

KITTY SPEARS AND KYLE SPEARS
Busy Bee Café, Cullman, Alabama

* * *

Date: January 12, 2016
Location: Busy Bee Café, Cullman, AL
Interviewer: SW
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: One hour, fourteen minutes
Project: A Burger by Any Other Name

START INTERVIEW

[00:00:01]

Sara Wood: Okay are you comfortable?

[00:00:02]

Kyle Spears: Sure.

[00:00:03]

SW: Okay; all right just for starters, can you introduce yourself? Tell me your name and where we are right now?

[00:00:10]

Kyle Spears: First off, should I look at you or should I look at the--?

[00:00:12]

SW: Oh yeah; good. Look at me and try not to look at the camera.

[00:00:14]

Kyle Spears: Okay.

[00:00:14]

SW: As best you can; yeah.

[00:00:16]

Kyle Spears: I hate when people do that on the--on the news when they just stare right at the camera, yeah. I know you're going to edit all this crap out. Okay; repeat your question.

[00:00:24]

SW: Introduce yourself.

[00:00:26]

Kyle Spears: My name is Kyle Spears. Me and my family, we own and run the Busy Bee Café Restaurant. And we have had this restaurant--it's been in the family since 1967.

[00:00:44]

SW: And could you tell me how your family--how did it start in 1967? Did you take it over from someone else?

[00:00:51]

Kyle Spears: My grandfather and--my grandma and grandpa, they moved here from Wyoming. And he could not find a job and so basically he bought one. The--the business was up for sale and they ended up buying it and they took over and they--they had to bring the place back up because the previous owner had basically ran the place into the ground. And my grandparents bought it up. Got it--even though it was an established business they brought it back up and then my parents took over and they brought it up even more and now me and my sister, we've taken over ownership and her husband, Michael, we--we all split ownership responsibilities and--and now we're taking over and trying--trying to further everything even more.

[00:01:52]

SW: And what were your grandparents' names?

[00:01:54]

Kyle Spears: Andy Houston Adolf Spears and Louise--Vivian Louise Spears.

[00:02:06]

SW: And do you know where in Wyoming they came from?

[00:02:07]

Kyle Spears: Casper.

[00:02:09]

SW: What were they doing in Wyoming before they moved here?

[00:02:10]

Kyle Spears: I have no idea. My grandma is from here anyway so she--I don't know why she was out here--out in Wyoming. Do you know? (*Speaking to his mother, Kitty Spears off-camera*)

[00:02:19]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): Oil business.

[00:02:21]

Kyle Spears: Oh.

[00:02:24]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): Papa worked in the oil business.

[00:02:24]

Kyle Spears: Well I knew papa worked--are you going to edit this (*asking Sara Wood*)? Okay; I knew Papa worked in the oil business but did she meet him--?

[00:02:33]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): She met him out there.

[00:02:35]

Kyle Spears: I know. I--I know he was originally from here wasn't he (*asking his mother, Kitty off-camera*)?

[00:02:40]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): He was originally from Cullman.

[00:02:41]

Kyle Spears: (*Talking to his mother, Kitty off-camera*) I know but I mean Alabama.

[00:02:43]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): They went out there because of the oil--

[00:02:45]

Kyle Spears: (*Asking Kitty off-camera*) But why did she go out there?

[00:02:46]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): Her family went out for the oil business, too.

[00:02:48]

Kyle Spears: Okay; see I never knew that.

[00:02:51]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): Getting rich in the oil business supposedly out there. They got out there--

[00:02:57]

Kyle Spears: Okay; you want to ask me that question again? (*Directing question to Sara Wood*)

[00:02:58]

SW: Certainly. So what were they doing out in Casper?

[00:03:01]

Kyle Spears: My grandfather he went out to work in the oil fields and my grandmother, her family also went out to work in the oil fields out west and--and they just both happened just

to meet. And he was originally from Alabama and so was she. After they got married, they lived in Wyoming for several years but then they came back to Alabama.

[00:03:28]

SW: And Hartselle is that where your grandfather's family is from? Do you know how they decided on Hartselle?

[00:03:34]

Kyle Spears: Oh edit this out (*directed to Sara Wood*). I didn't know Papa's family was from Hartselle. Where is--

[00:03:44]

SW: How did they decide to move to Hartselle after Casper?

[00:03:47]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): They actually moved to Cullman?

[00:03:50]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:03:50]

SW: Okay.

[00:03:51]

Kyle Spears: Yeah because Hartselle was throwing me for--

[00:03:52]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): She's from Cullman and he was from Florence.

[00:03:58]

SW: He was from Florence, Alabama, okay. So she was from here.

[00:04:01]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; actually she was from Jones Chapel but that's still Cullman--.

[00:04:02]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): But that's Cullman County.

[00:04:04]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:04:05]

SW: Okay; so they moved back here 'cause that's where the family is from?

[00:04:08]

Kyle Spears: Yes.

[00:04:10]

SW: And do you know have either one of them ever had restaurant experience before?

Had they ever worked in a business like this?

[00:04:15]

Kyle Spears: Uh, no, not really. My--my great-grandmother, she worked at a--she worked at a bakery so--so she did have baking experience. Shew knew how to make pies and cakes and all different types of baked goods. And she was very good at that, but my--my grandmother and grandfather, they did not have restaurant experience. When they moved back to Alabama, they--basically my grandmother's family, a lot of their family here was chicken farmers, so they came here and thought--thought we'll start--we'll start a chicken farm.

[00:04:54]

Well they went out to check out chicken farms, to get the feel of everything and they hated it. They decided *no, we're not going to do chicken farming*. So my grandfather, he kept

searching for jobs. And since he had experience in the oil business, he went to Mississippi and Louisiana trying to get jobs at the various different oil companies. But they would not hire him since he was a--a former union employee in the northwest. And uh, they were about getting to the end of their reserves of money and then they found a business that was for sale and they had enough to buy it.

[00:05:36]

So they ended up buying it and basically bought themselves a job and they took it over.

00:05:42

SW: Was it called Busy Bee Café when they bought it?

[00:05:43]

Kyle Spears: Yes; it's been called Busy Bee Café since 1919.

00:05:48

SW: And do you know did they buy it from the original owners, the family from 1919?

00:05:51

Kyle Spears: No; the original--it was originally going to be called Ford's Café because it was originally opened by a man named Milford Ford and but see, he did not have a business sign out front and there was no name for the place yet. And--and there was a big oak tree out front and there was a beehive in there. And before he could get a business sign made that said Ford's Café people had nicknamed it the Busy Bee Café because of the beehive out front.

[00:06:20]

So that name just stuck.

[00:06:23]

SW: That's awesome. And so do you know who--so the people, your grandparents bought it in '67 [1967] you said?

00:06:29

Kyle Spears: Yes.

00:06:29

SW: Did they buy it from the people who bought it from Milford Ford do you know?

[00:06:32]

Kyle Spears: No; apparently from when it first opened and when it--1919 with Milford Ford, up until 1967 when my grandparents bought it, I guess none of the families were really heavily vested or interested in it, and it switched hands constantly. It didn't stay in one family or to one owner for very long. Like, before--before my grandparents owned it, it was owned by oh—(interrupted by Kitty off-camera)

[00:07:07]

Kitty Spears (off camera): Eight different owners.

[00:07:08]

Kyle Spears: --eight different owners. But what was his name (asking Kitty off-camera)?

[00:07:14]

Kitty Spears: Carl Lassiter.

[00:07:13]

Kyle Spears: Carl Lassiter, okay. My grandparents bought it from Carl Lassiter. He only had it for just a handful of years before he wanted to sell it off. But it had gone from eight

different owners from 1919 to 1967 before my grandparents bought it. So obviously no one held onto it for a very long period of time.

[00:07:37]

SW: Was it always here in Cullman?

[00:07:38]

Kyle Spears: Yes.

[00:07:38]

SW: And where was it--was it this location?

