



Steva Casey
Birmingham, Alabama

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Interviewer: Michelle Little
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
Length: One hour and three minutes
Project: Career Servers

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:02.14]

Michelle L.: Okay. So, today is January 24, 2020, and this is Michelle Little, and I'm interviewing Steva Casey here at the Atomic in Birmingham, Alabama. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance Career Servers Project. Steva, to get started, will you just tell me when you were born?

[00:00:23.21]

Steva C.: I was born in 1978, January. I just had a birthday about two weeks ago.

[00:00:31.07]

Michelle L.: Happy birthday!

[00:00:34.21]

Steva C.: Thank you.

[00:00:34.23]

Michelle L.: And where were you born? Where'd you grow up?

[00:00:37.00]

Steva C.: I was born in Birmingham at the now-closed Montclair Hospital, and I grew up on the west side of town in Pleasant Grove, Midfield area.

[00:00:50.16]

Michelle L.: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What they did and . . .

[00:00:58.14]

Steva C.: Their names are Steve, as I'm sure you've probably already guessed. [Laughter] And Darlene. My pops is, for lack of a better term, an engineer. He's now retired, but he would do large projects for, essentially, civil engineering projects for H.V.A.C. within commercial buildings. So, he worked for an engineering firm in town for a long time. He technically had a career called draftsman.

[00:01:38.10]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:01:41.05]

Steva C.: So, he drew all the plans. Very mathematical. My mom worked for AmSouth, now Regions, I guess, for almost forty years.

[00:01:55.28]

Michelle L.: Yeah.

[00:01:57.19]

Steva C.: So.

[00:01:59.00]

Michelle L.: Any siblings?

[00:02:01.10]

Steva C.: I have three siblings, two younger sisters and a younger brother. They are all grown now, and live in and around town. So, they're great.

[00:02:19.13]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Did you—what did you think you wanted to do when you grew up? Like, did you ever think about it when you were a kid?

[00:02:29.08]

Steva C.: Of course. Everybody does, right? [Laughter] When I was a small child, I had no real concept of what a doctor was, but I thought that I wanted to be one. Then, like my dad, I'm very mathematically-oriented and detail-oriented, so as I got into high school and thinking about college, I thought that I would be an engineer. So, that is the initial path that I took; quickly realized I wasn't very happy doing that and knew I didn't want to sit behind a desk for the rest of my life. And sort of fell into hospitality. My first hospitality job was as a concession worker at a movie theater.

[00:03:27.18]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:03:29.05]

Steva C.: So, I enjoyed that and I enjoyed being around people. So, I sort of fell into, well, how will I make this be in service of my community, but make it be a career? Which is sort of how I got into the hospitality industry.

[00:03:49.27]

Michelle L.: Okay. Was that your first job ever, or did you have any other jobs?

[00:03:55.01]

Steva C.: That was my first paying job. I'd had a lot of—I was a candy striper at multiple hospitals from, like, twelve on. Twelve is the year you can start doing it. So, I volunteered a lot of time. I was an usher at the Civic Center, which is another volunteer job, but you get to go to shows for free, so it's not really—[Laughter] It's not totally unpaid. I've always sorta found a way to get to do what I want to do and also work that into a career.

[00:04:33.01]

Michelle L.: Nice. [Laughter] So, did you take any hospitality classes in college, or . . . ?

[00:04:41.25]

Steva C.: What I took in college were English literature. That was what my major was. So, no, not necessarily, but there's not really hospitality courses in Birmingham. Once the Virginia college didn't open until I was well out of college, so it wasn't really an option

here, and I needed to stay around town to go to college. I chose what I could do within that system.

[00:05:26.28]

Michelle L.: Yeah. So, you went to college here in Birmingham?

[00:05:28.20]

Steva C.: I went to U.A.B.

[00:05:30.15]

Michelle L.: Okay, yeah. What years were you at U.A.B.?

[00:05:33.17]

Steva C.: I was at U.A.B. [19]96 to 2000.

[00:05:38.29]

Michelle L.: Okay. At that time, did you have any leanings towards, like, which branch of the hospitality-service industry, or were there any . . . ?

[00:05:52.13]

Steva C.: Well, I started waitin' tables in [19]98. Actually, my first fine dining job was in [19]98. My first restaurant job, I had two jobs at the same time. My first restaurant job was at a Middle Eastern, like Mediterranean place called Moneer's, that was in

Homewood. So, I worked there, and then an old manager of mine from the movie theater opened a French restaurant which was fine dining in Mountain Brook. I went to work there, and I couldn't wait tables until I was twenty-one. So, at the time I was twenty; I couldn't wait tables until I was twenty-one there, because you couldn't serve alcohol in Alabama until you were twenty-one. Now, you can serve at nineteen. But then, you couldn't serve until you were twenty-one.

