

Shelly Waguespack
Pat O'Brien's — New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel

Transcription: Lori Lawton

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Project: French Quarter Cocktails

START INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 0:04*]

Rien Fertel: Okay, this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance in the French Quarter for our Iconic Bourbon Street Bars and Cocktails. It is April 1, 2015, just after 3:00 pm, and I'm at Pat O'Brien's, the famous Pat O'Brien's, at 718 St. Peter and I'm with Shelly Waguespack and I'm going to have her introduce herself.

[0:00:31]

Shelly Waguespack: Hello. I'm Shelly Oechsner Waguespack. I am the president of Pat O'Brien's Bar. Do you want me to just go on with just a little bit of the hires as to how I got here?

RF: Yeah, I was just asking about the family history and how you got here.

[0:00:47]

SW: Okay, well originally Pat O'Brien's was located a block down on St. Peter in a little tiny space, and it turned out to be Johnny Donald's Photography Studio after that, and now it's something else, but it was a little small space in the '30s [1930s]. And then Pat O'Brien and Charlie Cantrell had the opportunity to buy the location where we are right now in 1940. So the business was growing. They were very popular. Prohibition was going on, so it was more of a speakeasy kind of thing, but when they had the opportunity to move, they moved the business and opened this business in here in 1941.

RF: And that was 718 St. Peter?

[0:01:29]

SW: Yes and actually it's two addresses. We have 718 St. Peter and then the other building is another address, but we consider it all one. You know how French Quarter buildings are, they're kind of melted together. But shortly after that, my grandfather, who used to work in the shipyards, worked in a couple of different bars around the French Quarter, one on Rampart. He wasn't necessarily a bar person, but he was the manager. So they brought him as general manager in the '40s [1940s] and he ran it very well. It was becoming a very successful business at that point. Then my dad kind of stepped in the picture when he was old enough. He did the same as every other child of a manager or retail owner; swept the floors, did porter work, did everything that he needed to do to learn the business, because my grandfather made him do it.

RF: What were their names of your grandfather and father?

[0:02:25]

SW: George Oechsner, Jr. and George Oechsner III. So anyway, my dad was really the mastermind behind what has made this place successful, not only the socialization of it, the popularity of the drink, just of the tradition and the iconic figure and persona that people have of Pat O'Brien's. So in the '60s [1960s] and '70s [1970s] he rocked. He was awesome. He created this atmosphere where people loved to work here. They loved working for him. They loved working here and they loved everything about the whole atmosphere. It's fun. And even to this day, we have multiple families that work here; the cousins, the aunts, the uncles, many people work here.

RF: That have been here for generations?

[0:03:21]

SW: That have been here for generations. Actually we have seven or eight people or maybe six people now that have been here with us over forty years. And then we have this little club called The Twenty-Five Year Club. And we have close to twenty people that have been here for twenty years. So the mentality and thought process early on still carries over today where it's still — even though we're a large business, a large small business I should say, we still have a family kind of attitude towards each other and respect towards each other as coworkers.

RF: I want to do bits and pieces of the history. Let's start with — what was the original address? Do you know the original address or how far down the street it was?

0:04:10

SW: I can — actually, I have a picture of it and I'll show you. I know you can't see this on your — one of our managers actually found this online.

RF: Okay, so we're looking at the original Pat O'Brien's Bar, the original address.

0:04:26

SW: Yes and you can see the cars. It was in the 1930s. I'm not sure what the address was, but it's just a block down and it was just basically a door, and from what I understand they had an upright piano, so we did have a piano player then. Of course when we moved here, the dueling pianos came about.

RF: And who are "they"? Who was Pat O'Brien and Charlie Cantrell? What do you know about them?

[0:04:53]

SW: Two characters.

RF: Were they born here?

[0:04:59]

SW: Pat O'Brien was born on the East Coast. Cantrell, I believe he was born in Mississippi. I not sure exactly about that. Cantrell didn't have many family members, maybe one or two. I think there's still one that works somewhere in the New Orleans area. Pat O'Brien had several kids, and those children worked for him for a little while. But you really have to have a certain kind of personality to understand and deal with not only the business aspect of it, but dealing with people and understanding people. And Pat O'Brien and Charlie Cantrell both had the confidence in my dad and my dad specifically — my grandfather was getting a little older in age at that point, so they agreed to begin selling the stock to my dad.

RF: Oh, I see.

[0:06:01]

SW: So my family didn't own it originally, but in the '70s [1970s], Mr. Cantrell and Pat O'Brien started selling the stock to them and eventually all the stock was purchased in the '80s [1980s].

RF: I see, so by the '80s [1980s]. But it sounds like in the '60s [1960s] and '70s [1970s] your dad was redeveloping the place, popularizing the place, doing different things then.