[00:07:40]

Kyle Spears: No; the original location is on Highway 278 where Hagen Real Estate currently is. There used to be a little small building there. In fact, behind me there is a painting on the wall of--it is a reproduction painting of--of a picture from around the 1950s and it was in that building, same building from 1919 up until I believe 1962. And then in 1962 the current location where we're at now, the--there was a--a big long strip of buildings made that uh--the Doyle(s)--well John Doyle, Bob Doyle--not Bob Doyle but--

[00:08:34]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): John Doyle.

[00:08:38]

Kyle Spears: John Doyle he--he had a strip of buildings built and it was just basically a new shopping area and the Busy Bee moved into that location in 1962. And--and it was the same building--exactly building until 2011 when a tornado came through and then we rebuilt, came back in 2012.

[00:09:01]

SW: And I want to ask you a little bit about that tornado and rebuilding in a second. But do you remember seeing your grandparents in here? Did you kind of pitch in as a child when your parents took over?

[00:09:14]

Kyle Spears: No; I have--I don't have any memories of my grandparents when they were the owners. Now I do have some memories when I was a child after my grandparents had sold--sold the business to my parents and because my grandma she'd come in and help periodically and I remember a few times here and there my grandpa, he'd say let me cook some of--a few of them burgers. And he'd go back there and cook a grill full and say, "Okay that's enough."

[00:09:49]

SW: And can you talk a little bit about--I want to ask you a few more questions about your parents and the ownership before you, your sister, and your brother-in-law--. The menu, has--has--have you always made the same--? Can you talk about the recipe of the hamburgers? Was it like that in 1919?

[00:10:07]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; it's the same exact recipe it has been since 1919 but the--the actual--that exact recipe comes from 1917. It actually comes out of Chicago. Apparently some--I was reading up about this; apparently some man I think his name was Carl Weeks, he was from Chicago and he came down south and he first moved--he first went to Corinth, Mississippi and he opened up a--a burger place. And a couple--I think he--I don't know what he did with the recipe. I don't know if he'd opened up other restaurants or told other people the recipe or he sold. I don't know what the deal is.

[00:10:55]

But it actually came from 1917 from a guy named Carl Weeks from Chicago. He went down to Mississippi and basically--and then this--this burger--place was started in 1919. But it's off that same recipe.

[00:11:15]

SW: Do y'all have any idea how Milford Ford got the recipe?

[00:11:17]

Kyle Spears: I have no idea. And there are no records of anything back that far. I mean the only thing we have going back that far is we know the year was 1919 but I've checked with the [Cullman] county museum and the [Cullman] county courthouse. There are no business records for the Busy Bee. All they--all they said, "Why don't you go ask the owner?" I said, "Well I am the owner." That's--I'm trying to--the only thing everyone knows is the year. There's--we don't have any date, so--. I mean I--it's very limited knowledge of stuff back then.

[00:11:53]

SW: And--and Kyle I think I was telling you this the last time I visited, but you know we don't ask people to give out secret recipes or anything, but can you talk about like what's-- what's the recipe for the hamburger here? Like, what makes it so--what makes this hamburger so unique?

[00:12:09]

Kyle Spears: Well we--we do mix meat and bread together and we--and it's shallow fried on a--on a grill and that--back during you know the olden days that was a--actually a common way of making burgers. I don't know if you've ever looked into the history of hamburgers or not,

but I mean you may have heard the story about how hamburgers got started at the World's Fair (*referring to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, MO*).

[00:12:35]

SW: Hold on; can you tell that story?

[00:12:37]

Kyle Spears: Well actually--yeah. I don't know--I've tried looking up when the--the year that first World's Fair was. I can't--I can't seem to find it anywhere but at that old World's Fair it was a man who--who was selling what was it--meatballs. What he--what he was doing was--is he had the meat, he had the crumbled up bread in there and onions. And what he was doing is--is he was frying them in a skillet and--but see he ran out of plates or papers or something. I can't remember what it was. He ran out of something to serve the food on so what he did just to improvise is he squashed them flat (*Gestures*) and--and they basically instead of a round-ball of meat it--that created you know the flat patty.

[00:13:38]

So actually the--the actual very first hamburger recipes ever were from the World's Fair and they were a meat, bread, and onion mixture. So it's actually kind of similar to--to what we--we serve.

[00:13:54]

And I guess he just got some bread from someone else or he--he may have had some extra bread and put it in some bread and there you go--that was your first ever hamburger. It was improvised; it's all it was, it was just a--whatever the word I'm looking for--he just tried to improvise something to serve food to customers. And burgers--burgers stayed often times a--a mixture of meat and bread. That was a common thing up until after the Great Depression. It

really wasn't up until like the late '30s [1930s] maybe '40s somewhere in there that the all--that the all-beef burger thing really started catching on simply because no one before that had--had enough money because it--it--it started off--burgers started off as a way of improvising and then you people just continued putting bread in them because everyone was poor at first and this was a way how a family could feed you know--a mother could feed the family and stretch the dollar as much as possible because bread is cheaper than meat per pound.

[0:15:07]

SW: And Kyle I'm wondering--I've been wondering about this because there's a very specific way burgers are made and--in Mississippi and even sometimes-- Do you know why the recipe stayed like this even after people started using all-beef? Do you know; do you have any idea?

[00:15:22]

Kyle Spears: Uh, I have no idea. I mean some people--some people did it from tradition. Some people like the taste. The texture is different because I mean it--it can--it can vary for--I mean you could have the same recipe but based on the way you cook it, it can--it can vary greatly like--like if someone cooks them on a very high heat and--and then turns--then--and then turns the heat off it'll sear a crispy crust on the outside. But if you cook it on a lower temperature for a longer period of time it'll be a softer patty. It's just--I'm really--I guess it's preference, you know of how someone cooks it. And but I don't know; there's not many places left that serve these style burgers but I mean we've been serving them every single day for ninety--going on ninety-seven years now so obviously people like them.

[00:16:15]

SW: Do you know what--did your grandparents like kind of--do you know if they just picked the recipe up from the previous owner?

[00:16:20]

Kyle Spears: Yes.

[00:16:22]

SW: And do you know if there's been any changes to it since they took it over?

[00:16:26]

Kyle Spears: I don't think so. I mean--to my knowledge the recipe has never changed. It's always been the same mixtures of--of things. The only thing that has ever changed was when my parents took it over in I think '89 is they switched from cooking the burgers in lard to vegetable oil.

[00:16:49]

SW: And can you tell me your parents' names for the record?

[00:16:50]

Kyle Spears: Steve Spears and Kitty Spears.

[00:16:54]

SW: And so what--were they--can you talk a little bit about why they decided to take the restaurant over from your grandparents?

[00:17:00]

Kyle Spears: Well originally they wanted to--they wanted to be hairdressers. They both went to barber school. They had--they had a hair salon on the North Shopping Center and basically they just didn't make any money doing it. There's not much--there's no money in that

kind of business. And when my grandparents were ready to retire, uh they just brought my parents over and--and discussed some--some business stuff with them and they decided to take over.

[00:17:38]

SW: Kyle I'm going to stop you there just for a second. I'm just going to move the blind down a little bit (*fixing light with the blinds*).

[00:17:44]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): You know your daddy grew up here so--
00:17:46

Kyle Spears (*addressing Kitty*): Well I know he did but--
[00:17:49]

Male: And then another barbershop opened up right beside--.
[00:18:01]

SW: That's not in your face is it--the sun? (*referring to the light coming in through the blinds*)

[00:18:02]

Kyle Spears: No.

[00:18:03]

SW: I'm going to ask that you again.

[00:18:05]

Kyle Spears: Okay.

[00:18:14]

SW: Okay; so tell me again why your parents decided to take--or what they were doing in '89 [1989] and why they decided to take over.

[00:18:21]

Kyle Spears Well my parents used to have a hair salon in a shopping--in the North Cullman Shopping Center and they--they--they both went to college, barber school classes and that's actually where they met. But they were doing that for a while. They enjoyed it but they said that--there just wasn't--you couldn't make a living off of that because it--at that time there was not really much of a demand for hair--you know a hair salon, nothing much more than just your typical barbershop stuff you know.

[00:19:01]

And my grandparents were wanting to retire, so they invited my parents over for dinner one night and they discussed a business plan and see if they'd take it over. And my parents, they decided to take it over.

