



An Bui

The Answer Brewpub

Mekong

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Date: March 15, 2023

Location: The Answer Brewpub, Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: 1 hour 8 minutes 58 seconds

Project: Tapping Into Richmond Beer

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is March 15th, 2023. I'm here in Richmond, Virginia. Do you mind introducing yourself? Tell us who you are.

An Bui: Yes. An Bui, Chief Beer Officer at Mekong, and Chief Beer Officer Operator at The Answer [Brewpub], 49 years old.

Sarah Rodriguez: And when were you born?

An Bui: I was born in 1974 in Vietnam. And we moved to the US in the mid-[19]80, part of the boat people in the '80s. And here we are, and we've been here ever since.

Sarah Rodriguez: Here in Richmond ever since?

An Bui: Yes, here in Richmond ever since. We have a group of sponsor us here, and they were so nice that we couldn't move anywhere else. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: You can't go anywhere else?

An Bui: [Laughter] Yeah.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit more about where you grew up and your family?

An Bui: Yes. So we grew up in a very small town about two hours southwest of Saigon. Saigon, back in the day, was the capital, south. But right now we—I was born at the end of the Vietnam War. Before the south lost the war, Saigon was the capital of the south, and up north was Hanoi. But now the south lost, so the whole country's communist, so Hanoi is now the

capital. So Saigon ruled back then. We were about two hour southeast of Saigon. It's a very small town. So we were farmers, and my dad was a—it was a small town, so he's pretty much like a mayor but in a tribe of people, so like a tribe leader [Laughter] but it's the modern day, so he's a mayor.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember about how many people lived there?

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An Bui: I'm not sure. I left when I was young. It was very small. Everyone was a farmer, so pretty much rice was in the staple, rice, corn, some bean, some peanut. And then they raised some pig and some cow in that area. But during the war, man, I was young, and my dad was part of the South Vietnamese Army, so he was away fighting. So I'm always tag along with my mom out in the field, trying to survive.

Sarah Rodriguez: Did you have any siblings?

An Bui: Yes. We have or I have eight siblings: five brother and three sister.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where are you?

An Bui: And I'm number five in the pecking order. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

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An Bui: A big family. Well, when you live in a small town, you need labor. So, back there, labor is the older kids. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Did y'all help with the farming?

An Bui: Yes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

An Bui: Yeah, all the kids have different chore every morning. Some go up the mountain, getting wood. Some go down to the rice field, picking up weed and [Laughter] moving water in and out.

Sarah Rodriguez: So helping out in different ways?

An Bui: Yeah, helping, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

An Bui: And the girls stayed at home, help mom with cooking and clean the house.

Sarah Rodriguez: Well, speaking of, could you tell me what food was like in your house kind of growing up?

An Bui: Yeah, when I was born, it was '74, and that's pretty much at the end of the war, so time's a little tougher where I was, and food was a little harsh in our family.

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'Cause I can still remember that every meal, I feel like my belly's still empty; either that or I'm a kid, and I have a bottomless pit. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: A bottomless pit, yeah, I know. [Laughter]

An Bui: Yeah. But I feel like every meal that I eat, I'm still hungry. And then when I got here, in the U.S., in 1985–86, I mean, food's abundant, and the portion was so big. Seeing

people—like me, growing up in Vietnam was like everything on the plate, I ate it all. But here, it's like sometimes, you can't eat it all. It's like, god, and I see people leaving stuff behind, and throwing it in the trash. I say, "Oh my god, what a waste." But it's just a different lifestyle, when compared to Vietnam, here. Here, when I move here, it's heaven [Laughter] 'cause my belly's always full. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. [Laughter]

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An Bui: And I also had a good education. In Vietnam, you're always busy working, trying to earn a meal. Education wasn't in our mind.

Sarah Rodriguez: Were you going to school in Vietnam when you were younger?

An Bui: For kindergarten.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

An Bui: When I get to first grade, I had to help my mom out, so I'm always tag along with her out in the field. But here, once I got here, the first year, I was like lost 'cause I was behind. But the second year, I took off, learning quick, once I got here.

Sarah Rodriguez: And do you remember coming from Vietnam to Richmond, what that was like?