[00:06:47.27]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:06:49.10]

Steva C.: So, I was essentially a back waiter, waiter's assistant, until I turned twenty-one.

[00:06:54.25]

Michelle L.: Okay. And that was at the French restaurant?

[00:06:56.15]

Steva C.: Um-hm.

[00:06:56.15]

Michelle L.: What was the name of that one?

[00:06:57.26]

Steva C.: Bon Appetit.

[00:07:01.04]

Michelle L.: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about Moneer's? I'd not hearda that one.

[00:07:09.13]

Steva C.: Moneer's was sort of the precursor to an Al's or a Purple Onion. It was owned by this man named Moneer Ackawi, and I knew their son. His name is Kevin. We had worked together at the theater, actually, and then I frequented the restaurant because we knew each other and we were friends. So, when I left the theater, he said, "Well, we have an opening here. You'll like it, and it's fun. It's fast-paced and you're outside and you're still dealing with people." So, I went to work there. You know, it's a gyro shop that's pita wraps and kebabs and that kinda stuff.

[00:08:01.22]

Michelle L.: Um-hm. So, what were the first few days on the job like? What were some obstacles or lessons that—did it just come naturally to you?

[00:08:13.07]

Steva C.: I mean, it was a counter service place.

[00:08:14.25]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:08:16.10]

Steva C.: So, it was easy. Like, that job was easy to me because that was a thing that I was—like that counter service, especially because of the theater, I was used to. I moved up within the—I worked at the theater for four years, so within that time, I started in concession and I was managing a theater by the time I left.

[00:08:36.06]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:08:37.26]

Steva C.: Because they'll let nineteen-year-olds do that. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world, but here we are. [Laughter] And when you're nineteen, you think three hundred dollars a week is a lot of money, right?

[00:08:50.18]

Michelle L.: Um-hm.

[00:08:52.14]

Steva C.: So, that counter service was fine. Actually, they had just stopped being twenty-four hours when I started working there, but they were still open till 4 a.m. So, I would often get off of work at 5 o'clock in the mornin' on a weekend. It was . . . it was wild. [Laughter] The energy you have as a nineteen-year-old is just unmatched, you know.

[00:09:26.03]

Michelle L.: Yeah, yeah. So, would you just go out after that or was there anything else to do?

[Laughter]

[00:09:31.18]

Steva C.: I mean, at that age, there's not really anything else to do. At twenty-one, there are twenty-four-hour bars in Birmingham, so, if you want to go to a bar at 4 o'clock in the mornin', you can do that here. I don't know if it's the best-kept secret of Birmingham or a worst-kept secret of Birmingham, but it's a fact of Birmingham.

[00:09:53.27]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] What was the first bar you remember hanging out in? Kind of a regular, maybe?

[00:09:59.26]

Steva C.: Oh, the Garage.

[00:10:02.21]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:10:04.09]

Steva C.: I become territorial towards bars in their relation to where I work and where I live. So, I don't really go away from where I live. Like, I want to be going towards home if I'm gonna have a beer after work. So, at the time, I lived in Southside and I worked in Mountain Brook, and all of the people that I worked with at Bon Appetit—which is where I worked when I turned twenty-one—all of the people that I worked with had worked at, like, Azalea's or somewhere downtown in Five Points, so the Garage was their local. So, we would go there after work, so then it became my local. I still love that bar; I think it's great. The people are great. Jimmy Watson, rest in peace, was wonderful, and he always made you feel welcome in that bar, and you felt like you were a part of that bar. That's the greatest thing about hospitality, is the ability to make someone else feel like they are a part of it, too; that they're not an interloper or a stranger to this space, that it is also their space.

[00:11:28.27]

Michelle L.: Yeah. That's a great way to put it. Yeah, I've been wondering about if there's a difference between service and hospitality.

[00:11:38.00]

Steva C.: I think that there's a way to do it that the two can be differentiated, but they should meld together. You know? Like you're in service of making this an experience. Right? But your hospitality is what's going to welcome them to that experience.

[00:12:08.26]

Michelle L.: That's great. And so, can you tell me a little bit more about Bon Appetit? That was where you moved, from Moneer's?