[00:19:18]

SW: And how old were you at the time?

[00:19:19]

Kyle Spears: Three.

[00:19:22]

SW: You were three, so you don't have--you don't have a lot of memory--?

[00:19:24]

Kyle Spears: No; in fact the only--the only memory--the only thing I remember from that far back was I remember once back when my parents still had the hair salon, I was a little kid

and it was one of them little old tiny bottles of real lemon, you know that lemon juice stuff and I--I squirted and started (*gesturing a sour face*) and thinking oh that's sour. (*Laughs*) That's the only thing I remember from that age.

[00:19:49]

SW: Well, I can see how you would remember something like that.

[00:19:51]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:19:53]

SW: That's pretty strong. I'm going to actually--let's scoot back just a little bit because I think--I feel like you're going to--you're about to get the sun in your face (*adjusting set-up because the sun is setting through the blinds and changing*).

[00:20:10]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:20:12]

SW: I think that will be good. Okay--

[00:20:20]

Kyle Spears: Yeah as the sun is starting to set it's started getting--

[00:20:22]

SW: I'm going to move--there we go. Okay--

[00:20:34]

Kyle Spears: (*Addressing his mother, Kitty, who is off camera*) Hey mama; could you set--could you set a timer for like forty-five minutes? So when I hear beep, beep, beep I'll remember to plug that sucker back in.

[00:20:46]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): You want me to do that now?

[00:20:48]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; I got to do some stuff after I'm done with this.

00:20:53

SW: Okay; good.

[00:21:00]

Kyle Spears: I'm going to let her do that first (*referring to letting his mother, Kitty, set a timer off camera*).

[00:21:04]

SW: Okay.

[00:21:11]

Kyle Spears: Thank you.

[00:21:13]

SW: Okay Kyle, all right; so do you remember how like growing up at the restaurant what it was like growing up with your parents owning a restaurant because they had pretty much taken over by the time you were three, right? So--

[00:21:25]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; yeah.

[00:21:27]

SW: --what was that like growing up in a restaurant family?

[00:21:29]

Kyle Spears: No different than normal. I mean really didn't discuss business much at home, so you know as a kid I really didn't know much of anything going on. The only thing--the only thing I remember was--was by the end of the day they was tired of cooking so they didn't want to cook when they came home.

[00:21:57]

SW: Did you eat hamburgers a lot? Do you--

[00:21:59]

Kyle Spears: So--so but I mean I'd eat them more if I came here versus--'cause by the end of the day almost--usually they're all sold out, so--.

[00:22:11]

SW: By the time they got home after cooking all day for everyone else what kind of--like what would you guys have for supper?

[00:22:16]

Kyle Spears: Pizza, Domino's (*Laughs*).

[00:22:2]1

SW: And I'm wondering, too, in terms of you know did you--when you were growing up and your parents had this business did you ever think that you were next like, "I'm going to take this business over?" Was that an aim of yours?

[00:22:33]

Kyle Spears: Not when I was a kid; no. When I was a kid I had no interest in anything besides videogames. Okay as a teenager, I still just thought about videogames and cars at that point. But by the time I was an actual adult, you know I thought--thought you know--I first just

started working here I would say full-time at about age twenty-one or twenty-two. And at that--at that time I was just a burger cook. I was taking my dad's spot because he was--he was sick with cancer at that time. So before he--before he started getting real sick, basically as soon as he found out he had cancer, before he started getting sick he--he decided he wanted to teach me how--how--the--the proper way to cook the burger and everything because it's not just like a normal burger where you just pat it out and slap it on the grill. The--there is a whole kind of rhythm process you need to--you need to learn between the whole shaping it with the scoop, what heat to cook it at, hold on—*(Kyle gestures like he has to sneeze)*.

[00:23:54]

SW: You got to sneeze?

[00:23:56]

Kyle Spears: No; it went away.

[00:23:58]

SW: It went away.

[00:23:59]

Kyle Spears: It went away.

[00:24:01]

SW: Okay; can you--can you--again I don't want you to tell anything you're not supposed to but can you kind of like give people a sense of what--what that choreography is like?

[00:24:11]

Kyle Spears: Okay; like after you mix up the hamburger meat and everything of course you're going to have a scoop and you're also going to have a spatula. But you can't just scoop it

and--and scrape it off the spatula and--and flatten it out, because if you do that you'll have a lopsided blotchy looking burger. I mean so what you have to do is you have to take your--your spoon hand and--and you take that--I don't know if you're getting my hand in this (*referring to camera*) – you might want to--but because you got to have a hand motion. You scoop it up (*begins demonstrating with his hands how to scoop and pat out the hamburger*) and--and then you take on the side of that container you--you know you roll it against it a few times and it will--and it will round the top off. You want it to be rounded both ways. And then you take your spatula. You dip it into the grease on the grill. You scrape it from up underneath and then you press down on it and you do that and if you do it correct you should have a round burger instead of a--instead of a Texas or a--or a New York say--or old catawampus basically.

[00:25:25]

SW: I want to zoom in just to get—(*adjusts camera*).

[00:25:28]

Kyle Spears: What?

[00:25:28]

SW: Now who--who taught--? Who taught your dad how to do that?

[00:25:36]

Kyle Spears: I guess my grandfather did, I'm assuming.

[00:25:39]

SW: And he taught you how to do that?

[00:25:40]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; because if--like I said, if you don't do those processes, if you don't form it first before--before you try to flatten it out to a patty shape you'll end up with just a

catawampus shaped patty. You might have one side thin and one side thick, but if you do that first it will--it will get the whole thing correctly shaped to where when you flatten it out you'll have the same even thickness and a--and a very rounded shape. So it cooks better, because if you have one side that thin and that side that thick it's not going to cook correctly.

[00:26:18]

SW: And you want it but the idea--like what is the--the desired result you want it to be--crispy on the outside and a little soft on the inside?

[00:26:26]

Kyle Spears: That's how I like it. In fact, whenever--whenever you fresh fry them they come straight off the grill. They're always going to have a crisp crust because that's just the laws of the universe. I mean whenever you fry something up, whenever it first comes right out of the grease it's always going to have a crispness to it. That's just--I didn't create the physics; I just follow the law.

[00:26:51]

SW: And will you--go ahead; you were going to say--?

[00:26:53]

Kyle Spears: I want to say but some people like them to be a softer patty, but the only way you can get that with fresh fried is you--then you have to just let them rest for a while. It's the resting that--that lets it soften back up.

[00:27:05]

SW: And how--what is the original way of fixing them? How do you fix the burger--?

[00:27:10]

Kyle Spears: Mixing onion--mix is just a--just ketchup and mustard mixed together. We had found that if you take ketchup and mustard and mix them together it tastes different versus if you just put ketchup and mustard on--on a bun.

[00:27:24]

SW: So that's what y'all--

[00:27:26]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; yeah.

[00:27:27]

SW: That's awesome. I just thought it was mustard.

[00:27:28]

Kyle Spears: Nope; it's ketchup and mustard mixed together because--

[00:27:30]

SW: That's awesome.

[00:27:30]

Kyle Spears: Like I said, if--we have found if you mix the two together they taste different versus if you just put them on separate. You wouldn't think it would make a difference but it does.

[00:27:38]

SW: Can you describe the taste of that mixture? If you had to describe it to someone if they had no taste buds--

[00:27:45]

Kyle Spears: (*Laughs*) Okay; let's see. It has the--it has more of the smoothness of ketchup but it has just a slight tanginess from the mustard. It has--it has a texture more like ketchup does because--I mean there's not an exact measurement on this. It's--a lot of time it's just eyeballed, but if you do it at about a sixty-forty – sixty-percent ketchup/forty-percent mustard, it--it comes out--it comes out that--that orange(ish) red color and you don't want to do fifty-fifty 'cause then the mustard will over-power the ketchup and then you just taste the--I mean the mustard part.

[0:28:39]

SW: Gotcha. It sounds like--it sounds like chemistry.

[00:28:43]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; it just--imagine if you just kind of mellowed out the mustard a little bit. That's a good way to put it.