An Bui: Yeah. So we were part of the boat people back in mid-80, or in the '80s in general, 'cause the Vietnam War end in '75, and the communists took over, so things are not good for a lot of people, so people start to find a better life elsewhere.

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So we were part of the boat people in the '80, and it took us seven days, seven night to escape from Vietnam to Malaysia. And then from there, we got accepted from the U.S., so we went to a camp in The Philippines, and we stayed there for six months. And then we wait for sponsors. So a group here in town sponsored us, and we got here in 1985. And it was the first time I ever flew in an airplane. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

An Bui: It was like, holy moly, it's so high up here, like "Ah!"

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: It was so scary. It was fun. And then got here. Back in the day, you know how when you get off the airplane, there's a step ladder to get down? Now there's a —

Sarah Rodriguez: It's like a tunnel.

An Bui: Yeah, a tunnel that connects the airplane. You just walk in the airport.

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But I stepped on that door, and I feel that breeze, said, "Whoa, this is cold." And I stepped down on the ground, said, "Man, this is like walking into a freezer." [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: It was winter here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh gosh.

An Bui: And, oh my god, it was cold! And I was looking up, saying, "Wow, is this what heaven feels like [Laughter] in a freezer?" [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] It's like walking through a freezer? [Laughter]

An Bui: Yeah, 'cause we have a T-shirt on. So we ran quick inside, and then all the sponsor was waiting for us inside, and they give us some jacket —

Sarah Rodriguez: Good.

An Bui: —yeah, a sweater, something to put on, whatever. It was cold.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. That's different.

An Bui: Yeah. And they took us to a house that they rent, and it's literally a mile from here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

An Bui: Yeah. It's an area down here, but now a lot of place are renovated. But they rent us a place, and then they took us to a Goodwill, stuff like that, to get some clothing.

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And I remember they took us to a Dunkin' Donut.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: We had Dunkin' Donut here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

An Bui: My first experience at Dunkin' Donut. Normally for us, we eat sweet at night. But this is in the morning. I'm looking around, eating dessert in the morning, drink orange juice.

[Laughter] I'm like, wow! Okay!

Sarah Rodriguez: What's happening? [Laughter]

An Bui: [Laughter] And then they took us to the grocery store, and we went into a grocer like, oh my god, we have never seen anything, like the meat section —

Sarah Rodriguez: Huge.

An Bui: —the vegetable, all the can food. Yeah, my jaw was on the floor. I said, "Wow, there's food everywhere." For us, like vegetable, we would grow at home. Pig, we had to raise them. Chicken [Laughter], you had to raise them.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah?

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An Bui: [Laughter] Yeah. But here, there it is. There's a whole section of chicken. There's a whole section of pork, beef. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

An Bui: Plenty of food, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a lot of change really quickly.

An Bui: That was amazing. Oh, man, as I say, heaven, we went to heaven.



Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Okay. And so could you talk me through a bit more of those early years in Richmond, what it was like kind of adjusting? You mentioned briefly how food changed once y'all came here.

An Bui: Yeah. So I think for my oldest sibling, it took them while, a little longer to adjust. But for me, I was young, so I was quick to adjust to things. I think the toughest part for me is just in school. So not knowing the language was tough to begin with, but I catch up quick 'cause you are young, your brain, you're willing to learn.

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So when I get here, the only two word I know is yes and no. When people point to food, you say yes or no. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's all you need.

An Bui: That's the only two word I know. But getting to school here in elementary school, I started to learn ABC, color, shape, I moved quick. I started in second grade. And then the next year, they move it because they didn't know where my age would fit into a grade. So they started me in second, and I learned so quick. And the next year they put me in fourth grade [Laughter], and I was struggling a little bit for half the year. And then the next half, they put me in third grade. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: And at the end of the year, they put me in fifth grade. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] You were just bouncing around?

An Bui: Yeah. I'm like, "Yeah, all right," you know, "challenge him!"

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: And then after fifth, just move on to six, seven, eight, nine, ten, junior, senior.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where did you go to school?