[0:06:23]

SW: He had great vision and even though it was wildly popular then, the '70s [1970s] is really when it kind of took off with the Hurricane drink especially, even though the Hurricane was created in the '40s [1940s], just the promotion and the marketing and just getting the word out essentially. Speaking of getting the word out, it was kind of funny how early on in the late '40s when they were trying to promote the Hurricane, what they would do is ask pretty ladies or certain women to walk around the patio drinking the Hurricane or asking gentlemen if they would like to taste the Hurricane, and it's a really funny story in hindsight. Of course now you kind of go, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe they used to do that!" But the drink is a really pretty drink, and it's really enticing when you watch your waiter walk by with a tray full of this fruity, red, delicious looking drink, so that's kind of what started it: "Oh, I really need to taste that."

RF: I think there's maybe an official history of the Hurricane and there's other histories. What is the history of the Hurricane as Pat O'Brien's tells it and then maybe we can fill it in with other histories?

[0:07:46]

SW: We can connect stories. I know there are other versions that have come out recently, not too long. The version that the Hurricane was not formed or made originally here in New Orleans is a new concept. So what I have always been told and what's always been written not only in our drink menu, but in newspapers from the '50s [1950s] and from the early '60s [1960s] and everything, was that the liquor salesmen were trying to sell liquor. There was a short supply of items such as whiskey and things like that, but there was a large supply of rum coming up the river, so the salesmen encouraged bar owners to buy large quantities of the rum just in order to

get a case of scotch or a case of something else that they want. So there was a stockpile of rum and it wasn't necessarily bad rum like I've heard some people say, "Oh, that nasty rum!" It's not *nasty rum*. It was good rum from the islands, but there was just so much of it. So through trial and error, they just mixed one recipe, another recipe, and it didn't develop as a result of one person just saying, "I think this is what it is." What happened with that recipe is, as we do today, when we have a drink that we think might be a good drink to add as a specialty item, we tested it out on our regular customers, you mix and you taste and you just kind of twerk it a little bit. So eventually, it was tweaked to where they felt comfortable with the product. And being a passion fruit-based drink, it kind of took off. It's a sweet, fruity drink and it's strong.

RF: So that establishes Pat O'Brien's as the founder — of the bar as the founder of the Hurricane.

[0:09:52]

SW: Yes.

RF: So ever since, or recently, what are people trying to say?

[0:09:58]

SW: Oh, the stories that I've heard, and I think you even mentioned this, that it came from New York, from a bartender in New York, and I kind of think that may stem just from the fact that Pat O'Brien may have been born on the East Coast. Maybe they're connecting some kind of dot where he brought that recipe here, but I really don't think there is any connection. Unfortunately, when the drink was created, they weren't so much into trademarking and protecting names. Of course I have Pat O'Brien's name protected, but the Hurricane now is

synonymous with any red drink and people put all kinds of stuff in it and they call it a Hurricane. What makes us so satisfied and proud of the product that we put out is that when we get customers that have tried all those other drinks all around Bourbon Street or the French Quarter, they finally get here and they go, "Oh, this is really good! It doesn't taste like the stuff that I just tasted down the street." So people copy us and we're cool with that, as long as we know that we're putting out the best possible product.

RF: Were they always served in those shaped glasses or did that come later? Did your father bring that in?

[0:11:16]

SW: The drink is named after the glass.

RF: So the glass came first?

[0:11:21]

SW: The glass came first. They had the drink. I don't even know what they called it before. It might have just been, "Hey, this is our sample drink," I don't know. But a salesman came in with the glass and they thought, "Oh wow, let's just call it a Hurricane because it's a hurricane-shaped glass." And it's just interesting how the whole thing has evolved into what it is and the programs that they put in place such as specialty glass programs and things that we have like our fire fountain and the dueling pianos, those all originated here.

RF: I want to go through each of those. How far back did — when did the dueling pianos come in and when did the fountain come in? Did your father bring them in or were they here before? Did the patio always look like this patio that is a garden and a fountain?

[0:12:17]

SW: It was always a garden. It was actually more like a park setting and my grandfather, my grandmother, and other family members used to tell me that the bar, the Main Bar, and the Piano Bar were open. Those were open well before the Patio Bar was open. So we had the dueling pianos and if I had to give a date I'd say maybe around 1950 is when the dueling pianos started really becoming a major part of the business. The Main Bar has always been there. I'll show you pictures of what the patio looked like years ago, but it was basically a park and they told me that people used to come, get a drink in the Main Bar, bring a picnic lunch, go hang out on the patio and it was like a park because it was all grass. There was still a step up, which is kind of funny. When I show you the picture, you'll see there was a step up which kind of contradicts what other courtyards are all about in the French Quarter, because the courtyards were meant for the horses to come in.

RF: They are flat everywhere else.

[0:13:25]

SW: Usually they're flat, but this one was raised. I don't know why it was raised but it was.

RF: Do you know the original uses of this building and these buildings on this block?

[0:13:36]

SW: Yes, they were built as residences. This building that we're standing in is all one building essentially, but on the other side of the carriageway was another address, so they were both built as residential dwellings, but shortly after that a dance group came in and took over

what is our piano lounge and that was a theater. It was a theater for Spanish dancers, so it was a Spanish theater. That's why in our history we say this was the first Spanish theater in the United States, because it was the home to a Spanish troupe. I don't know at what point in time that stopped, but our piano lounge started.

RF: And so then it became a full bar?

[0:14:33]

SW: Yes.