[00:12:20.03]

Steva C.: I moved—well, yeah. So, I worked at both of those places until I could wait tables there, so I worked at Moneer's at night and I worked at Bon Appetit during the day, 'cause I worked lunches. After I turned twenty-one, I worked lunches there until they felt like I was ready to work dinners, wait tables working dinners. It was where I learned about wine, and it was where I got a sense of what white tablecloth service was, and it was also where I got a sense of what being a regular means. Because we had two or three times a week regulars there, that that was the place—like, they didn't cook dinners for themselves anymore, and that was the place they went to eat dinner three times a week. So, it was a very much neighborhood restaurant, though it was fine dining. And it was also one of those places where there's a very French mentality; the chef was French. The French mentality of you greet everyone you work with when you get to work and you create that camaraderie, but there is a very . . . unspoken hierarchy of it starts with chef and it works down the line. So, it was a great job. I loved it. The owners sold the restaurant and moved to France, so they left in 2000 and I went to work at a little bistro across the street, which is not there anymore, called Lemongrass. It was owned by this woman named Mikki Bond who had previously owned Cobb Lane, and so I worked there. In that time, I had gotten married, so my now ex-husband was in the kitchen, and he had started working at a restaurant off Valleydale [Road]. They needed a bartender, and sort of a person to help

them run front of the house. So, I went to work there, and did the bar and waited tables there, ran their front of the house for a couple years.

[00:15:22.08]

Michelle L.: Was it Ragtime?

[00:15:24.25]

Steva C.: No, it was called Villa Rosa. It was on the other side of 65.

[00:15:31.16]

Michelle L.: Okay, yeah. And were there any mentors that you remember from those early restaurants, like people that just really made an impact on you and helped you learn?

[00:15:45.05]

Steva C.: I mean, the owner of Bon Appetit, Richard Foster, taught me more about wine. I was eager to learn about it, too. He was a great teacher of a lot of things, but I learned a lot about wine. I learned a lot about food at that place. I have a sort of rural family, so we ate . . . offal, for lack of a better time, right. Like o-f-f-a-l, organ meats and that kinda thing when I was growin' up. So, I wasn't unaccustomed to eating that kinda food, but in French cooking, that is very much—they're very present. Sweetbreads, liver, kidney. Chef, of course, I was a pet at that point, 'cause I'm like, "Absolutely, I'll eat a kidney. Yes, please. Give that to me." He was like, "Oh! Regular people don't want to eat this weird stuff; you'll eat it. So, I'll teach you how to—" He taught me how to make desserts,

and I worked on Saturdays in the kitchen there for a while. So, when I went to Villa Rosa, I made all their pastries. I made all their desserts. It was, ah, two years, maybe, I worked there.

[00:17:11.21]

Michelle L.: Are they still there?

[00:17:12.20]

Steva C.: No.

[00:17:15.27]

Michelle L.: Okay. So, what is a typical shift like at some of these places? What time do you get there, what is a day like for you at, say, Villa Rosa?

[00:17:29.12]

Steva C.: You get there at, like, 2. Dependin' on if you have to, like, make or receive orders.

You know, in Alabama, you still have to go and pick all your liquor up, so it depends on if that's a day. Like beer and wine's delivered to you, but you have to physically go to the A.B.C. store and pick your liquor up. 'Cause they don't ever want anything to be C.O.D., so they don't let you have it delivered.

[00:17:58.28]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:18:00.29]

Steva C.: Dependin' on what, if you needed to get liquor. If you didn't, it'd be, like, between 12 and 2, you would go make or receive orders, wine, beer orders; prep anything you needed to prep. Service usually starts at 5, so the rest of the staff gets there between 3:30 and 4. Service starts at 5. Usually, restaurants are staying open later now, but then, it was, like, you closed before 10; 9, 9:30, something like that. You were done by, like, 11. So, it wasn't terrible.

[00:18:51.14]

Michelle L.: Yeah, yeah. Are you still in school at this time, or you finished?

[00:18:56.06]

Steva C.: I'd finished.

[00:18:58.16]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Okay. Wow. So, that's early 2000s. Then where'd you go from Villa Rosa?

[00:19:09.08]

Steva C.: I went to Standard Bistro, and I worked there for . . . I guess, like, a year and a half. We had a front of the house manager when we opened. He left a couple months in, and I took over that position. That was my job there. I still waited tables there, but that was my

job there until . . . Standard Bistro was technically opened by E.B.S.C.O. So, less than two years into it being open, E.B.S.C.O. replaced the chef and brought in the Hastings as consultants. So, I left when that happened. They restructured everything and brought their own people in. They didn't keep many of us. And it was in Mt. Laurel, so it was forty-three miles one way from my house.

