And we found this spot on Summer Avenue, and it was just convenient, and we ended up purchasing it and falling in love with the area.

Simone Delorme: Do you know what was here beforehand?

Meghan Medford: It was an insurance office. And he passed away, and so it was empty, and we just kind of bought it and started renovating it. And we've stayed here ever since.

Simone Delorme: What was Summer Avenue like when you first opened your business?

How would you describe it?

Meghan Medford: It was great. It was a lot of small businesses in the area, so we got to know all the people. We loved the people. We loved the convenience of it. You can get anywhere in the city pretty quickly.

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And we just fell in love with it.

Simone Delorme: And how would you describe Summer Avenue now in the contemporary period to someone who's not familiar?

Meghan Medford: It's definitely grown quite a bit. There was a lot of blight when we first located over here, and there's not nearly as much anymore. It has definitely improved. It's cleaned up. It's grown. It's definitely improved quite a bit.

Simone Delorme: Can you tell me about the Summer Avenue Merchants Association?

Meghan Medford: I started the Summer Avenue Merchants Association about five or six years ago, and I was actually sitting at Mortimer's with a few of the business owners around and we were talking about how we wanted to-- there was some blight and there was some negative things going on and some businesses coming in that were just kind of-- the area could've gone either way. And so we met with Mayor-- well, it was Jim Strickland and Heidi Shafer were our county commissioner and city councilman at the time.

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And we met and they said, if you form a group and have a voice, then the next time anything's up for review or approval, then you would have a say in it. And so I started the group so that we could have a loud voice and then just become united and grow from there.

Simone Delorme: What was the process of actually starting the association?

Meghan Medford: It was a lot of online googling, trying to figure out how to form a 501(c)(3) and a nonprofit and all that. And once all the paperwork was done, it was just holding-- we held monthly meetings and we would just meet and pick a topic at that time that was kind of like something that was going on that we wanted to tackle. And each month we kinda tackled a different topic. So it just kinda grew from there. We started with a few members and now we're probably up to sixty members or so. So it's grown quite a bit.

Simone Delorme: And what are your goals or the objectives for the group?

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Meghan Medford: The goals are to revitalize the neighborhood, to clean up, to beautify, to reduce blight, to make the area safe, and just to unify the neighborhood.

Simone Delorme: And did you receive a grant to help support some of these efforts?

Meghan Medford: Yes. We received a grant from the Shelby County Commission to help with our website and to create a-- we wanted to create an international district to do marketing, to create a brand and a destination location. And so the grant helped work with our social media and marketing, and just helped with that campaign.

Simone Delorme: Can you tell me how you got this idea to become an international district?

Meghan Medford: Just by the demographics of the area. There's just so many different nationalities and countries represented here, and you can get any kind of food from anywhere. And so we were thinking, what is this area and what does it mean to people?

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And we just thought, it's like a melting pot, and it'd be a great international district just to brand the area.

Simone Delorme: What are some of the challenges you've faced as president of the association?

Meghan Medford: Well, some of the challenges I face are-- well, how can I say this? Basically, I'm the person they complain to when things are going on, and just making sure that we're not fighting every business that wants to locate here, but we're just making sure we get the right businesses to locate here. There's a lot of politics that goes on with certain businesses entering and coming in and stuff like that. So some of the challenges is just making sure that everyone has a seat at the table and is represented that way.

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Simone Delorme: And what kind of food can people find here on Summer Avenue?

Meghan Medford: Gosh, everything they could ever want. I mean, from every country, every nationality. It's pretty much everything.

Simone Delorme: What has the response been to the branding as an international district?

Meghan Medford: It's been great. We've definitely got some great feedback for sure. Everyone is saying they love it and it's a great idea, so we're excited about it.

Simone Delorme: And you said you were born in Memphis, right?

Meghan Medford: Yes, Mm-hm.

Simone Delorme: What is it like if you go back to growing up? What was your experience like growing up in Memphis, for people who aren't familiar?

Meghan Medford: It was great. The one thing I love about Memphis are the people. It's kind of a small town in a big city where everyone seems to know everyone. I love the convenience. There's not a lot of traffic. That's one thing I love. The low cost of living has been great. I had a great experience growing up. We had great friends, and most of them still live here and still work here, so yeah.

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Simone Delorme: What do you recall about your childhood here? Any memories or stories that stick out to you?

Meghan Medford: No. Well, not really. I guess I just-- I'm trying to think.

Simone Delorme: Where did you live, for example?

Meghan Medford: I lived in Cordova, and I went to St. Benedict High School. Went to Rhodes for College and then CBU for my masters. And I just had a pretty easy-- it was great. I loved it here, and that's why I'm still here.

Simone Delorme: What did you do in your spare time?