[00:28:50]

SW: Doesn't make it so tangy.

[00:28:52]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:28:53]

SW: Can I ask you a couple more questions about your father?

[00:28:55]

Kyle Spears: Sure thing.

[00:28:55]

SW: What kind of cancer did he have?

[00:28:57]

Kyle Spears: He had throat cancer.

[00:28:59]

SW: Is he--is he still around?

[00:29:00]

Kyle Spears: No; he passed away.

[00:29:02]

SW: I'm sorry.

[00:29:02]

Kyle Spears: There's a picture--painting of him on the wall right back there.

[00:29:04]

SW: Is that him right there (*gestures to the painting behind her on a wall above the window tables*)?

[00:29:05]

Kyle Spears: Yes.

[00:29:07]

SW: Aw, I was wondering who that was and I was going to ask you who that was. What year was that?

[00:29:10]

Kyle Spears: 2012.

[00:29:14]

SW: And do you know how old was he?

[00:29:16]

Kyle Spears: (*Directing question to his mother, Kitty, off camera*) How old was daddy—
fifty-six?

[00:29:19]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): When he passed away?

00:29:25

Kyle Spears: Fifty-six I believe.

[00:29:27]

SW: So I wanted to ask you--well 2012, you guys rebuilt by then so--

[00:29:32]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; we--we reopened on April 27th 2012 and he passed away on March--

[00:29:39]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): May 27th [2012].

00:29:40

Kyle Spears: May 27th; sorry I always get those--

[00:29:42]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): One month after he--

[00:29:43]

Kyle Spears: One month.

[00:29:43]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): He got to come up here for the grand opening, rich people to greet people. That's when he--he went to bed and you--. So I think he truly was hanging on just to see us reopen.

[00:29:58]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:29:58]

SW: That's pretty incredible.

[00:30:02]

Kyle Spears: Can you get--did you get that on there?

[00:30:03]

SW: Yeah; yeah. I can hear--

[00:30:07]

Kyle Spears: Okay.

[00:30:08]

SW: So you guys--you're here (*directing question to Kitty Spears, off camera*) and you were still--you and your husband were still running this place when the tornado happened?

[00:30:16]

Kitty Spears (*off camera*): Yes; I was here when it got destroyed. I got hurt in the tornado and everything.

[00:30:20]

SW: Oh my gosh. Do you want to come sit on camera for a little—(*directing question to Kitty, who is off camera*)?

00:30:24

Kitty Spears: (*Laughs*)

[00:30:28]

Kyle Spears (*addressing Kitty*): Yeah; come on.

[00:30:31]

SW: You can switch out real quick.

[00:30:39]

Kyle Spears (*now behind the camera with SW*): You know I used to have a pro-zoomer camera and one thing I never used was the zebra bars (*referring to a function on the camera*).

[00:30:44]

SW: You know I kind of just ignore them 'cause I don't know how to get them to go off but I like that there's a grid right here (*referring to camera functions, addressing Kyle*).

[00:30:50]

Kyle Spears: Yeah; it had a whole bunch of features that I just never used.

[00:30:55]

SW (*addressing Kitty, who has now moved from behind the counter to sitting in front of the camera*): There you go. Are you comfortable right there?

[00:30:56]

Kitty Spears: You stay right--no Kyle stay right there. You're blocking the sun. There you go.

[00:31:02]

SW: Okay; and I'm just going to refocus real quick.

[00:31:11]

Kitty Spears: No makeup, no--yeah.

[00:31:13]

SW: You look pretty though; you do. You have like--you don't have any makeup on? You have really nice skin because you can't tell. Okay; I'm not just saying that to flatter you. I mean it. All right before we start will you introduce yourself and tell me who you are?

[00:31:30]

Kitty Spears: I'm Kitty Spears; I am the proprietor/owner of the Busy Bee Café since 1981 to 19--no, 2014. Is that when you took over (*asking Kyle, who has now moved behind the camera with SW*)?

[00:31:48]

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

[00:31:49]

Kitty Spears: Two thousand fourteen.

[00:31:50]

SW: How did you meet Steve? Will you tell that story because Kyle mentioned it but I wanted to hear you tell it?

[00:31:55]

Kitty Spears: We met each other at Calhoun Community College in Decatur [Alabama] and we both were going to school to become barbers, hair stylists. That's how we met each other.

[00:32:05]

SW: Do you remember the first--did he approach you first or were you friends first? I mean how did--?

[00:32:09]

Kitty Spears: We were friends the whole year before we even started dating, so--. And that was our--you know our friends, they kept saying, "Well you guys need to go out with each other. You're--you're meant for each other," so that's how we ended up dating.

[00:32:26]

SW: How long did y'all date before you got married?

[00:32:28]

Kitty Spears: Two years.

[00:32:32]

SW: And so y'all started working--you were working at a barbershop before--?

[00:32:37]

Kitty Spears: Yeah; we owned a barbershop here in Cullman.

[00:32:40]

SW: Can you say the name of it?

[00:32:41]

Kitty Spears: California Concepts.

[00:32:44]

SW: Now how long did you guys have that?

[00:32:45]

Kitty Spears: I cut hair for eleven years before. We had the barbershop goodness, about eight--nine years.

[00:32:58]

SW: Wow and then can you tell the story of how y'all decided to go from having California Concepts to taking over the restaurant? That's a jump.

[00:33:08]

Kitty Spears: Well my husband grew up in the Busy Bee since his family owned it and everything and he was having to help his dad quite a bit because his dad's health was failing. And his father come to us one day and asked us if we'd like to you know buy the Busy Bee. And all we had heard is all the headaches over the years and we said no. We didn't want it. And his dad says to come over, you know for dinner that night and look at the books and make an informed decision, not to you know--. So we went over and had dinner that night and they showed us the books and I looked at my husband and he looked at me and we said, "Oh yeah, we want it," (*Laughs*) because it was like--it doubled or tripled our income overnight. So yeah but see; we never realized the financial part of it. We only knew the headaches that goes with it.

[00:33:58]

SW: How did it change from having a business like California Concepts to having a restaurant business? What--what changed for you guys?

[00:34:05]

Kitty Spears: It's not a lot of difference because you still deal with the public and you-- you know and I had--was a waitress you know in high school and right straight out of high school and everything so I--I had some food experience and he knew how to run the kitchen back there from helping his dad. So it wasn't really a--a lot of difference.

[00:34:25]

SW: Did the hours kind of stay the same or were you working more hours would you say?

[00:34:29]

Kitty Spears: Uh no; from his parents to us was--it pretty much stayed the same. We did breakfast and lunch and then when my children took over 2014 they added an evening on the weekends, Friday, Saturday--Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights to expand their--and it's a totally different menu at nighttime than it is during the daytime. So they're trying to--since they've got two families to feed off of it instead of just one, they're expanding the business.

[00:35:00]

SW: Now Kitty, did you grow up here in Cullman?

[00:35:02]

Kitty Spears: No; I didn't--I'm a military brat.

[00:35:05]

SW: Oh, so did you travel all over--?

[00:35:06]

Kitty Spears: I traveled all over the place and then when my dad retired that's when I--you know they lived in Morgan County. And I enrolled in Calhoun Community College and that's where you know I met my husband, so--.

[00:35:20]

SW: What--what are your parents' names?

[00:35:21]

Kitty Spears: John Thomas and Arzine Thomas.

[00:35:24]

SW: How do you spell her name?

[00:35:25]

Kitty Spears: A-r-z-i-n-e--just like it sounds.

[00:35:28]

SW: That is a really pretty name.

[00:35:29]

Kitty Spears: It's the only person I've ever known with that name.

[00:35:31]

SW: Me, too; I've never heard that before. Can you talk a little bit about why--well I wanted to ask you; do you mind talking about the tornado?

(Referring to the tornado that touched down in Cullman County, Alabama on April 27, 2011.

This was a tornado connected to what is known as the 2011 Super Outbreak, which affected

Southern, Midwestern, and Northeastern states. The tornado that hit Cullman on April 27, 2011

registered as an EF4)

[00:35:41]

Kitty Spears: No.