[00:20:27.24]

Michelle L.: Yeah.

[00:20:29.26]

Steva C.: In the time that I worked at that place, I would just be there from open to close, because it didn't make sense to leave and then come back, and fight 280 traffic. It just didn't make any sense.

[00:20:43.00]

Michelle L.: Yeah.

[00:20:44.22]

Steva C.: So. I went from there to a place briefly in . . . Brookwood called Bricks, which is where La Cocina is now. They revamped it, made it La Cocina. From there, I went to this place called Bacca that was in Crestline Village. Most recently was Mafiosa's.

[00:21:16.13]

Michelle L.: Okay, mm.

[00:21:18.20]

Steva C.: So, it was sort of fancy pizza, like woodfire-grilled pizza. The owner wanted to do retail wine, and he had previously worked for International Wines, which is a distributor in town. So, the wine list was vast. I really, like, honed wine skills past French wines, which is what my specialty was before that into, like, New American and Spanish and Italian wines, which are all a beast. [Laughter] And it was a great job. They sort of revamped their concept, and I went from there to Bettola. I opened Bettola.

[00:22:13.14]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:22:16.06]

Steva C.: And I went from Bettola to Little Savannah. And I was at Little Savannah, on and off, for five-ish years. So, from [20]07 to 2012, mid-2012, I was at Little Savannah.

[00:22:33.24]

Michelle L.: And how are you picking the next restaurant? Like, how did you select where you wanted to be at?

[00:22:43.07]

Steva C.: When I was at Bacca, our wine rep—whose name is Robbie Colvin—told me about this place. He told me about Bettola and introduced me to James, and so that's how I found that place. I had a friend that I had previously worked with who was working at Little Savannah, and I had been in there for dinner once or twice. So, that's how I went to there. Birmingham is—especially the hospitality community, is really small. So, you always have a friend that works somewhere, and they are telling you about how their place is going or things that they've heard that are opening up or would need somebody.

[00:23:35.10]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:23:36.26]

Steva C.: So. I did a brief stint at John's City Diner during my Little Savannah time. I essentially was at Little Savannah. I was head waiter and I did the wine list, and then I went to John's to be front of the house manager, but I was still working brunch, so there was really, in that five-year time, only like a six-month period that I didn't work there. I was front of the house manager at John's from September of [20]08 to January of 2010, and then I went back to Little Savannah from January of 2010 to mid-July 2012.

[00:24:32.20]

Michelle L.: Okay. Wow. So, at that time, were you startin' to think more towards food and—or the beverage industry than . . .

[00:24:46.26]

Steva C.: Sure. Well, when I went back to Little Savannah, I took over the bar.

[00:24:51.28]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:24:53.10]

Steva C.: I was writing menus and I was workin' the bar a little bit at John's, too. I'd worked a bar at virtually every restaurant I've ever worked at, with the exception of Bon Appetit. But when I went back to Little Savannah, I was writing cocktail menus and essentially teaching myself how to be a craft bartender, 'cause there wasn't—in 2010, that wasn't really a thing that was happening here. I watched a lotta YouTube videos and read a lotta books and figured out—you know, I have a pretty good palate, so I figured out, like, what flavors go together and got a flavor bible and studied it. Tried to complement the food. So, it was a great learning process for me, while also working the bar every night, because I was the only bartender.

[00:26:03.11]

Michelle L.: Wow. Why do you think the craft cocktail revolu—why do you think that happened when it did? What do you think brought that out?

[00:26:14.22]

Steva C.: I think it's an extension of what the food scene is in this town, which has always been really great. I think people started to pay more attention to it. Birmingham's always been a wine town. You know? Like, there was a point where, I don't know total validity of it, but there was a point that it was said there was more pinot, or as much pinot noir drunk in Birmingham as, like, entire other states, right? So, it's always been a really great wine town, and the people in this town really appreciate wine, so I think it was easy to get them to try cocktails. Especially because they're food-adventurous people, and so it's easy to get them to be drink-adventurous as well.

[00:27:13.11]

Michelle L.: All right. So, Little Savannah—

[00:27:17.04]

Steva C.: Little Savannah.

[00:27:16.16]

Michelle L.: John's City Diner.