Meghan Medford: Played sports. I liked to, of course, hang out with my friends. And I worked. I started working when I was about 14. I worked at a silk flower store and then TCBY. So I always had a job. And then waited tables. And so that's about it.

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Simone Delorme: What are some of the other jobs you've had before you opened your business?

Meghan Medford: I did a lot of medical-sales-type jobs. I was in medical device sales for a few years. I did pharmaceutical sales. So I've always been in sales, so it was kind of like owning my own business, so it wasn't anything crazy to start my own business. So just kinda switched from selling medical supplies to roofs.

Simone Delorme: What do you remember best about your parents or family?

Meghan Medford: Well, my father actually-- he was a retired orthopedic surgeon. He worked quite a bit. And my mom, she stayed home, and she was basically our taxi driver, she volunteered at school, the room mom. It was a great experience. So, yeah, very close family.

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Simone Delorme: Did they ever talk to you about their experiences growing up or their youth?

Meghan Medford: A little bit. I know my mom was a-- she had four brothers and sisters and she grew up here in Memphis. And my father grew up in Charleston, South Carolina. And he had a brother and a sister. And his dad was an orthopedic surgeon, and so they were a medical family. And then, my mom's father was a distributor for Pabst Blue Ribbon, so he traveled a lot. And her mom just raised the kids here.

Simone Delorme: Are there any things you remember about your grandparents?

Meghan Medford: Well, I do remember both grandmothers' wonderful cooking. My grandfather-- both of them were a lot of fun. Let's see. My grandfather on my father's side played the piano and painted art. He was an artist. And then, on my mother's side, I remember he would swing me around and play, and he was the fun grandfather.

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And my mom's grandma, she made great coconut cake.

Simone Delorme: What were mealtimes like growing up in your family?

Meghan Medford: We loved to eat, and we'd all sit down at the table and eat. My mom would cook every night, and we would eat the family dinner every night. It was great.

Simone Delorme: Are there certain traditions or holidays that you celebrated growing up?

Meghan Medford: Just the usual. Christmas Eve we would open a present before Christmas Day. And then we would, of course, decorate the cookies and the tree. And we collect Christmas ornaments every year, so those are fun to put on the tree. They kind of bring you back in time. And then, Easter we'd, of course, hide the Easter eggs and dye the eggs. Let's see. I'm trying to think if there's any other ones.

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Thanksgiving we'd-- the usual. We'd eat at the table with the turkey and all the family would get together.

Simone Delorme: Are there specific foods that were part of these traditions or that you associate?

Meghan Medford: Well, we would always have beef tenderloin on Christmas Eve, and then turkey on Christmas Day. And then, on Thanksgiving, we would have turkey, of course. Let's see. And then, Easter we would have ham.

Simone Delorme: Do you have any additional questions?

Annemarie Anderson: I'm curious; you said that your dad was from Charleston.

Meghan Medford: Yes.

Annemarie Anderson: I'm wondering about that, because there's such a strong food tradition there with the low country. And then, Memphis, I think, also has its own strong-- West Tennessee, especially with barbecue kind of culture-- growing up, how did you connect with that low country, I guess, in regards to food?

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Meghan Medford: Right.

Simone Delorme: Could you talk a little bit about that?

Meghan Medford: Well, I learned a lot about the Charleston-type food from my grandmother. She would always cook the oyster casserole-- that was something different-- or the shrimp and grits. And there was a lot of seafood like that. And then, my mom's mom was the country, fried-chicken-type situation. And so I kind of grew up having a little bit of both. On holidays when my Charleston family would come in town, there would always be a oyster casserole, something like that from the South-Carolina-type food. So that's great.

Annemarie Anderson: That's nice. Would you tell us the names of your grandparents?

Meghan Medford: Sure. It's Bonnie and Gene Freeman on my father's side, and then John and Mildred Duffy on my mom's side.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And what were your parents' names?

Meghan Medford: Barney and Jackie Freeman.

Annemarie Anderson: Nice. I think that's it.

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Simone Delorme: I had one other question about COVID and how businesses have been perhaps impacted on Summer Avenue or how you've been impacted?

Meghan Medford: Well, I will say it has been difficult managing the time off work for quarantine situation. I know in construction this past year we were exposed pretty much every job, because you can't socially distance when you're working on a job. So we had a lot of, you're exposed, quarantine for two weeks; you're exposed, quarantine for two weeks. And so it was a lot of back and forth. And we're under contract to finish jobs by a certain date, and if we don't finish it then we get hit with liquidated damages. And so it was pretty stressful. And I know now there is a lot of people looking for help and that need employees. So right now that's another thing that's been affecting all the businesses along Summer Avenue is we need people to work.

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Annemarie Anderson: In regards to that, too, I'm wondering about, I guess, speaking with your Summer Avenue Merchants Association hat on, I guess in what ways have you kind of maybe met this moment of COVID-19 pandemic, and what sort of things have you heard from other businesses about the challenges of this moment, whether they're restaurants or other businesses?