RF: Have any customers or family members of the two men told you any stories that stand out about Charlie Cantrell and Pat O'Brien?

[0:14:46]

SW: Oh jeez, let me think. Well they were both very eccentric.

RF: In what way? Because the Quarter is famous for its eccentrics.

[0:14:58]

SW: Well, they weren't always both here at one time. Cantrell lived in Mississippi. He lived in Picayune, Mississippi. Pat O'Brien lived on the North Shore and there's actually still a Pat O'Brien's Street; I think it's call Pat O'Brien Street. And he had a huge farm, horses, and the whole thing. They would really just come in just to collect their paychecks and kind of check on things and see what was going on. My grandfather was the business person. He was the one that really kind of ran the show as far as the financials and making sure everyone was doing what they needed to do, operations and everything else. Back then we may have had fifty employees,

thirty employees, or something like that, but they didn't really come in. They were characters in their own right. Pat O'Brien obviously was Irish, so he had kind of like a gregarious kind of charisma about him. Charlie Cantrell was a little bit more serious. And I mean my memories of Pat O'Brien is going to his farm, one of my memories would be going to his farm on the North Shore and his wife just had — they had animals all over the place and she was a little eccentric herself. She had ducks that trailed her and chickens that—. But my grandfather was really the business person. He was the one that was here every day.

RF: They didn't live in the bar or anything?

[0:16:27]

SW: No. There was property across the street where there was an apartment that they came in when they came in to hang out, but they weren't day-to-day.

RF: And did they both live into the '80s [1980s]?

[0:16:40]

SW: They did. They both passed away at eighty-one I believe, different years, but eighty-one.

RF: So tell me about your grandfather. Where was he born? What are your memories of him?

[0:16:54]

SW: He was born in New Orleans. He had five sisters, two of them are still alive. They're 103 and 102 I think, something like that. But he was a character. He loved the race track,

loved horses, loved being at this bar. It was his life and his passion and he treated, as well as my dad, the people — he treated people as though they were family. And at that time, we did have family members that worked here, various uncles and cousins and whatever that all participated in Pat O'Brien's because it's our family business, even though it wasn't owned by our family, it was their objective to make sure that everything ran right and it came number one. Number one above everything else.

RF: What are your earliest memories about being here?

[0:17:59]

SW: Everything was green; the carpet was green, the walls were green, the apartment across the street, everything was green and maroon. Any young person that comes here, my operations manager, whenever anybody brings their children here when they're young and they grow up, the funniest thing is that the memories are that you get a cup full of cherries and you get cherries and you go across the street. And that doesn't happen now because we don't have the property across the street. When my kids were little, they would come to my office and I'd give them cherries of course because I had to because that's what we all did, but just memories like coming here as a kid it was — I don't know, it was just kind of like a normalcy. I didn't come to work with my dad a lot. I came maybe, you know, a dozen times a year and I wouldn't be on the floor, because we opened early at that time and, you know, I'm a kid, so I'd go sit in his apartment or sit in his office or whatever. But the feel was always that I've known these people my whole life and it really wasn't that much of a — it was just kind of like going to school or going to Aunt so and so's house. It was just kind of normal and I honestly did not think any big deal about it until I got to, I guess later years in high school, that's when I kind of

realized, “Oh wow, that’s kind of a big place! It’s a big deal! It’s a big responsibility.” You know, I guess the more I thought about it and the more I appreciated all the work that my dad put into this place, and now I realize why he spent so much time here and so much effort and why it was always number one. I mean I’ve come to realize that now, but it will be interesting to hear my kids answer that same question when they’re in their twenties or thirties or forties.

RF: I love the cherries story because it reminded me of growing up in my family’s restaurant, that was the exact same thing.

[0:20:13]

SW: Really?

RF: When they’d sit me at the bar, before I had a baby sitter or after school or whatever, and they’d give me a couple of cherries and that was my entertainment.

[0:20:20]

SW: That’s funny.

RF: It is. Do you bring your kids here? Are you going to encourage them to work here or take over the business? How does that work?

[0:20:31]

SW: I have three kids; a boy who’s eighteen, a sixteen-year old boy, and a thirteen-year old girl. My eighteen-year old has for years told me that this is what he wants to do. I didn’t encourage or discourage as my dad did with me. In fact, my dad kind of, if anything, discouraged me because back then there weren’t too many females in the bar world, in the French Quarter

especially. So I did a variety of things: clothing stores, different boutique kinds of things, all while I was working here. So once he finally realized you're here and this is what you want to do, I'll swallow that fact and let's go forward from here. So my eighteen-year old, who is a freshman at LSU, has been saying forever that this is what he wants to do. Now granted, he hasn't gotten to the meat and bones of the business. He's done things like work at the warehouse, he's done some summer things like that. This summer I hope to get him more involved with more customer interaction to see if he's truly in it for the satisfaction of being in this business or if he's doing it for the money.

RF: He needs to taste his first Hurricane too.

[0:21:53]

SW: He has! He has done that, and he's worked a couple of festivals with me and he's good with people, so I think he's going to do a fine job.