[00:27:20.27]

Steva C.: Yeah. Post-Little Savannah, I went to Veranda. I knew this guy's name, was Angel Negrin, and he had gone to Veranda to consult their program, 'cause they had hired a new chef and they wanted to revamp their bar. So, they had hired him, I guess, on like a six-month basis to consult their program, and his time was coming up. So, he told me about

that job, and I went to it. It may be my favorite restaurant job. The food was really great; the front of the house—I was the bar manager—the front of the house manager, his name is Stan Reynolds, was exceptional. He had worked for Commander's Palace for, like, twenty-five years. Just his idea of service and the effort, like his effortlessness of how he worked a room, was fascinating. It was just a joy to watch. Like, he is a professional in this industry that I really learned a lot from. If I had one mentor, it would be him. Just in service; not even in food and beverage, but just how you approach service and how you approach people and how you make them feel inclusive. And how you make a room feel together. It was really great. He's, I believe, still at Galley. So, Veranda became Galley & Garden. When Veranda became Galley, I . . . left from working there. So, I was there about two and a half years. I considered moving outta Birmingham, 'cause it can sometimes feel like feast or famine here. I was working at the Collins Bar on Sundays and then some pick-up shifts, and I started doing my pop-up dinner series, Swing Shift, in 2014. For about . . . a year, that was mostly what I did, just to have a reset . . . and still be around a food. I have a lot of friends who are chefs, so it was easy for me to build pop-up dinners. I've made those connections over the years, like with Stephen DeVries who, as a photographer, he let me use his photo studio. He was then sharing a studio with Mary Clinton Carl, who's a prop stylist. So, I did a lotta collaborative things with them and they let me use that space, 'cause they had a space at the Phoenix which was really awesome. And all the while, I was still, like, working a bar shift a week at the Collins Bar, doin' several other pick-ups things. Starting to travel to work with cocktail conferences and event production companies in other places. Then, I opened Saturn in 2015. I was there for [20]15 and [20]16. It was a whole—like I needed a new challenge, and it was a whole

other beast of a production, because it's a music venue. We wanted to do cocktails there, and there were two bars. A sold-out show is five hundred people, and how will we execute cocktails in that space? Also make people happy? What does this room look like when there's not a show? So, it was very challenging. That was a very challenging space.

[00:32:05.26]

Michelle L.: What did you learn from doin' Saturn?

[00:32:10.02]

Steva C.: It was a whole new demographic for me, because . . . I saw a lotta the same people in that fifteen years of fine dining and that kinda restaurant and bar scene. So, Saturn was—the crowd was much younger, and it's much more fast-paced. It's fun. I learned how to, like, not be so serious about it. Just have fun. It was a great time. From there, I was at the Louis Bar at the Pizitz for a little while, to sort of help a friend of mine out who was the bar manager. Under the auspices that I would run their program. Fero was the Italian restaurant that they were gonna open there, and they just . . . didn't have their stuff together. It . . . when it finally came to fruition, like too much time had lapsed and I was taking on other projects, 'cause I don't really believe in a day off. So, I need to be working. I've been doing this bartender, trade-focused Tiki festival for the last—since 2016. In 2017, we expanded to Europe, so we are also producing this event in Europe, so that was a conflict for Fero that they couldn't really give me a timeline of when they were opening. So. And I had already committed to this Tiki festival in Europe, so I had to go. So.

[00:34:46.29]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:34:48.07]

Steva C.: That, unfortunately, didn't work out with Fero. But it was for the best. They are not open. I started working at the Atomic in . . . late April, early May of 2017. I've been here since then. I'm still producing that Tiki event. So, I work at Atomic on Friday and Saturday, which is really great. Feizal [Valli] and Rachel [Roberts] are really great to me and work with my schedule. It's a change to come to work and my responsibility is bartending. Feizal makes the menu. He orders everything. He makes all the syrups. So, it's a very much of a change from what I'm used to doing, but it allows me to focus on growing this Tiki festival, Tiki by the Sea, into a thing that I've grown it from one event to five events over the last three years. And, Atomic allows me to continue to have a touchstone in Birmingham, because I really don't want to move out of Birmingham. It still allows me to see Birmingham people and be a part of this community and still be present and still be able to be a face that people recognize, versus if I was only doing a thing like Swingshift and I'm only able to do . . . I would love to do ten a year, but I'm really only able to do, like, I think I did six last year. So, you're not a regular to those people anymore if you only see them six times a year.

[00:36:55.16]

Michelle L.: So, how did you decide you wanted to stay in Birmingham? 'Cause you mentioned you considered leaving.