Meghan Medford: Well, the challenges that I've heard right now is just people needing to find employees. Also supplies and costs of things have gone up. Like, for example, in construction world there's backorder on all steel and metal from China. Our roofing manufacturing plants are potentially shutting down and things like that. And then, the food

industry, I know that the cost of food has gone up and so they're having additional costs and then additional labor of the cleaning and the disinfecting and things like that.

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And then, in the restaurant world, they're at a limited capacity, and so they're already working with slim margins to start, and now they can only-- they're at 50 percent capacity so they're basically breaking even just to get by, from what I've heard.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. And one more thing. Sorry.

Meghan Medford: Mm-hmm.

Annemarie Anderson: So I'm interested in the Merchants Association and its role, especially since you drive by-- across the street I'm looking at a Colombian restaurant, and there's a wings place right next to this building, as well. But I'm wonderin' about-- so there are a lot of restaurants, but what other sort of businesses belong to the merchants association?

Meghan Medford: Gosh. The restaurants, we have a lot of-- kitchen design supply, plumbing.

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There's, of course, the funeral homes and the mortuaries. And there are-- let's see. Goodness gracious. Gyms. Let's see. I can go down through the-- hobby stores. I'm trying to think what else there is. Insurance agencies, realtors. Gosh. A little bit of everyone. I'm trying to think who else would--let's see. Contractors and equipment and property owners, property managers. A little bit of everyone.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And I have one more question, because I--

Meghan Medford: Mm-hm.

Annemarie Anderson: --just keep asking questions. And this might be a question that you can answer, and it might not, since you've been here for a little bit. And one of the fascinating things about Summer Avenue to me is it's kind of like an international corridor like you see in a lot of these places in the South.

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Why do you think all of these folks who've emigrated here from many different kinds of countries, why do you think that they decided on Summer Avenue to set up businesses?

Meghan Medford: Well, I think probably because they live in the area. I think when there was white flight and everyone was kind of leaving the city, a lot of the immigrants moved into those houses that are in the area, and they rented them. And it's an area that welcomes everyone and they felt comfortable. And so I'm guessing that's probably why that they set up their businesses along Summer Avenue.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. One more question.

Meghan Medford: Mm-hm.

Annemarie Anderson: And that also might be a yes or no kind of situation. But did you ever come here as a young woman or as a girl?

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Do you have memories of Summer Avenue before being an adult who's started a business here?

Meghan Medford: Mm-hmm, yes. We used to come over to the bowling alley and we would hang out. We would go to Jerry's Sno Cones, of course, for the sno cone. And I do remember

coming over to eat. And Summer Avenue used to be the happening spot for everyone to come hang out. So there's a lot of good memories on Summer Avenue, for sure.

Simone Delorme: Has the reputation changed over the years at different points in your life?

Meghan Medford: I feel like it did, because most of those places closed down that were the destination spot. And then, for a little while, there was kind of-- I don't know if people thought it was unsafe or just, like, it didn't have the branding that it used to. And then, I feel like recently we've been able to try and make a comeback. And with this new image of the international district and making it a destination location for people to come eat or hang out, and so I think just recently we've been able to change the tune for Summer Avenue.

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Annemarie Anderson: One of the things I'm interested in, too, as you're talking about some of those restaurants-- and Roger Watson talked about some of the restaurants that he remembered in the late [19]50s and the [19]60s. Could you talk a little bit about some of the restaurants that were there when you were a young woman coming to go to Jerry's Sno Cones, and some of the things you remember about them?

Meghan Medford: Well, there was always The Peanut Shoppe, which was great. You could go in there and get the peanuts. And then Bryant's. Always go in there and get a biscuit and sandwich like that. Pancho's has been around forever, and who doesn't love their cheese dip? Those are a few that I remember from back in the day.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

Simone Delorme: Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

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Meghan Medford: I can't think of anything. I'm sorry. I'm so bad at this.

Simone Delorme: Just in case we missed something--

Annemarie Anderson: You're not.

Simone Delorme: --that's important for us to document.

Meghan Medford: Oh, I can't think of anything. I don't think so.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Simone Delorme: Okay.

Meghan Medford: Oh, God.

Annemarie Anderson: You did great.

Meghan Medford: I am so not good at that stuff.

Simone Delorme: No!

Annemarie Anderson: That was fantastic!

Meghan Medford: Oh, it was awful.

Simone Delorme: It was fantastic.

Meghan Medford: It was awful. I don't know.

Simone Delorme: We got so many great details about Summer Avenue.

Meghan Medford: I'm so bad at this.

Simone Delerme: It was wonderful.

Annemarie Anderson: No, you did great.

[End of Interview]