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An Bui: So there's a school, there's an elementary school not far from here. It's called Crestview. That's where I first started school. And then middle school, we went to Tuckahoe, Tuckahoe Middle School, and then [J.R.] Tucker High School. And then I didn't want to go away from my family for college, so I went to two years at a community college. And then my —

Sarah Rodriguez: J. Sarge?

An Bui: J. Sargeant, yeah, J. Sargeant Community College. And that's when my dad, my parents, that's when we sponsored our parents here in '92. So they got here, and then they see —

Sarah Rodriguez: Your parents?

An Bui: My parents, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

An Bui: So when we left Vietnam, it was just me and my two older brother.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

An Bui: Yeah. So what we did, what my parent did was sent half and leave half, 'cause there's risk when you send kids away 'cause they might die, because a lot of family lose their kids.

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Sarah Rodriguez: It happens.

An Bui: Yeah. So my parents sent half, which, lucky for us, we made it [laugh], right. And then we sponsored, then half came over in '92. And my dad, after the war, the north won, so he was in prison, 'cause he was part of the south. He was in what they call a re-educate camp. So he was there '75 to like '84.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a long time.

An Bui: Yeah. And then once he got out, he said, "Right, kid, there's no life here, so gotta send you guys somewhere."

Sarah Rodriguez: And so he joined y'all?

An Bui: No, he didn't. He sent us first. And then after we got here, settle, and said, "Okay, let's sponsor our parents."

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Sarah Rodriguez: How old were you whenever your parents came over?

An Bui: I was a junior in high school. I was a junior in high school. And they came in '92, and I graduated in '93. And then I went to community college. And then I have two older siblings. They work in a warehouse: one in printing; one was a mechanic. So my parents looked

around and said, "Oh, man, it's tough to see you guys at one time." He just had this idea that "maybe you kids could do something together that I can see you at once." So my oldest brother's wife work at a restaurant, so we just have this idea that maybe we should open a restaurant so, that way, mom and dad always come out and see us. [Laughter]

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So that idea keep on building up for a couple years. And finally in 1995, we bought a place where Mekong is now. It was much smaller when we bought it. But now, we expanded since then. It's three times now. That's back in 1995; August 11th, 1995. That's when we bought a place called Toodoo [sp.], and we turned that into Mekong. Nobody, just except my sister, she was just a cook in the kitchen, but no one had experience running a restaurant before. [Laughter]

And I gotta say —

Sarah Rodriguez: That's an adventure.

An Bui: —we were struggling for three or four years. And there was many, many times that we were thinking about closing the place.

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But, I think, the hardship that we were grown up, it just give us more patience to go through the hardship, and make it happen out there.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so eventually, it started becoming more successful?

An Bui: Yeah. So back in the mid-80, Vietnamese cuisine is not well-known here, 'cause this town is still small. And we were trying to serve Vietnamese food, and the wine that go with the food is just not popular here. It's normally a sweeter, lighter or spicy or white wine go well

with Asian food. But this town, all they drink is merlot, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay. Those are the wine that doesn't go well [chuckle] with our cuisine.

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So it took us a while to understand and to build the fan base. Just literally just built one person at a time. So we started from the scratch, so trying to build the foundation. So when we first opened, we're thinking, "Yeah, let's make this happen." You think if things are there, you'll be successful. But, no [Laughter], when things are not there, you have to build a foundation from scratch, so literally one brick at a time. It took us a while. So we figured if the wine doesn't work, then we could try the beer. So three years later, we're struggling, and say, "Yeah, maybe we should give beer a try." So we start carrying Belgian beer that's kind of like [in] a wine bottle. So we have a nice, fancy-looking wine bottle. Why can't we carry a fancy-looking beer bottle, right? [Laughter]

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And the beer are more favorable for pairing to Asian cuisine than the wine.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

An Bui: And people here drink beer. So that's when started replacing the wine with some—we still have some of the wine, but the majority we focus on beer. So we started doing some beer pairings, some free beer tasting, and then, when people come in, we would introduce them to a beer. And then literally every month, we would have a beer tasting. So, back in the day, there's no social media, so what you do is you have a phone, right?

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] Yeah.

An Bui: So I have a notebook or a notepad. So I would come there. I had a—people with myself 'cause I work behind the bar and manage up front.