[00:37:02.18]

Steva C.: Yeah. I definitely considered leaving, and I didn't want to do it then, so I really tried to find a way to be able to stay and make money here, even though I didn't feel like there was necessarily a place for me to work at that time. I love Birmingham. I think it's really great. I think the food scene here is really great. I think the people, overall, are really great. I think that it has . . . and can be a struggle as a single woman who's not twenty-five, if I'm bein' honest. You know? Like this is a young person's game, and I'm not anymore. You know? Like I've been in this business for twenty years, more than. So . . . I tried to adapt Birmingham to what I needed but also be malleable to what was available, which I think is . . . if you're not malleable to your surroundings, you're not adaptable to your surroundings, then you won't fit. And you won't get what you want out of it. I think it was easier for me to figure out how to do that here in a place I really know versus to move to a new city and it's the same. Like it's a young person's game in Chicago. It's a young person's game in Boston. It's not an older person's game there; it's a young—hospitality is a young person's game in virtually every city, and I've been to many of them. I was in five different countries last year. So, I travel a lot and I have seen a lot of cities and I've seen a lot of hospitality in those cities, and it's the same. They're not forty-five-year-old people holdin' bars down every night. They're very few and far between. So, there are far more twenty-five-year-old people. But I think, at some point pretty early on in my life, I just decided that this wasn't my in-the-meantime job. This is my what-

pays-the-mortgage job. This isn't my beer-and-cigarette-money job, so how do I find a way to continue to be in it and it continue to be my pay-the-mortgage job? You have to know how to manage your money. You make tips for a living; you have to know that there are feast and famine days, and that if you want to survive, you can't be in feast mode all of the time. We'd love to drink vintage champagne every day, right? [Laughter] Sounds amazing. But you've gotta temper it.

[00:40:49.03]

Michelle L.: So, why do you say it's mainly a young person's game? Is it the hours? Is it . . . ?

[00:40:56.23]

Steva C.: It's the hours. It's what you're willing to put up with. It's the fact that . . . when you're twenty-five, you think the worst thing that can happen to you is that you break an arm or a leg and then you can't work. Right? When you're forty-five, if you haven't been to the doctor in five years—like when you're forty-five, the concept that you don't have health insurance is just not a thing you think about, right? Or it's a primary concern; should be a primary concern. When I was twenty-five, I was like, "Oh, I don't have health insurance. That's fine. I'll be fine; everything'll be fine." And thankfully, it wasn't—I didn't break an arm or a leg in that time, but I certainly lived without health insurance. Because it didn't cross my mind. It didn't stress me out to not have it. At forty-two, the thought of not having health insurance is like not having car insurance. Like, it's just not a thing that I would think to go without. So, yeah. I mean, it's hours. It's . . . your Peter Pan attitude about life. [Laughter] Which is great; don't lose it. It's awesome. But . . . you gotta be a

party facilitator, and so you gotta be fun and that kinda thing, and you'll put up with a lot more when you're twenty-five. Because, to me, there's a big difference between being a server and being a waiter. Someone who serves you something is . . . they serve you. If I'm waiting on you, I'm attending to you. Right? So, I'm creating an experience. I'm not simply serving you something and then I'm outta here. So, I think that it takes people time to learn that. Hopefully, there are people who, at twenty-five, want to be in a career; a hospitality career. It's also, like, now when I was twenty-five, it wasn't a career. You know? Like . . . I always knew that this would be my career, but my parents definitely kept tryin' to talk to me about—I didn't finish college, so they kept tryin' to talk to me about, "Just finish college and you can be a teacher. You're such a great teacher. That could be your career." I was like, I feel great about what I'm doin'. I've never asked you for money. I'm not in a place where I'm struggling and I'm paycheck to paycheck and I'm worried, because I know that I will make money, and that I have to work to do it, but that I will make money. So I'm not worried about it. You know? But yeah, I mean, it's a young person's game in the invincibility factor. When you're twenty-five, you think you're invincible. When you're twenty-five, you don't think about twenty years from now. So, they're in it and they're doin' it and it's fun and it's great. Will you still be doin' it in ten years? I don't know. I'm not thinkin' about that. [Laughter] You know? Did you think that you would be—what'd you think you would be doin' at twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five?

[00:45:11.17]

Michelle L.: Yeah, I don't know that I thought twenty years in advance. I just went to college and studied what I wanted to study. [Laughter]

[00:45:18.27]

Steva C.: Right.

[00:45:20.11]

Michelle L.: 'Cause that was okay in the early 2000s, before the recession. That was all right. [Laughter]

[00:45:27.24]

Steva C.: Yeah, of course. Which is great.