RF: Do you remember any — of all the employees that have passed through this place, there must be some that really stick out as characters. Are there any piano players that were here for a very long time?

[0:22:17]

SW: Oh yeah.

RF: Or maybe the original piano players or the people most associated with that bar within the bar?

[0:22:24]

SW: Well, the old-timers would think of Mercedes who was — she was in the '50s [1950s], early '60s [1960s] and then we had — oh gosh, now I can't think of her name, mind blank — but for almost fifty years we had an entertainer named Barbara Bennett. And Barbara retired shy of her fifty year mark and she was great. She had famous people coming to listen to her. She had people up on the stage with her. She was a real entertainer and she truly loves — and she's still with us today. She's not working here, but she's still around. She truly loves entertaining. She would just play anything anybody wants. She would learn and she definitely is an outstanding character as far as the entertainment goes here. She's a recent. We still have a lot of entertainers. We have thirteen entertainers.

RF: Who play the piano, regularly?

[0:23:30]

SW: Uh huh, and we've gone through different formats. We've had an MC up there at one point, Emile Para from like the 1960s and early '70s [1970s] who people from years back would remember him. He was more like an MC. And then we continued with the dueling pianists throughout the years, but then we had, I don't know if you remember Eddie Gabriele. Eddie was the tray player. He was a tray player.

RF: Oh right, so I think of him as the 'thimble guy.'

[0:24:10]

SW: The 'thimble guy,' yes.

RF: So he was the original? That was my next question.

[0:24:13]

SW: He was the original thimble guy. We've only had two thimble guys.

RF: Okay, tell me about them.

[0:24:18]

SW: Okay, so Eddie basically was not even an employee of Pat O'Brien's, and my grandpa — he was friends with my grandpa. So Eddie had this great idea: while they're playing, let me go jump up and see if I can make some money with the tray, so he was tapping the tray with his fingernails like that and people started throwing change up at him and it was just — the whole idea of him, my grandfather just saying, "Give it a shot. Go see if you can entertain them. Go up there." So after doing the tray thing, it just kind of became this really quirky, honest way to make music and he made a living at it. Finally he was put on payroll and he worked here for sixty years doing that.

RF: Sixty?

[0:25:10]

SW: Every night.

RF: That's amazing.

[0:25:12]

SW: Every night. He passed away when he was ninety-six. So Eddie worked the night shift. Eddie was the original tray player and during the day, we have Alvin Babineaux who was Eddie's protégé. Alvin worked as bartender. Alvin's done a little bit of everything. His mother

was one of the original piano players. So Alvin, he had a connection here anyway, but he has that musical instinct to him, so Alvin played the tray for years during the matinée and since Eddie passed away, Alvin plays the night shift. And Alvin is all into the acoustical perfection of the tray player and it really is amazing if you hear him talk about it. A quarter sounds different than a nickel and a dime and they all sound different.

RF: Interesting.

[0:26:06]

SW: And the way he pops it, it's amazing. And he's a very boisterous character too, so his presence on stage is great.

RF: I'd love to interview him. I should ask him that.

[0:26:17]

SW: You would love to interview him. He would love to be interviewed.

RF: Okay. A year or two ago I met — some of the women behind the bar have been here forever it seems, for decades and decades.

[0:26:30]

SW: Some of them, yes. We have Miss Patricia Morgan. Patricia works in the bar two days a week now, downstairs in the lounge, that's her territory. And she comes upstairs. We have a lot of other things that she can do, like cut oranges and do things that she can sit down now, so she does that also. So she does the bar. Patricia is also one that has trained nearly every bartender that came through here, including me. The training process is you go through the hole. That's

where the waiters get all their drinks, and that's where it's fast, fast, fast, so you learn the drinks pretty quickly. And she's a great mother figure, I guess you could say, around here. She's very straightforward, but she's honest about how she feels and how she talks to you. Other than Patricia, we have Glenn Sunseri who has been here with us forty-plus years. He's a bartender. I'm trying to think of other bartenders who have been here. We have many waiters that have been here quite a long time.

RF: Let me ask you this, so on a Saturday night during a big holiday weekend and the waiters and the bartenders are dishing out, I'm guessing, hundreds of Hurricanes and other drinks in an hour, what is the process? How does the "machine" run? How do you get so many Hurricanes out there so fast?

[0:28:07]

SW: How do we handle the volume?

RF: How do you handle the volume?

[0:28:10]

SW: We have this incredible system where it's kind of like a soda fountain at a fast food place where it's dispensed. They're not poured out of a jug. They're dispensed from a larger tank and it's kind of like an octopus that goes throughout the facility and the tank satisfies each bar, so it's a pouring system is what it is.

RF: Okay, so there's a pourer in the back, kind of like a kitchen?

[0:28:43]

SW: It's a tank basically. It's a tank and the tank feeds each bar. So the bartender presses a button and three Hurricanes of the appropriate portions are put in three cups.

RF: Oh, so it shoots out three at a time?

[0:29:01]

SW: Yes.

RF: Okay.

[0:29:05]

SW: And the tray that the Hurricane cups are in are perfectly sized for this location. Everything is down to a science. The ice is right there, you scoop them up, you put the fruit in, you give it to the customer, and you're ready to go. It's volume-based, but I can still honestly say that the product that we put out, even though it's volume, we still have a great product.