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As people come in, and I just introduce them to a beer. So if they like beer, they say, "Oh, you know what, he's a beer lover." So, yes, I would get his name and phone number down, and say, "Hey, we have beer tasting here. If you're interested, I'll get your name and phone number down, and we'll just call you or text you when we have an event." Literally, we create lists. And back then, I mean, this town was, I have to say, I mean, all they drink is Bud Light and Miller Lite and Budweiser 'cause, literally, every craft beer does not exist here. I mean, it's like a desert. So we built that one person at a time, a small group, and now [Laughter] we're a destination in town. I mean, we're part of it.

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I don't take credit for building the whole thing, but it's great to see that, from the start and now, from one brewery back in the day, you see like 60 brewery in town. So it's amazing.

Sarah Rodriguez: How were you finding beers early on in those days?

An Bui: So, luckily, when I was at high school in my junior, senior, I work a place called Chi-Chi. It's a Tex-Mex place. And one of the guy, one of the GM there, he was from Pennsylvania, and he collect a lot of different beer. So he had a party at his place one time. He invite a bunch of people, and I came over. I was not quite legal age to drink yet, but I see a lot of beer on the table. I said, "Wow." And he decorates out with lots of different beer. I was amazed, looking at it, wow.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Just how many different types?

An Bui: Yeah, I mean, I didn't know that there [Laughter] were so many different types of beer, because I've never seen Belgian or German beers as like the amount that he collect with all the bottles. So he got some beer in a bottle he'd pop out for people to taste, well, you know, for legal people to taste.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: I was happy to be there. To me, before that experience, beer had been kind of bitter, skunky. It's like I'm not a big fan. But he had a couple of bottled German beer on a table, and said, "An, give it a taste." It's like, "I don't know, I just don't like that bitter taste, skunky kind of beer." He said, "No, give it a taste." It was a doppelbock, and I tasted it. "Oh, this is not bitter. It's on the sweeter side. It tastes like raisin and banana."

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I said, "Oh wow." So my eye was wide. My eye was popped wide open. My jaw was on the floor. I said, "I didn't know beer tastes like this." [Laughter] It was good.

Sarah Rodriguez: So different.

An Bui: Wow, yeah. And there was a couple more doppelbock that I taste, and it's like, man, this is good. So that opened a can of worm in my head on beer. So, after that, every time I see a beer from German or Belgium, I'm curious that I want to taste. So I have that knowledge back into my head. So when the restaurant is not doing well, I was like, "Maybe we should give

beer a try," 'cause I kind of know some profile in my head with beer and the cuisine that we have here, so I was like, yeah, we can do some beer tasting, beer pairing.

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So when people come in, when I introduce people to beer, they say, "An, yeah, pick us a beer or what's this? What would a beer pair well with this?" So I have this knowledge of beer that I know I like, and the food that I understand. It's like, "Yeah, that dish, I know a beer that I can let you taste with, I could let you pair with." And then just build up slowly, build that foundation, one brick at a time. And I began to have this, I guess, what's that term—in town that's a place that's known for "oh, let's go here to have Belgian or German beer with cuisine." So we kind of create a bar in town for places to carry beer, come by and drink beer.

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And then, after that, we have a small community that's supporting us, and then that community, all of a sudden, there are people in town start opening a beer bar. That's when Capital Ale House pop up. They have one downtown, and they have one out in Innsbrook, which is like two miles from here. I mean, they have like four or five places in town. All of a sudden, bam, whoa, we have a real community now that can support a place. And after that, Hardywood was to open up, Strangeway, Lickinghole. So breweries started to open up because the community is getting bigger. So it's like now that we've got beer coming in, people want it more, and say, "Oh, what if we can taste fresher beer that's not coming in from out of the country or out of town? How about we taste fresh beer locally?"

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So that's when breweries start to open up, brewing fresh beer. It's like how good is that when beers in the backyard taste fresh? [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: So you started carrying more local beers?

An Bui: Yeah. So we still have our bread and butter, Belgian beer. But then the beer scene get bigger. There's the Belgian beer crowd, German beer crowd, American craft beer, the IPA, the fruity. So we start carrying, you know, just listen to our fan base, when people come in, what they like to drink. So we start to carry what beer people like to drink.