[00:35:42]

SW: Because I saw the menu and I've read stories about this place. Can you talk about where you were that day and--and what happened?

[00:35:50]

Kitty Spears: Well I let the employees go home early because everybody was a nervous wreck and the--it was really not that much business, so I went ahead and let everybody go home. And I closed up. And I was standing at the cash register fixing to get the money out of the cash register and my ears started hurting real bad. And I just happened to look up and I could see--I didn't see a funnel cloud but I saw this just like this black cloud coming straight at me over the bridge.

[00:36:21]

And all I could do was just jump under the counter as far as I could get thinking it was just going to blow the windows out. And it totally just destroyed the whole building. It just--and I got hurt in the tornado. I got a broken pelvis and cuts and bruises. It messed my back up. But the counter actually saved my life, so--.

[00:36:47]

SW: Was it still in--like the counter was intact?

[00:36:48]

Kitty Spears: Yeah; it was squished down but it was still in-tact and--

[00:36:54]

SW: Oh my gosh. Have you ever had--have you ever been in a tornado before that?

[00:36:58]

Kitty Spears: No; never. *[Laughs]* No.

[00:37:00]

SW: Was it--were people--was the weather just kind of strange that day? Or were people talking about it?

[00:37:06]

Kitty Spears: It was strange all day. The morning, south of Cullman County, Hansel area got hit by a tornado so the--Cullman itself was busy just in the morning hours having all the people from Hansel. And then it--the second round came and it was everybody--it was just gloomy, thick, heavy, you know so--. And everybody was--I guess could feel it coming or something; I don't know. But they were--I--I had you know been indoors all day and working here I didn't know what was going on--on the outside.

[00:37:41]

SW: Now did it--this wasn't just like a tornado; this was like one of the biggest--wasn't it like a--a Category--I don't know what the number is but it's--

[00:37:49]

Kitty Spears: Category 4 for Cullman (*Known as an EF4 by the National Weather Service*).

[00:37:51]

SW: It was--like huge.

[00:37:53]

Kitty Spears: Yeah; yeah.

[00:37:55]

SW: Did it--did it knock you out? I mean were you unconscious?

[00:37:58]

Kitty Spears: No; no, I never lost consciousness. I was trapped under all the debris and I-- it was--it happens that quick. You know and it was eerie silence and then all of the sudden I could hear people running up and down the street just screaming and hollering you know and I

just started hollering back for help, you know because I couldn't move or nothing. And they kept saying, "Where are you?" And I just kept screaming and then finally they found where I was at and they had to dig me out. And I didn't even realize I was hurt at that time. And then when they went to lift me up is when I realized that I was in a lot of pain and I thought I had broken my back and everything but it was my pelvis.

[00:38:41]

SW: Oh my gosh; that's a pretty serious break though.

[00:38:43]

Kitty Spears: Yeah; it's painful.

[00:38:44]

SW: How--how long did it take you to rehabilitate?

[00:38:48]

Kitty Spears: It took quite a while.

00:38:54

Kyle Spears: Couple months.

00:38:54

Kitty Spears: Several months; yeah.

00:38:57

SW: Oh gosh and then--I mean did you guys--was it your intention to come back and rebuild the restaurant or were you kind of like I don't know about this?

00:39:04

Kitty Spears: Oh no immediately; we was--I was in the hospital and we were already discussing about rebuilding and everything.

00:39:12

SW: Why was it important for you to rebuild?

00:39:13

Kitty Spears: Just Busy Bee is historical in Cullman. It's Cullman's oldest restaurant you know that's still established and in business. And it's just--it's part of Cullman and we had to, you know and it was our lives. That's all we knew to do; you know that's all we've ever done, so--.

00:39:33

SW: And it took you I mean it seems like you guys were quite resilient and you came back pretty fast.

00:39:41

Kitty Spears: Yeah; we immediately started you know working with an architect and doing plans and then we had to, you know get bids and all that stuff, but we--that was our goal was to get opened. We opened on April 27th of 2012, exactly one year to the day after the tornado and that was our whole goal you know.

00:40:03

SW: How did that make you feel? I'm just--it's kind of a two-part question but how did that make you feel when you reopened the doors and what do you think that meant to your customers to have people walk back in here one year later after such devastation?

00:40:15

Kitty Spears: Well the whole time I was recovering and we was at home, everybody was constantly either calling, emailing, wanting to know what we was going to do, what--is Busy Bee coming back and--and we said--we assured them yes.

00:40:27

Kyle Spears: We even had some who came by the house.

00:40:30

Kitty Spears: Yeah. [*Laughs*] It was--you know because it's just--you've got to live Cullman to understand the--what Busy Bee means to Cullman.

00:40:39

SW: Yeah; I want to ask you about that. Do you mind if I switch the--the little card real quick because there's four minutes left and I don't want to make--I don't want anything to get cut off. Are you okay comfortable Kitty?

00:40:50

Kitty Spears: Yeah; I'm fine. So what are you doing--what is--what are you doing?

00:41:04

SW: So basically okay; I'll give you my card. I work for an organization that's based--we're a documentary institute at the University of Mississippi. We're called the Southern Foodways Alliance. And we basically--I basically travel around the South and collect stories of southern food traditions. And so we--we have like about 800 oral histories and right now I'm working on a project for you know Kyle was talking about some of the slug burgers in North Mississippi where I am and we noticed that there are some similarities and recipes in Alabama and Tennessee, but you don't find them much anymore. So I wanted to drive around and document stories of the history of some of the restaurants.

00:41:44

Kyle Spears: Do you know about the others in--?

00:41:47

SW: Let's see; I was at Dub's--what was--today is Tuesday, right. I was at Dub's yesterday in Athens.

00:41:54

Kyle Spears: I knew there was one in Athens.

00:41:56

SW: And he knew of you guys. He's never been down here. I told him--he said he's going to come down here with his wife. His name is Lanier Greenhaw. And his family used to have a moving company and then they--his great uncle started Dub's in Athens. And then I'm going to CF Penn's tomorrow and then there's a place in Hartselle called Willie Burgers. I stopped there today; they were pretty slow but there's a couple women there that I wanted to talk to because they said it's been slow for about 10 years there. But everybody told me to come here and one of the guys--

00:42:31

Kitty Spears: There was supposed to be a place in Moulton, too I believe.

00:42:34

SW: Oh NeSmith's? I tried talking to her but she doesn't really want to talk, so--. She kind of hung up the phone on me.

00:42:42

Kitty Spears: Oh okay. *[Laughs]*

00:42:45

SW: But she--but yeah; so that--so and I'll leave you my card Kitty. So basically when we're done with this we have--we put it in our oral history archive and we kind of share excerpts

of the stories, but I'm going to send you guys copies of everything 'cause it's yours. And then we usually--the SFA kind of travels around and we have events in places that kind of like--we have--we have like a membership. We're a nonprofit but I'm trying to organize some sort of community event around these stories, so I might be back in touch with you guys. I know you guys are super-busy but I--we try to help share the stories of the businesses with other parts of the community and I just thought it would be really nice to talk about Cullman, too because there's a lot of history here.

00:43:28

I'm going to turn the tape back on; is that all right? Okay; right before I switched the card you said you have to know Cullman to know what this place means to the community and I'm wondering for people who aren't from Cullman, I know this is kind of a hard question when you live here, but can you talk about what--what kind of draw this place has on your heart, like what this place means to you? What does Cullman mean to you?

00:43:58

Kitty Spears: Cullman? You know I'm not from Cullman so when I moved to Cullman I thought it was--I was used to the big city fast life. And I thought it was a little slow. Then I had a family and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else or raising a family anywhere else. It's just--it's wholesome and it's family oriented, so--. Yeah; I love Cullman.

00:44:25

SW: And can you describe the setup here, because we're sort of like--we're like down--would you say we're downtown?

00:44:30

Kitty Spears: Yeah.

00:44:32

SW: Can you kind of explain what the layout of Cullman--like is it--have the downtown and then the neighborhoods are sort of around that or how would--how would you describe the geography of it?