[00:45:31.13]

Michelle L.: Yeah. As a freelancer now myself, how did you maintain that positive attitude that you knew you would always find work? That's hard. [Laughter]

[00:45:44.08]

Steva C.: It's very hard. It's so hard. I . . . I've been lucky to be able to hustle work. And the way that I kept doing it is that I was not too proud to work somebody's catering event and I would say yes to bartending weddings or, you know. If I had a free day and somebody wanted to pay me a hundred dollars for four hours' worth of work, I said yes. I think that there are people that get into one line of a career and then they never think that they can

go back from that. I see this with a lotta friends who step from behind the bar but still are in the liquor business. You don't really see this in Alabama because we're a control state, but there are brand ambassadors for liquor brands, right? So, I've seen several people who don't want to go back to bartending after they've worked for a brand because that brand job didn't work out. That they need to hopscotch to another brand job. It's always perplexing to me because you started bartending. So, it's not a step down. Right? Conversely, when I was in that super freelance time and someone would ask me to wait tables at an event, I said yes. I'm never not gonna be a waiter. I'm a decent bartender; I'm a great waiter. I say that with, hopefully, not a lot of ego. If I think I have a good skill, it's that I'm a great waiter. The ability to read a room, the ability to read the people that you are with, the ability to make them feel comfortable, the ability to be friendly without being their friend. To detach yourself. You know, I say all the time, "Oh, I make it look fun on the internet." Like your internet versus reality, you learn that; I learned that waiting tables. I have a dessert voice, because I learned how to make people feel at ease and want to be still in that experience. Like no one hates dessert, right? Dessert is great.

[00:49:04.19]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Right.

[00:49:05.04]

Steva C.: But it's just a matter of, do you want to continue to be in this experience? So, let me tell you about how much longer you could be here. That's what dessert is. Dessert is, let's prolong our time together. So, that kinda thing. It's a challenge, for sure. I mean,

freelance is great, and it's terrible at the same time. [Laughter] It's so great. It's so great to be able to be like, "I can be off on a Tuesday." But it's terrible too. My regular call with my Tiki by the Sea partner is on Sundays, because that's the easiest day for us both to have a call. Do I want to have an hour-long call on a Sunday? No. Do I want to work for three hours after this call because now we've set up for the rest of the week and I'm not just gonna leave it until Monday. It's just easier to do it on Sunday. So, when you're freelance, one of the things is, "I can work from anywhere" is a double-edged sword. I can work from anywhere, so I go to Europe for two weeks every year. I have for the last five years. Or I take a trip in January for two weeks. I didn't go this year for extenuating circumstances, but . . . I can go because as long as I have my computer, I can work from there. But that is also . . . that sucks. [Laughter] Right? Because you're in an airport where you should typically be tryin' to eat somethin', maybe. Or read a book or, just like, relax. You're like, "Ah, let me send these ten e-mails before I get on the plane and I don't have Wi-Fi service."

[00:51:19.18]

Michelle L.: Yeah.

[00:51:20.29]

Steva C.: I fly so much that my phone just recognizes the Birmingham airport wifi. Just jumps onto it automatically. I'm a regular there. But that's my choice to stay in Birmingham, you know? That's the sacrifice I make to be able to still be in Birmingham, because Birmingham does not fly direct to one single place. It may connect to a million places,

and the one time you need to go to that place it connects to, then you still have a connection to somewhere. It's ridiculous.

[00:52:02.10]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about. I don't know what we should talk about first, about the pop-up dinners which I've been lucky enough to go to one of them, or the Tiki by the Sea project?

[00:52:20.07]

Steva C.: We can talk about Swing Shift first, since it's Birmingham-related.

[00:52:25.13]

Michelle L.: How did that start?

[00:52:28.14]

Steva C.: It started in 2014. I'd been thinkin' a lot about it, because I knew I didn't want to transition from Veranda to Galley. And they were gonna be closed for an undetermined amount of time. They, of course, say a month; it was, of course, like three months. I just couldn't go three months without working. So, not for my sanity. I have a savings account that I've, like, padded over the years specifically for that. Being freelance, you know how that is. But, for my sanity, I couldn't just not work for three months, right? So, I had seen pop-up dinners in other places, and there were some people sort of doing one or two here or there in Birmingham. You know, especially in that time, people were very receptive;