Sarah Rodriguez: How many taps do you have now?

An Bui: The story on draft. Okay. I can tell you a story on draft.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, yeah?

An Bui: I mean, we were doing decent, not well but decent, throughout the years up to the housing crash, back in 2008.

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Before that, we do mostly beer bottle: 12-ounce, 32-ounce, 750, what we known for, the Belgian beer. So the housing crash, and we took, I don't know, a 30-40% drop in sales. I'm like, ah, what are we gonna do? 'Cause the first which had hit us was the dot-com boom, was the '99, and that's when we were starting. We were struggling anyway, [Laughter] so we might as well struggle through it. And then after that, we were doing well with Belgian beer and Vietnamese food. And then the housing market crashed, so literally this is our first real recession that we had. And it's like, oh, what are we gonna do? It's like, my god.

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It took me a couple months. There was some night just sitting in the dark room like begging God. How can we come out of this, or how can we go through this? But what's good is that it's a family, so we stick together. The sibling doesn't get any wage or stuff. It was okay. Let's get through this, and skip the wage and anything, just get through this. So I'm like, man, this is rough. So one night, I was sitting, I said, "What if we start installing draft beer?" Because I was thinking the margin would be bigger. So the next day, I said, "Well, I'm gonna shop around for a kegerator." [Laughter]

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It happened to be one of the beer rep that we buy beer from said, "Oh, shoot, I've been going down to this account, down the beach. It's a hotel. I think it's a hire thing. And they have a kegerator there they don't use anymore." So I asked him, "Can you ask 'em how much they sell it for?" It's a used kegerator with three half-keg inside, and they say 500 bucks. Deal! [Laughter] I told him, "All right, so next time your truck delivers down there, can you pick that up too?" It was great. They went down there to deliver their beer, they pick up our kegerator, and then they deliver here. So I put it in the back bar. It's still there, our first kegerator.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

An Bui: Yeah. We put three keg in. That was our beginning of our journey with the draft beer.

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And it sells so well that the following month, I'm like, oh, okay, how can I maximize this kegerator? So it was a three-keg, so I bought a tower that turned it into a nine-tap. [Laughter] So what I do, I use the other system. Instead of half-keg, you know what, do all the six though, so from three beer to nine beer. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's huge.

An Bui: Yeah, oh my god. And then 'cause the keg a great price, it enabled us to mark the beer low. So, back in the day, we do like a draft pour \$3, \$4.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really? [Laughter]

An Bui: Yeah, well, 'cause recession, right? People are in the park outside. I'm like, "You guys depressed? Come in. It's more fun. Drink a pint of beer." [Laughter]

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Well, you're still doing well. We won't broke you. And then the beer was pouring. We had distribution say, [indistinct] wow. They sell so many keg! [Laughter] So, three months later, I was like, wow, this is great. I gotta get me another kegerator. So I bought a new one, just like that model, turned it into nine more taps, so we have 18 tap.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh my gosh.

An Bui: Yeah, 18 tap, and that two keg is still behind the bar. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

An Bui: Yeah. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's funny.

An Bui: Still behind the bar. And then a year later —

Sarah Rodriguez: So it's pretty old at this point.

An Bui: Yeah, it's very old. And then the draft save us! I mean, I think we're out of the recession faster than anybody else.

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And a year later, it's like, wow, this is great. Wow. You know what? Draft beer it is. So we clear an area behind the bar, and we build a cooler, and put 36 draft lines.

Sarah Rodriguez: Thirty-six?

An Bui: Yeah. So 36 and then 18, yeah, the total we have next door [in Mekong]. So the rest is history.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

An Bui: We came out of the recession, and then all the local breweries start to open up. Hardywood, I think, opened in 2009 or '10. And then we start catering to the homebrewers in town that you see. And then the Great American Beer Festival, which is run by the big homebrew branch there, well, what's it called? What's it?

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But we won best beer bar two, three years in a row. It's like, wow, yeah. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: For what beer did you win?

An Bui: I mean, best beer bar.