00:44:40

Kitty Spears: Well when we were rebuilding they've got it broke down into different sections and we're in the historical part of Cullman so when we rebuilt we had to use a palette from the historical you know colors, brick work; everything had to fall into historical pattern to rebuild you know so--. And then there's the business district and then there's--it's just warehouse--or the--what do you want to call--it's where warehouses and industrial type--it's all divided in sections and we're basically right on the edge of the business/historical section and then right next to us is subdivisions and homes, so it's just--we're just right on the edge.

00:45:32

SW: And I wanted--I wanted to ask you a couple more things; is that okay?

00:45:36

Kitty Spears: Okay.

00:45:36

SW: When I was here it was right--it was like a few weeks before Oktoberfest. Can you talk about some of the historical roots here? I understand that there's a lot of--there was a lot of German settlers here and so that kind of plays out into the town today. And can you talk a little bit about that?

00:45:51

Kitty Spears: Well Colonel Cullman, which you know is German, he's the founder of Cullman. And see; that's what they basically base the Oktoberfest--and years we've always done Oktoberfest but Cullman just recently went wet so we used to have a dry Oktoberfest and we still have people come in--

00:46:10

Kyle Spears: It was actually the only dry one in the world.

00:46:12

Kitty Spears: Yeah because we made one of the talk show, nighttime talk shows making fun of Cullman 'cause--

00:46:16

Kyle Spears: *Comedy Central* is what it was.

00:46:21

SW: So how do you do dry Oktoberfest? What do people drink instead of beer?

00:46:24

Kitty Spears: Root beer and did they serve non-alcoholic beverages? I don't know. But I knew they had root beer.

00:46:34

Kyle Spears: They had this stuff called October Zest which was basically a super-sugary apple cider.

00:46:42

SW: Now when did the--when did Cullman go wet, do you know?

00:46:47

Kitty Spears: I don't know, 2010. *[Laughs]* I don't know.

00:46:52

SW: And the menu, I noticed 'cause Kyle was talking about this the last time I was here, too and there's even like--I saw the senior citizen dinner special. Can you talk about--I mean has the menu always had German inspired dishes or is that something--?

00:47:06

Kitty Spears: No; that is something my son had started 'cause he--that's his--nighttime is his thing. He thoroughly enjoys cooking German food, cooking steaks--that kind of food more so than he does the--the lunch.

00:47:21

SW: And is that menu--like in terms of the--is that on the dinner menu now or is that something that's special for Oktoberfest?

00:47:29

Kitty Spears: No; we--we started out at Oktoberfest serving the German food. My son did that and everybody said we had the best German food in town out of all the events, different places that served German food during Oktoberfest. So he kept it on the menu. And--and we have people come in just to eat the German food 'cause they really enjoyed it.

00:47:49

Kyle Spears: We get people who come from other counties, who will drive an hour from Jefferson County and they will come from Huntsville just to come to Cullman 'cause they say ours is better than the German food they can get in Birmingham or Huntsville.

00:48:03

SW: That's awesome. Are there a lot of German restaurants in Cullman?

00:48:06

Kitty Spears: None.

00:48:07

Kyle Spears: None.

00:48:07

SW: There's none.

00:48:07

Kitty Spears: There's Germantown with no German restaurants. That's--yeah--

00:48:11

Kyle Spears: And this isn't--this isn't even a German restaurant. We just have a few German dishes, but we sell them--a lot of them.

00:48:18

Kitty Spears: We sell a lot of them.

00:48:18

SW: Yeah; that's so interesting. Kitty I don't know if you wanted to talk about this on camera but it's something that you said when you were standing over there and when Kyle was sitting here, but he was talking about how when his dad got sick and he was--you know you were talking about him being here to greet people and then he would go home. Could you retell that story? Would you feel comfortable talking about he was here to see it reopen?

00:48:43

Kitty Spears: Yeah; my husband had throat cancer and had--had his voice box removed and everything. But he--he fought it tooth and nail as long as he could. And when we was in the rebuilding process he helped choose colors. He--he helped with everything. And then the day we opened, we opened exactly one year to the day from the time we were destroyed by the tornado and my husband came up and greeted everybody. He stood at the door and was shaking hands, greeting people, and for about an hour and then--it was about--he was exhausted and they took him home and he went to bed and he never got back out of bed. He demised from that point on and but I know he did it because Cullman--that's how much--you know Busy Bee means to everybody, not just us but everybody in Cullman. And he wanted to see it rebuilt and reopened and he did and he was okay then. I mean he--he said he was ready then.

00:49:51

SW: Uh-hm; so you stayed on for two more years?

00:49:54

Kitty Spears: Yes.

00:49:55

SW: And what--can you talk about the decision to--to hand it over to your kids? Is that something that you and Steve had talked about before he had passed?

00:50:04

Kitty Spears: Well we definitely had talked about it. That's why he wanted to teach my son you know how to do everything and do it correctly because he knew that you know he was--well he didn't know; he was hoping my son would be the next generation to take it over. So and I

was just being--I don't know; I was mentally ready. Then my daughter had a baby and so I now--
I'm full-time baby-sitter, so--.

00:50:34

SW: Was she the first grandbaby?

00:50:35

Kitty Spears: Oh no; she's--no, she's not. I've got you know four grandchildren so--
yeah. But she's the baby. [*Laughs*]

00:50:45

SW: Is she the one who was here--?

00:50:46

Kitty Spears: Yeah.

00:50:46

SW: What's her name?

00:50:48

Kitty Spears: Emily.

00:50:50

SW: She's sweet. I loved her little boots. She's very fashionable. Kitty I don't want to
take up too much of your time but I'm wondering if there's anything you want to add whether it
be about the history of the business or about Cullman or about all of your years here that you
would want to share that I didn't know to ask you or I didn't--or a question I missed that I should
have asked you.

00:51:13

Kitty Spears: No; not really.

00:51:16

SW: Okay; I appreciate you sitting--I know that we're kind of playing tag team here and it's kind of awesome. I feel like this is such a treat. I didn't realize that I'd get to talk to you, too. Kyle, do you want to add anything else? You want to talk about the--you know taking over and--and--

00:51:34

Kyle Spears: For her?

00:51:35

SW: Do you want to talk on camera about the menu that--?

00:51:37

Kyle Spears: Sure; sure.

00:51:37

SW: Thank you Kitty.

00:51:39

Kitty Spears: Thank you; okay I'm going home.

00:51:43

SW: Okay; I need you to do one quick thing if you would before--

00:51:46

Kitty Spears: Sign something?

00:51:46

SW: Yeah. And I have a copy for you if you want it.

00:51:54

Kyle Spears: All the more footage you have it lets you have more stuff you can work with you know so--.

00:52:00

SW: Well who taught you how to cook that way? Did you--I mean were you making--

00:52:06

Kitty Spears: Well see he took machine shop. We raised all this money you know and he hated it. He just hated it. And if I had known he had liked food business, well we should have sent him to culinary is what we should have done.

00:52:19

Kyle Spears: You know back when I was a teenager--

00:52:21

Kitty Spears: He showed no interest then really. Well he didn't show interest in anything. *[Laughs]*

00:52:26

SW: You said videogames and cars.

00:52:27

Kyle Spears: That was about it. Back when I was 16 I--if I--if I wasn't speeding down the interstate or doing donuts, I was playing videogames.

00:52:37

Kitty Spears: Yeah; he'd come in and bus tables and stuff like that but as for showing any interest in the business--no.

00:52:42

SW: So this--I'll give you a copy of this and if you want to put--I have the address of the restaurant and I'm happy to send the copy here but if there's another address you want to me send it to--.

00:52:58

Kitty Spears: Tell me what to do.

00:53:04

Kyle Spears: It's your signature. That's the date.

00:53:13

Kitty Spears: What is the date?

00:53:13

SW: I think it's--I've been writing the 12th but I could be wrong.

00:53:18

Kyle Spears: Well if it's not--

00:53:20

SW: That's fine; close enough.

00:53:23

Kyle Spears: Name, business name, address--.

00:53:55

Kitty Spears: I was going to put my own.

00:53:55

Kyle Spears: Telephone; email.