RF: I know the ice is really special and there's like a special ice machine I've heard about or read about.

[0:29:39]

SW: Really? We have an ice room. Actually I was talking with somebody about the ice room earlier today. We have an ice room where a huge ice machine sits on top and I'll show you, but years and years and years ago, there was just a room and the room was a huge cooler kind of room and they would bring the ice bagged in and just dump the ice in the room, and then shovel it out and bring it to all the bars. Now we have an ice machine that drops into a holding tank and

we get the ice from there. It's basically the same procedure, but we make the ice here and the ice is unique, you're right. You can't just use any kind of ice. And people find this really bizarre, but it's cracked ice. And if you look at the ice, it's typically clear as opposed to ice that comes out of your refrigerator/freezer, which is cloudy. That has to do with the way that ice is formed there. But it's cracked ice, and you can't have it too big because then it's too clunky. You can't have it too small because it melts too fast. So we're very specific about the ice. We have two franchises and one of the first things that we look at when we go check the franchises is the ice machine.

RF: Okay. Is it the same ice machine? The ice machine here that makes this ice, how old is it?

[0:31:09]

SW: How is the ice machine?

RF: Yes, is it a particular machine that does it for you and that you trust in?

[0:31:15]

SW: It's a machine that's been fixed and repaired and improved upon for decades, yes. So, the franchises have a certain brand name and it's our brand name as well, but it's not as large as the one we have here because our volume is much greater than the franchises' volume.

RF: Do you share numbers publicly about how many Hurricanes in a day or a Mardi Gras or week or month or year?

[0:31:45]

SW: No. I mean I'll tell you here at Pat O'Brien's it's over a half a million for a year. I'm sure you could figure that out, but as far as concrete numbers, no. I mean people have their ideas of what kinds of sales we make, what we generate, and of course it's about sales because sales and income is what keeps us — our maintenance and keeps us going, but it's also about the ambiance and what people experience when they come here at Pat O'Brien's. If they don't want to get a Hurricane, that's their decision. We have lots of other drinks. They can get a bottle of water if they want. But it's my focus and my teams' focus is really about customer experience.

RF: Yeah, the last time I was here I was in the bar opposite the Piano Bar and had a great drink that wasn't a Hurricane. What is the name of that bar?

[0:32:39]

SW: The Main Bar

RF: So that's the Main Bar with the steins hanging from the —?

[0:32:44]

SW: They all have steins, yes. Well, the Piano Bar and the Main Bar have steins. The Main Bar is the one right below us.

RF: Okay. Is there a story behind that room?

[0:32:54]

SW: Is there a story? No.

RF: Is there a story behind the steins? I associate it with these beer steins hanging from the wall, hundreds of them.

[0:33:01]

SW: We have 520 beer steins throughout the facility, both addresses.

RF: Wow!

[0:33:08]

SW: Yeah, that's a lot. And really, the way that we got those, and other people might tell you a different story, but the deal is is that my grandfather got word that a container from Germany came in and it was a container full of German steins, and being Oechsner, our last name, he wanted to put a little bit of German into Pat O'Brien's bar, so he bought the whole container of German steins and hung them from the ceiling.

RF: Oh, so they were never even used?

[0:33:40]

SW: No, they were never even used.

RF: Oh, because people, I think I grew up with a story like these belonged to the old guys who used to drink here when it was a beer bar.

[0:33:50]

SW: I can see that being a story, but no, they weren't used, and they're real German steins, so we had them — they're hooked on the ceiling and they're double hooked and they're

secured for a third — they're on there because, you know, we get — sometimes we get a little bit of a rowdy crowd and some guy might think that he can grab that stein up there and he might try, but they're hooked in pretty good. And not to mention for safety reasons we don't want a stein to fall on somebody's head.

RF: This place, right now it's a beautiful springtime day and it's very peaceful and calm out there. Are there any nights that stick out as wild nights where things did or could get out of control here on Bourbon Street or just off Bourbon Street at Pat O'Brien's?

[0:34:41]

SW: I mean yeah, sure. You have your younger crowd that gets a little rowdy sometimes, but that really doesn't happen that often where they get out of hand. I remember — we'll have things like one Mardi Gras — we used to have a very large palm tree in the middle of our courtyard behind our fountain and it was really big, and it was always that one thing where younger guys would look at it and be like, "I'm going to conquer that one day," and they did try. We did have one guy that actually got to the top of the palm tree and he wouldn't come down. Things like that. In hindsight you're like, "Don't hurt yourself, but get down you stupid ding dong!" So things like that happen. People jump in the fountain. Just goofy stuff. Thank goodness — when people come in here, they just want to have fun. They might do stupid things and they might say something every now and then to aggravate Joe Blow next to them, but they generally want to come in and just have a good time and sometimes the girls will keep them in check: "Don't say that!" "Behave!" But it's really just a gathering place.

RF: So what do you think accounts for the popularity of this bar?