Sarah Rodriguez: Just in general?

An Bui: Yeah, in the whole country.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

An Bui: They have regional. Each region, they nominate a place. And then if you win that region, they put you against the other region, and they vote for it. We were like, "I don't know how a small place like that from Richmond that win two, three years in a row." And then I have to fly out to Colorado, the same with GIBS, and they give this little plaque. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. [Laughter] That's awesome.

An Bui: Yeah, and it was so great. I was like, wow. And I was seeing, wow, all these brewery had opened in town.

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It's like, oh, you know what, it's gonna affect Mekong going forward 'cause people shifted to the brewery. So I was like, oh, how can we make it through the next round? So that's when my mind said, oh, you know what, maybe we can open a brewery. [Laughter] So that's when this place [The Answer] opened up.

Sarah Rodriguez: What year was that?

An Bui: 2014. And the lady who owned this place, obviously ran this place, and she was struggling. I talked to her a little bit. It's like, "Oh, yeah, An, we're not doing too well. I'd like to move back to Virginia Beach, and spend some time with my family." So she got about a two-

year lease left. And I said, "Well, I can talk to the landlord, and restructure the lease, and take over."

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So that's when I took over the lease in 2013, and got The Answer going in 2014.

Sarah Rodriguez: What was the space that The Answer's in? What was it before?

An Bui: It's a very strange place. When we opened Mekong, this place had always been a nightclub.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh?

An Bui: Yeah. But they only opened Friday and Saturday. And after that, they sold it to a family, and they opened up El Fuego. So it's kind of funny that they opened up. They had country music up front, and they had dance music back here.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

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An Bui: Yeah. And they catered to Latin Americans, and guys could come in with a big hat, boots that are up to your knee. It's kind of up to his knee. But they had that for a few years, and it changed hand again. [Laughter] Changed to El Tucanazo, and then they have that going for a while. And then they sold it to a guy up in D.C., so it turned into a Korean place, Soju. So they try to do karaoke and then Korean food. That's going for a while, and then they sold it to the lady down the beach. She kept it the same, but then she bring in the country music [Laughter] —

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, interesting. [Laughter]

An Bui: —for a while, and then it's not working out for her, so now we have The Answer.

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But the history of this building is that it was a furniture shop in the '50s. And then before that, it was a speakeasy in a basement, so I think that prohibition, back in the day. So in the basement, there's still a pizza oven. There was a bathroom down there. And then there was an exit, but they closed the exit already. And then there's also a tunnel. So there was a tunnel that go across the street, so I guess they do some illegal stuff back in the day. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. [Laughter] How interesting.

An Bui: Yeah. But now they cement that end. But this building has some history.

[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. A lot of history, for sure.

An Bui: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's interesting.

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Could you talk a bit more about, I guess, what your role is as it relates to actually the brewing? 'Cause I guess it's one thing to sell the beers, but now you started brewing the beers. What were the early days of brewing like, and how did you do that?

An Bui: I mean, being at Mekong, knowing the beer taste well, but I didn't know anything about brewing. But getting to hanging out with people that do homebrew, so talked to him, tasting stuff. I watched him brew once or twice, here and there, but never actually get myself into

brewing beer. So when I opened this place up, I tapped one of the guys that was part of the homebrewers.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

An Bui: Yeah, I get to know him well. And every time he would bring his homebrew beer in, he would let me taste it, and I said, "Oh, this guy know his stuff. He can brew."

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So I told him, "If I ever open a brewery, man, the first guy I'll interview is you."

Sarah Rodriguez: What's his name?

An Bui: Brandon Tolbert. So when I opened this place up, before I opened this up, I get him on board. Back then, he doesn't know the commercial side of brewing, so I would send him to Asheville to learn about hops, about yeast. And then there was a brewery, there was another brew pub that needed someone to brew. So I told him, "Why don't you go there, and learn the commercial side?" He was there for six months, and then when this place was about to open up, I got him on board. And then the system, the brewery system got here, so he was helping installing, and then, after that, practiced some test batch.