they're still very receptive to it in Birmingham. But at that time, people were very receptive to it, and so I knew it would be a thing I could accomplish. And I have a lot of friends who are chefs. I just made them go along with. I sort of Tom Sawyer, Huck Finned them. "It's gonna be so much fun! You're gonna come and cook." [Laughter] "We'll get to hang out together and work. People will pay us for it. It's gonna be great." [Laughter] "Whitewash this wall. It's gonna be fun." So, that's how it started. There are a lot of really great chefs in this town that, in that time, were transitioning to other places. Like my first dinner was with Haller McGee, who's the chef at Cayo Coco now, and he had just left Satterfield's in that time. So, he was in a transition. So, it was a perfect time for both of us. I've done several dinners with Victor King who now owns the Essential with his business partner, Kristen, and they own another place in Homewood called Bandit, a bakery. So, in his transition from Bottle & Bone we did several dinners together. I've done a ton of dinners with John Hall, who I've known for twenty-five years. When he moved back to Birmingham from New York, he was doing Saw's, and then pre-Post Office Pies, we started doin' a lot of dinners together. We still do dinners together because he wants to still do elevated food. So, we still do a lot of dinners together. I've done dinners with Roscoe Hall, who is at Rodney Scott Barbecue now. I've done dinners with Will Drake, who owns Hero. So, they all want to do fun things. Like, that's the great thing about a pop-up dinner. It's an isolated experience, right? They're really great because people trust you. In that setting, it's wild to me that in that setting, people trust you almost implicitly, where they wouldn't have that amount of trust in a restaurant. You know? They don't really need to see what the menu is; they trust that it's gonna be great and that you're gonna provide them with this experience that you've promised. They just

come with the expectation that it's gonna be fun. You know, and I give 'em parameters of, "If you're a vegetarian or a vegan, or you have a specific dietary restriction, please tell me about it." So, it's just that kind of experience, and they're just very fun. It's a great way for me to continue to see the Birmingham community and Birmingham has really grown in the last five years. It's a lot younger than it used to be. So, there are a lot of people moving to Birmingham. That was not the case five years ago or ten years ago, which is great. So, that's why I started doing Swing Shift and why I continue to do it. And it lets me be a part of this community in relation to food, which I need to be near.

[00:58:04.07]

Michelle L.: So, where will you go from here? I know you may want to talk a little about the Tiki by the Sea, but what all other projects are you . . . thinking about?

[00:58:17.22]

Steva C.: You know, I want to include Birmingham always, right? Swing Shift, Atomic, Tiki by the Sea are the big things in my life, but I also host a cocktail competition every year that is just for fun. I usually pick a liquor that won't be sponsored and I pay for everything, and the kids in Birmingham compete. I started doing it in 2014 because Alabama's a control state; we don't have regional cocktail competitions. There are people in this town that enter cocktail competitions, move on to regionals, move on to nationals, and they've never competed in front of people. So, they're just not prepared to do it. That, to me, is unfortunate. I wanted to find a way to help those people because they represent Birmingham and, by proxy, they represent me, and also, they're a part of my community,

so I care about them. So, I just started doin' cocktail competitions that are ridiculous and fun, and everybody has a great time. And that's what they're supposed to be. But then, they're also—they have a practice. Because if they throw their cocktail shaker off the stage because they're so nervous, nobody's gonna be mad at them. You know? We're gonna help them. So.

[01:00:03.26]

Michelle L.: That's awesome.

[01:00:04.23]

Steva C.: Yeah. It's super fun. And Birmingham is the kinda place that I want to fold into my embrace all the time. I want to be around these people. So, the things that I have on the horizon are building Tiki by the Sea, and I have a few other, like, smaller cocktail event projects in the works. I do a little bit of work with a lot of people. So, parlaying that into a larger community.

[01:00:56.19]

Michelle L.: Well, and I know we're gettin' close to when you've actually gotta go to work.

[Laughter]

[01:01:00.25]

Steva C.: Yeah, you're good.

[01:01:02.22]

Michelle L.: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wish people knew about you or waitressing or bartending? Anything that you would like recorded for posterity.

[Laughter]

[01:01:17.10]

Steva C.: Gosh. I think you got me. I think that I'm appreciative that this is a career that is taken seriously now. That twenty years ago, when I started doin' it, it wasn't. It is a career. And it's also hard work. It's not always fun. Being nice to someone works both ways. So, you know, have a little bit of graciousness towards the people who wait on you. They are actually people, too. Become a regular at a place and you're involved in that person's life. So, give as much as you take, you know? 'Cause we're not endless wells. Though it seems that way, you know?

[01:02:39.21]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] All right, well, thank you so much.

[01:02:42.16]

Steva C.: Thank you so much.

[*End of interview*]