00:54:06

SW: And that's--this is my card if you want it, if you have any questions. I will send you all the copies of everything.

00:54:15

Kyle Spears: What time does the--what you call it--close, the courthouse? Is it 4:00 or 4:30?

00:54:25

Kitty Spears: I don't know.

00:54:28

Kyle Spears: I don't know why it closes so early.

00:54:30

SW: Do you want a copy of this?

00:54:31

Kitty Spears: Yeah.

00:54:40

SW: Okay; do you need to go to the courthouse?

00:54:41

Kyle Spears: I need to pay my property tax.

00:54:46

Kitty Spears: You can do that tomorrow.

00:54:46

Kyle Spears: Yeah; I can.

00:54:49

SW: Okay; can you scoot back one booth?

00:54:56

Kyle Spears: Sure; it's [the sun] still in my face.

00:54:57

SW: It's still in your face. Let's--

00:54:59

Kyle Spears: It's shining all the way back there.

00:55:01

SW: You know what; how about try--is it--is it bad on this side?

00:55:09

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

00:55:09

SW: What about this? How about you sit here and--

00:55:13

Kyle Spears: I'm just curious.

00:55:15

SW: If you--yeah that's actually where I was thinking of setting it up in the first place.

[*Off Mic Conversation*] Have you ever been on a film crew? Sounds like you have.

00:55:32

Kyle Spears: Yes and now. I mean I used to--me and an old friend, like I said, we used to have one, a pro zoomer camera and we split the cost on and we made two or three movies.

00:55:44

SW: That's awesome.

00:55:45

Kyle Spears: Before--before he ended up turning into a jerk and I ended up selling him my half of the camera and said screw you. And I didn't see him for two or three years. You know who I'm talking about.

00:55:57

Kitty Spears: Brendon. Yeah; when y'all went in together and bought that high dollar--?

00:56:01

Kyle Spears: Yeah; that \$4,000 video camera.

00:56:02

SW: And he just ran with it?

00:56:03

Kyle Spears: Well I sold him my half.

00:56:05

SW: All right. But still--okay.

00:56:09

Kyle Spears: It was a really nice camera, but it better be for \$4,000. [*Laughs*]

00:56:15

SW: Okay and I think we're still good on tape. Okay and you're comfortable over there?

00:56:22

Kyle Spears: Yeah; oh plus I also had my own You Tube show so I'm--

00:56:25

SW: You do? You have to tell me about it when--

00:56:27

Kyle Spears: It's just a peer review show. It's--it's pretty lousy though.

00:56:32

SW: I want to see it.

00:56:32

Kyle Spears: There's no script on it; it's just turn the camera on like the only editing to it is--is I edited out where I'm going up there and turning it on and running back to the--that's about the only editing in it. [*Laughs*]

00:56:43

SW: So well before your mother sat down--

00:56:46

Kyle Spears: Yes.

00:56:46

SW: --to talk you were talking about reopening and the tornado. And now what were you doing at that time when y'all reopened in 2012? Were you working here?

00:57:00

Kyle Spears: You mean what did I do once we reopened? Yes; I--I worked here. I've been a full-time--I've been here full-time since 2008. I mean I did work here part-time you know a little bit here and there but I came on full-time in 2008.

00:57:19

SW: And can you talk about how you've grown into this role and up to the point where you know your--your parents left it up to you and your sister, like what--what was that decision like for you to take over the restaurant?

00:57:32

Kyle Spears: I don't really know how to answer that question. I mean there's a lot to it. I don't really know how to answer that question; sorry.

00:57:45

SW: Had you ever thought about that? I mean did you ever think about taking--was that something that had crossed your mind before about taking over the business?

00:57:51

Kyle Spears: Uh, not--not right when I first was full-time. But soon afterwards, maybe like I say, I started--I came in full-time at 2008. Around 2009, 2010, somewhere in there is when I thought--thought you know one day I probably--I'll probably be taking over.

00:58:20

SW: And so at 2014 that happened.

00:58:25

Kyle Spears: What happened?

00:58:26

SW: You took over?

00:58:27

Kyle Spears: Yes.

00:58:28

SW: So how did that change for you? How did--how did your life change as soon as you took over?

00:58:34

Kyle Spears: It didn't really change. I mean--I, the--the big step up in responsibilities is what happened in 2012. Soon as we came back--I mean back in 2000--you know from 2008 to 2012 the beginning half of the year I was just a burger cook. I knew how to cook the burgers; that's what I did. But when I came back I--I not only had to be burger cook but I took over management responsibilities from day one.

00:59:11

But then my mom wanted to retire, so over--and she said she wanted to retire in 2013, so well not--she told us in 2013 that she wants to retire by year's end. So we--me and my sister and my brother-in-law we just started just talking--talking with my mom and everything and this--you know talking to her. She let us know of all the different ownership responsibilities and--and everything. So we just started slowly improvising and implementing one thing after another and it's--so therefore by the end of the year it's just kind of by habit you know. We--we knew what to do.

00:59:57

SW: What's your sister's name?

00:59:58

Kyle Spears: Stevie.

00:59:59

SW: Stevie; okay. And Michael is her husband?

01:00:02

Kyle Spears: Yes.

01:00:02

SW: What is the last name?

01:00:03

Kyle Spears: Douglas.

01:00:04

SW: Douglas okay with one S?

01:00:07

Kyle Spears: Yes.

01:00:07

SW: I just want to make sure I have it right. And so can you talk about the Oktoberfest menu and how you--what your influence on that has been?

01:00:16

Kyle Spears: Yes; I've always liked German food. First time I ever tried it was back when I was a teenager. I really enjoyed it. But you know I just didn't never get to have it much because it wasn't--there's none in this town except for around Oktoberfest time.

01:00:33

And a lot of the other places I had tried German food at during Oktoberfest, I didn't really like it. I didn't--I didn't know what it was at that time; now I realize the problem was a lot of people were trying to hurry and rush on everything, on stuff that--on foods that needed--need time to cook and prepare and everything. They just weren't spending the--the time and they were rushing everything. And it just tasted that way.

01:01:03

Basically you know I like German food and I like good German food so about two months prior to Oktoberfest, me and Patrick who was a cook here working at the time plus he's a good friend of mine--

01:01:19

SW: What's his last name?

01:01:20

Kyle Spears: His name is Cook, Patrick Cook, the cook yeah; he was a cook up here also. And we decided let's stick around after we close and--and just practice some German food. So--so basically we would go back and get on the computer and look up recipes, head to the grocery store, pick up stuff, and sit up here for a few hours just you know tinkering around.

01:01:46

And we--we found what works and what doesn't. And we found some very tasty recipes and we just kind of learned them and tweaked them a little bit until we made them our own. And when--when we found it was good, we decided let's do this. And let's--let's open up for Oktoberfest on--on that Oktoberfest that weekend. We--we served German food on Friday and Saturday night. And people came here and said it was fantastic. They said it was better than every--than everywhere else.

01:02:21

And--and you know jokingly me and Patrick said that's because it was cooked with love unlike everyone else, you know. *[Laughs]* We was just joking around. But in all honesty it was; you know we--you know we practiced it and everything and we got good at it. Patrick does not work here anymore. He got married and moved to Birmingham and so now he works at a restaurant down in Birmingham but he's still a good friend of mine.

01:02:50

SW: What restaurant does he work at?

01:02:51

Kyle Spears: Shane's Rib Shack.

01:02:52

SW: Okay; now I mean so when you people--your food was so well-received at Oktoberfest, how soon did you start deciding to put it on the menu permanently?

01:03:02

Kyle Spears: Let's see; we first had the German food like I said for 2012--that first Oktoberfest. Uh, let's see; I think it was the--it was the following year in 2013 we--we did the Oktoberfest again. And since people liked it so much we--we decided well, let me back up a little bit.

01:03:35

When we were in the process of making a new dinner menu and since people--we knew since people liked the--the Oktoberfest German food so well, we figured Oktoberfest would be a good time to go ahead and implement the new German food. So what we did was we served it--the German foods once again during Oktoberfest and then soon as it was over we put out the brand new dinner menu which had the German food on it year-round.