[0:36:00]

SW: Well, I guess you could look at it — I look at it a couple of different ways. There's the popularity of the bar itself with the décor, the ambiance, and the tradition that we have. And then there's the popularity of the drink, of the Hurricane. And they go hand in hand together. But I think the longevity of why the Hurricane has been so well received is that it tastes good, for one thing, and I think people realize that they can have the confidence that it's a quality product. It symbolizes not only drinking and you're having this pretty strong cocktail, but it's also all about fun. And that's why people take their glasses home. They want the glasses so they can say, "I had so much fun at Pat O'Brien's, and this is my trophy to prove it."

RF: Do they come in a plastic style?

[0:37:04]

SW: We offer plastic.

RF: Oh, there is a plastic, okay.

[0:37:05]

SW: Well, we offer plastic. Of course we prefer to go out in a glass because it looks better. I prefer to drink in a glass as opposed to plastic.

RF: But it is portable? You can bring it onto the street if you get it in the plastic?

[0:37:18]

SW: Oh yeah, yeah. We started doing the — our deal with the glass is that if you buy the glass, you don't have to keep the glass. You might want to drink your drink in a glass, but you

don't have to buy it, so if you don't want to buy it, you buy it when you buy the drink, but you can always turn it back in and get your money back. And we emphasize to our staff: tell our customers — because sometimes they'll just leave the glasses. Most people, when you buy a drink and they say you're buying a souvenir glass, you have to buy the glass, but we give them the option. And that started because people continuously stole the glasses. So my grandfather came up with this, "Okay, well they're going to steal all of our glassware because it has our name on it. They're going to steal it. They're going to pay for it. I'm not going to make them pay for it. I'll give them their money back." So then we give them the option for the cup of course so they can walk out on the street.

RF: It's one of those brilliant marketing ideas where you get a glass, you buy a glass.

[0:38:22]

SW: And if you don't want it, turn it back. It truly is brilliant. And our glass guy that we buy our glasses from right now met my dad thirty or thirty-five years ago and it was at the beginning of this specialty glass program and, like I said, Pat O'Brien's, my dad was really on the forefront of that whole program. Now everybody has a specialty glass. So my dad was talking with this young glass salesman. He just started his business and he was telling Dean, the glass guy, about what he does and Dean is fascinated. He's thinking, "This is amazing that you have this program going." And Dean completely used that to his advantage and grew multi, multi-billion dollar company based on that conversation with my dad.

RF: Really?

[0:39:11]

SW: Yes.

RF: So he does this with other places around the country or the world?

[0:39:14]

SW: The guy that we buy glasses from?

RF: Yes.

[0:39:17]

SW: Oh, he sells all over the place now, but he started off very small with the idea that came from my dad. And when we leave, I'll show you something that Dean and his company did when my dad passed away and it's really quite something. The employees wrote all these little notes in appreciation to my dad for giving them a job because Dean really looked up to my dad for giving him this brilliant idea.

RF: How long did your dad work here for? How many years?

[0:39:45]

SW: Well, he started helping out with maintenance and cleaning when he was like seven or eight.

RF: Oh, okay.

[0:39:57]

SW: I mean like little kid and then he worked his whole life and went to Saint Aloysius High School, played football, and then got a football scholarship to Tulane. And he played Tulane until he got hurt. This was his life, his business.

RF: When did he pass away?

[0:40:21]

SW: Three years ago.

RF: And was it a shock to the business?

[0:40:30]

SW: When he passed away?

RF: Yeah, the next week or month with the employees and the family here in this place, was there a memorial service here? What was that like?

[0:40:38]

SW: Well —

RF: Someone so associated with a place.

[0:40:41]

SW: Well, the thing is, it was his life and he got to a point I guess when he was in his mid-fifties, that's when I started working here full time in the office and learning most aspects of the business, and he started backing away from the time that he spent here. So really, for like the

last ten years, twelve years, maybe even fifteen years of his life he didn't have much day to day operations here. We, as vice presidents and executives of the company, would meet with him and keep him up to date. He knew every single thing that was going on. He just physically wasn't here, so the people that he didn't work with really didn't know him that much. They knew that he was the owner. I was the one that I guess represented him as ownership, even though I wasn't owner, I was next in line. So the fact that I was here, I am here and Charlie Bateman, our VP of Operations who's been here thirty-plus years, he felt like okay, I'm starting to step away from this and letting you guys take over for now. And he did. Not that he let us take complete control or let me take complete control, but for the day-to-day operations, absolutely. So it wasn't too much — I mean it was sad for the older employees, it was sad for me, it was sad for people who didn't know that he was sick because he had been sick for two years or about a year and a half prior, so I had been preparing myself. Other people didn't really know he was sick, because he was a really fit health-conscious guy, so it was kind of shock when he got cancer. But we closed the doors for half the day so the older employees could go pay their respects at the funeral. The younger employees, they really didn't — it didn't affect them so much, but it was — those people that knew him, I still get calls today: "Oh my gosh, I didn't know Sonny passed away!" They called him "Sonny." Didn't know he passed away and then they get all emotional and me on the phone and I have to console them, because he was here for so many years that when he decided to start backing away, he was kind of like, "Okay, give me my space." He raced thoroughbreds. He loved raising thoroughbreds, not necessarily being at the race track, but he raced thoroughbreds in Fulsom, he and my grandfather did for a long time. So he was kind of content doing that and meanwhile, we ran the ship and we still run the ship.

RF: Just a couple more questions. I think, if I was to guess why Pat O'Brien's appeals to so many people, I'd point to how — I've been coming here, I probably snuck in when I was eighteen or nineteen like I think a lot of the kids used to.

[0:43:49]

SW: We card by the way.

RF: Okay, yes, yes, so I'm thirty-four now so I've been coming here for a while. I came here in college. But it doesn't change, it looks the same, and it hasn't gone the way of so many other bars in this area and everywhere else, which there's not TVs everywhere, there's not a full food menu, right, there's not a DJ. Why do you not make these changes? Maybe that's an obvious question and answer. And what does that mean?

[0:44:24]

SW: It is an obvious question for sure because the trend is to have stimulation everywhere and our thought is that you're coming in to have fun, you're coming in to socialize. You don't want to come in with a date and have your date sitting there looking at the TV constantly or playing — they can't help from playing on their phone because they're going to do that. But we refrained for a long time about the TVs. We do have a huge screen TV in the Main Bar that we don't drop down for everything. We'll drop it down for big sporting events and we'll plug in another smaller TV if there are a couple of different sporting events, but on a day-to-day basis, no. We want you to come in and enjoy the moment, not be in someplace else. We do have two TVs in the Bourbon Bar, but that's kind of a different thing. The Bourbon Bar —

RF: I don't know that bar.

[0:45:22]

SW: Well we have a restaurant, you're aware of that?

RF: I know that, okay.

[0:45:26]

SW: Well the Bourbon Bar, our facility is shaped like an L. Bourbon bars are on Bourbon Street. It's basically like a holding area to get a drink while you wait for your table to dine.

RF: Okay.

[0:45:36]

SW: And that whole building, that building was purchased in '89 mainly as a private party venue. And then in '96 [1996] we turned it into a full-fledged restaurant, we'll still rent it out for private parties. But that was an incredible move that we did and it's proved to be beneficial in more ways than one. One, the drinking age changed at that point, so we were limited. The tourism in New Orleans, the tourism demographic was changing at that time. More families were starting to come in, so it kind of all worked all very well. We opened the restaurant where families can come in, they can still see the fountain.

RF: They still have a Hurricane?

[0:46:25]

SW: They still have a Hurricane and the restaurant has gone through several menu changes depending on what's up with what people want. The restaurant is predominantly tourists. You'd probably ask most locals and they'd go, "Wait, you have a restaurant?"

RF: That's what I say.

[0:46:44]

SW: Which drives our executive chef nuts, because the food that we have in the restaurant is really good. I mean if it wasn't good we wouldn't be in business because there's so many great restaurants around here. So it drives him nuts. But we still have a lot of locals that go to the restaurant, but it's mostly tourists. The food is great. Our bar business on St. Peter typically, on average, I would say sixty-five percent local, which is huge, for a French Quarter bar. But you know, I have to say that's to the testament of our employees, our management, and the overall mentality of everybody who works here. It makes a big difference when you feel a connection to your employer or your workplace than just getting a paycheck.

RF: Yeah. It's so impressive that a bar that every single source who knows or who comes to New Orleans knows about remains a local's bar. Right? Everyone knows about this place.

[0:47:51]

SW: Yes.

RF: But everyone who lives here still comes to this place, or a lot of people. I think that's amazing. It's not something you see I think with any other bar.

[0:48:01]

SW: That's what makes it so special, and that's what makes it family. Our employees all consider each other family. Whenever anybody has a birthday, everybody brings food. It's like even though we have 200 plus employees, it still feels like that. And I think that makes a huge difference. That comes off to the customer and it comes off to your fellow employees as being a good place to work. And we try to do as much as we can possible for them.

RF: Yeah. I need to ask this one question, because I just read — I don't know if you've read Richard Campanella's book, *The History of Bourbon Street*, which is this really interesting history of Bourbon Street and how Bourbon Street just changed over the years.

[0:48:46]

SW: I'm familiar with it.

RF: It's really great and really well written and he talks about how Bourbon Street has — the bars on Bourbon and just off of Bourbon — have changed over the years and been more inviting to different groups, so more inviting to say African Americans first, and then families would come in over the years. Has Pat O'Brien's changed over the years? You mentioned families before — that's what reminded me. Do more families come than came in the past?

[0:49:27]

SW: You mean as far as customers?

RF: Customers, yeah.

[0:49:29]

SW: Oh.

RF: Demographically has the customer base changed in terms of who's coming in?

[0:49:39]

SW: I'd have to say the demographics have not changed. It's remained the same. It's just now that the third generation might have been the first generation forty years ago. So we've always had a very large demographic.

RF: Young, old. It always looks —.