01:04:04

And it's been selling--selling well ever since.

01:04:08

SW: Can you describe or you know identify and describe some of the dishes that you serve in terms of the German dishes?

01:04:13

Kyle Spears: We have a Jagerschnitzel which is probably out most popular. If you--if you don't know what a Jagerschnitzel it is a--it is a hand-breaded and fried pork cutlet. It's--it's--it's different than a pork chop. It's a--it's a cubed pork tenderloin, you know and it's got--I do the--I first take them and I season them up, flour, egg wash, bread crumbs, and work that into the meat really well and then you fry them up on--I do that on the same grill that I use for my burgers. It's

a--it's a shallow fried grill. It's different--most restaurants have--have a--your standard grill is a flat-top. The way our grill works is we have a--we have a steel plate in the front that can hold grease in, so it works like a giant cast iron skillet.

01:05:08

It works--it works--it's like a cast iron skillet as big as this table basically.

01:05:12

SW: That's awesome.

01:05:14

Kyle Spears: That's how--that's the way it works and--

01:05:16

SW: Do you fry it in vegetable oil like you do the burgers?

01:05:17

Kyle Spears: Yes; but it only requires oil that deep [*Gestures*]. I mean sixth of an inch that's all the--that's--that's enough to shallow fry, for you to sear on each side of your foods. And that's how we do it with--with the Jagerschnitzel. It's fried up like that and then we put that on a plate and we top it with a homemade mushroom cream gravy.

01:05:40

SW: Sounds amazing.

01:05:41

Kyle Spears: I take a--I take--I make the beef gravy and it's got red wine--not red--white wine, onion--sautéed onions and--and mushrooms. I sauté them in butter and then throw in the--the wine in there with it and the cream and add that in with the--in with the--the gravy and I just let them simmer for about 30 minutes. Let all the flavors cook before I ever--before that batch of gravy is what I would call to be done, and then we take that gravy and we put it over the meat. And that's a very popular dish.

01:06:22

Of course we also have bratwurst, rock-wurst, and knockwurst and curry-wurst sausages.

01:06:29

SW: Did you guys invent those?

01:06:29

Kyle Spears: No.

01:06:30

SW: I mean that's a lot. Can you--what are--what are those?

01:06:33

Kyle Spears: A bratwurst is--is a--it's a pork and beef blend. It's--it's unsmoked and it is cured--it is seasoned with [inaudible] marjoram. The rock-wurst sausage is a smoked pork sausage.

Knockwurst is a smoked beef sausage and it's also seasoned with garlic. And the curry-wurst is an all pork sausage and of course it's just seasoned with curry.

01:07:03

SW: And you guys make those homemade?

01:07:05

Kyle Spears: No; I don't make them here but I--I have found a--a very good quality sausage supplier. They're out of Wisconsin called Bavaria Sausage Company. They are far-superior to--to what you will find at grocery stores such as Johnsonville.

01:07:24

SW: Sure; that's amazing.

01:07:25

Kyle Spears: It's a--Bavaria Sausage Company is an authentic German-style butcher shop and it's all they do is German recipes, smoked meats, cured meats, sausages, all--things that are--you know Old World European recipes. And we use them as our sausage supplier.

01:07:45

SW: And now Kyle is there anything else--and in terms of the German menu that you wanted to mention that you really enjoy making?

01:07:53

Kyle Spears: There's a few things we--we do during Oktoberfest that we don't offer year-round, such as [schweinaxe], [rouladen], sauerbraten. Those things I really like them a lot but it's just not feasible to have those year-round.

01:08:11

SW: How come; what are they and--?

01:08:11

Kyle Spears: A--a [schweinaxe] is a--it is a cured and hickory-smoked pork shank. I get those also from Bavaria Sausage. They--they cure them and age them in--they hickory-smoke them but they're only partial-cooked and then they send them--they overnight them here to me. And then what I do is I take them and I finish them off in the oven for about six to eight hours on real low heat. And by the time they're done they're almost fall-apart tender and I take them and put them on a char-grill when I get an order of them and I sear them and it puts--sears a crust on the outside. But see; it takes a long time to make them and they're very expensive to buy. So that's something that I--I just don't do it year-round 'cause it's not feasible.

01:08:59

SW: That makes sense. Now does your family have German heritage in it?

01:09:02

Kyle Spears: No.

01:09:03

SW: Are there a lot of people here in Cullman who do?

01:09:05

Kyle Spears: Yes; yes. Yeah; there are a lot of German descendants, plus there is a—ReHau, German-owned company and it's you know they have--they have a plant in Cullman.

01:09:20

SW: What kind of plant is it?

01:09:22

Kyle Spears: They make polymers, you know plastic stuff. Like they have an injection molding department where they--where they make car bumpers, they've got a pex department where they build pex pipe which is like PVC pipe, but it's--it's like flexible plastic piping.

01:09:42

SW: And Kyle you were saying something right before your mom went off camera; you were talking about how people come from other places like Huntsville and Birmingham--

01:09:51

Kyle Spears: Yes.

01:09:53

SW: --because they say that this is the best German food.

01:09:53

Kyle Spears: Yes.

01:09:55

SW: Can you kind of retell that part of it?

01:09:56

Kyle Spears: Yeah; well I get--a lot of times I'll get some people who come from out of town. In fact there's this one couple, who--who lives in Corner which is--you know that's in Jefferson County. It's right--it's close by Warrior. It's probably a good 30--45 minute drive to Corner. And they come about once a month, usually either on a Friday or Saturday night and they always want schnitzels--schnitzels and sausages. Usually they--they will get a schnitzel platter with--with about one sausage on the side. They like the red cabbage, the pan-fried potatoes, the potato salad; they like it all.

01:10:41

And--and usually they'll get a glass of a German beer to go with it. But they say this is the best around. They say you know--they're in Jefferson County so Birmingham is still not far for them, probably another--just on the other side of the county another 20 minute drive or so, but they--they said there's--there's two or three German restaurants down there and they said we're better than them. Our food--said it's--my prices are better. And it's--they said it's more

flavorful. You know it's not bland. I've had a couple people who come in and you know--our window washer, for example, he comes in about--about once a month for dinner. He brings his family and nine out of ten times they get German food. He said he likes--said he doesn't have to drive all the way to Huntsville now to have to eat a good German meal.

01:11:41

And we've also like I said, we've also had some people from I believe it was Madison County which is right next to Huntsville, you know and they've come down here and tried the German food and they said it was better than what they could find up there.

01:11:56

SW: That's pretty flattering.

01:11:56

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

01:11:58

SW: Kyle I don't really have any other questions for you. There's one specific question and I think you mentioned this the last time I was here visiting you, but the Spears Building, what's the story with that?

01:12:09

Kyle Spears: Well the Spears family paid for the building so therefore it's the Spears Building.

[Laughs]

01:12:16

SW: I was just curious. Is there anything you want to talk about--anything else you want to talk about you know something I should have asked you but didn't or something about the history of the business or your family that you'd like people to know?

01:12:27

Kyle Spears: Well I do have one funny thing to mention about the Spears Building. I came up here one day you know during the construction when--when the bricklayers, the masons were laying down the brick and everything. And I--and I asked you know the contractor who was over the bricks and everything, I said--said, you know because I see it keep going up and I said, where are you going to put those--those--those cinderblocks that have the names on them? And he's like--he [*Gestures*]*--we're going to put it right there* [*Laughs*] and so it's a good thing I was there that day because they--they had--because those cinderblocks were sitting over on the sidewalk and they didn't--they had forgot about them. And they got up about three or four feet [*Laughs*] above where it's at right now and he just--he pulled--he pulled those bricks back down because the mortar was still wet. [*Laughs*]

01:13:24

SW: And started moving?

01:13:24

Kyle Spears: Yeah.

01:13:26

SW: That's awesome. Well if there's nothing else you want to add Kyle, I just want to say thank you for taking the time to do this.

01:13:32

Kyle Spears: Okay; no problem. And thank you for waiting.

01:13:35

SW: Oh it's no problem. I was--I was having fun--.

01:13:37

END INTERVIEW