[0:49:56]

SW: It's everything which makes it really hard to market. If you actually want to go to market this place, it's always been a challenge because we have the younger market and we have the middle aged, we have the older people that want to come in for nostalgia. But it's a fine balance. You want to keep it fresh and you want to keep it something that younger people are going to want to be a part of. But you also want that older generation to come in and feel comfortable and feel like, "Oh yes, this is where we had our first kiss." Or, "This is where you proposed to me," or something. It's kind of hard to promote and to advertise, but we just do our best and treat everybody the same. And it's funny that you asked that: "Have our demographics changed?"

RF: Yeah because sometimes it seems like — I've been here with bachelor parties, but then I've also been here on dates, and I've been here with my mom, so it operates in all these different ways.

[0:51:04]

SW: Exactly. And that's very typical of our customer. Christmas night is a prime example. Christmas night is so much around here.

RF: Someone told me about Christmas night and what a beautiful time it is. Can you say something about that? I've never been in here on Christmas.

[0:51:21]

SW: It really is. It's grown into this amazing night where people just meet. They'll do their family thing at the beginning. We've always had a good Christmas night business. But we do Santa at a certain time at night. We're decorated very heavily, as we are with all holidays. And it's always been a fun little thing, but in the past twenty years, Christmas night has become kind of like taken a life of its own, where all three generations will come in. Or we'll have people home from college or people that are coming back home for Christmas and they'll say, "Let's meet at Pat O's at nine o'clock." It's a meeting place. And they know it's going to be a safe, nice place to hang out. I don't consider it just a bar. I consider it more of an experience.

RF: Pat O'Brien's, is it special because of its location: Bourbon Street, the French Quarter? Can it exist without these things? What is the play between this place and the larger area?

[0:52:42]

SW: Well that's an interesting question because we do have two franchises. We had more, but a couple of other ones closed for various reasons. We have one in San Antonio above the River Walk and we have one in Universal Studios in Orlando and the ambiance is very

similar to what we have. They did a great job of recreating what we have. And the San Antonio location has kind of like the family atmosphere amongst their employees, as we do. They've been open ten years. And I would say that they probably have been able to capture that local market with that kind of feeling. Orlando, it's in a theme park, so people go to Pat O'Brien's in Orlando because they've been here and they know the name and they know they're going to get a quality product, great entertainment, or just an overall fun place, or "Hey, that's famous. I need to go there." So it's kind of different.

As far as plugging this place, if we picked this up and moved it to Metairie, for instance. I don't know really. I don't know how to answer that, because we have customers that are so passionate about Pat O'Brien's. I mean really, really passionate, I would off the bat say, "Yes," it could succeed probably anywhere because we have such a passionate base. However, on the other hand, you're in the Quarter, you have the Quarter, the Quarter is an awesome eclectic unique place and that adds to the — we have all this quirkiness around us and then we're stable. So I don't know. I don't know if that would be the case. It is hard to duplicate what we have in another location, I mean like in another city, but another place in this city, that's a good question. I don't think I want to take that under consideration too much, but it's an interesting thought.

I mean I've been asked many, many times if we could open up a Pat O'Brien's either in Metairie or the North Shore or any place around here, Kenner or whatever and that's definitely out of the question. I'm not going to open something so close to home. But we had a place in Cancun. That's far enough. "Okay, we can do that." San Antonio, that's far enough.

We get a ton of requests for franchise locations in certain places, but for the time being, I'm good with what we have. We're doing what we're doing and we're doing it well and I think

if we added another element to the mix, it would stress us out a little too much and I don't think we need to be stressed out. We're good at the moment.

RF: One last question: you mentioned before how it might have been tough being a woman in the bar industry, especially in New Orleans, where there's not a lot running really big, successful bars like this. Was it tough? And is there a community among Bourbon Street and French Quarter entrepreneurs, bar owners?

[0:56:09]

SW: Yes. Well, there are a couple of organizations. One is the French Quarter Business Association, and I was the president of that four or five years ago or something like that, and it was a great organization, loved being a part of it. But since then, since we've had so many important issues that have come across our desks in the past few years, a group of us on Bourbon Street specifically have formed, so we can all talk and have a single voice on all the issues that come up in the city. And there are some things that are very important that are pertinent to our business and some things that are just kind of minor. But we have kind of bound together as a group so we can have one voice which is greatly important.

As far as years ago when I first started getting involved in the business as full time, I mean I did high school work and college work and all that, but after I graduated from college I started getting into it, I was buying the liquor and that's just a small part of what we do, but it's kind of like an intro into dealing with men. All the liquor salesmen were men at that time. Now it's no big deal. Probably most of them are women, and that's great. But I didn't experience anything negative when I was coming up, I think partly because my dad was such a strong guy and nobody really — I hate to say, but I don't think anybody wanted to mess with me because of

my dad. And I didn't do anything that would necessarily offend anybody or prompt them to act negatively towards me. So I would like to think that, through my years, my younger years, I developed a respect within the industry regardless of my gender. And it's funny, being a five-foot person, I'm short, I'm a female, and my dad is looking at this like, "Oh my goodness, you're going into a man's world, this is going to be tough," but after a couple of instances I think he soon realized that, "Okay, I think she can hold her own."

RF: Good, well I want to thank you for this interview.

[0:58:45]

SW: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

[0:58:49]

END OF INTERVIEW