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And then we opened September of 2014. And at first we brew . . . our brew process was slow. We brew a batch in there just to get comfortable with it. But my goal here is to brew our own beer but also to carry guest beer. So my thinking is that to be able to compete with all the brewing town, or to have a special place that when people come in town. I mean, every place brew in a different style. And to come back to The Answer, what's different about The Answer?



We brew our—you can come in and taste fresh beer. But we can also have guest beer in some of the style we don't brew.

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So you can taste our beer and a guest beer, so that's kind of different between us and all the brewing town. So we've tried to be one of the piece of the puzzle where people in town, yeah, you should go here and taste this. This place heavily IPA, or this place have stout, lager. Or Tony, he have a homebrew shop [Original Gravity], and he do all sorts of style. Here, you come in, guest beer. We have [indistinct] style. We have fruited beer. We have IPA. We have lager. So it's a different variety.

Sarah Rodriguez: So it gives you varieties because you're bringing other people in?

An Bui: Yeah. And even though I don't brew beer but I know the knowledge, I understand the taste with our fan base. So I'm always next to my brewer, talking.

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We share our thoughts, and knowledge, and how to make better beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember the opening day of The Answer and what that was like?

An Bui: Yeah, it was nervous. It was my first time opening a big place. To me, this is a big place. And we have to hire outside. So I'm getting used to family doing everything now [Laughter], and now to hire people and manage people.

Sarah Rodriguez: It's different.

An Bui: Yeah. So what I found is that, god, to manage people is tough. Still this day, it's the toughest thing, managing people. But the first day, it was overwhelming.

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The community come out to support us. It's just that years and years of building friendship, building that craft beer scene, and just people come out overwhelmingly supporting us. This p was jam-packed, and everyone was in the weeds.[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: First day, first week, everyone's learning the system. They're learning the way, where the beers are, what kind of glass weights you should use, the POS system. So, I mean, a lot of people, our speed was slow, so everyone was sweating. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. [Laughter] Of course.

An Bui: There was some people that's not happy with the wait and stuff, but they forgive us, 'cause it's the first day, and things are a little slow.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense for just starting up. So is it still mostly family at Mekong?

An Bui: Yes. So we try to run like yin and yang. So next door has been family run. So it's been for 28 years. But when we opened this place, how can we complement this place with Mekong? So what's missing with Mekong is fresh beer, right? So that's why I said, okay, we can brew fresh beer here, so the fan base can come to Mekong, taste what they used to taste. And if

they like to try a fresher beer, they can come next door, and taste fresh beer, and they can also buy some to take home. And then on this side, instead of having Vietnamese food, we should have like Vietnamese street food.

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That's the way we started out. And since then, COVID hit us. This place isn't back to pre-pandemic yet. Now, just the menu, the food menu is very small. We haven't quite, you know, fully back to the full menu yet but slowly. The pandemic hit everyone. It's something. I've been here since, in the '80 that, some of these that have never hit us. So it was two years of tough, a dark time for us, for this place. But next door, family, again, we stick together, try to get through it. So when the pandemic hit, we closed next door.

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The state closed us for three months. It shut down. And then they let the restaurant and food places that have to-go. So then next door, we opened back up for to-go. And this place, we sold beer. And then when we have a chance to open back to-go, it's like, oh, it's not really a food place. So we delayed the open until—well, shutdown was in March. We delayed until August to open this up.

Sarah Rodriguez: To open The Answer?

An Bui: Yeah, because by August, they let us back for seating. You can now have people inside with six feet apart. So we had like six tables in this place, and no bar service. At that point, we try to get the staff back, but most of 'em doesn't want to come back. They have the unemployment.

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And then we just have the manager come back, 'cause they're on a salary. So I've been paying 'em the whole time, and they come back, and help out to open up, and try to get it going. And it was tough. It's six table. This place is huge. The rent [Laughter]—you know.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

An Bui: It doesn't make sense to open this place back up. We try to brew more beer, put it in a can, and sell to-go. People could come in, and buy beer to take home.

Sarah Rodriguez: Were you canning at that point, before the pandemic?

An Bui: Yes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. So you had the canning —

An Bui: We had the canning, yes.

Sarah Rodriguez: —there to —

An Bui: Yeah, literally right before the pandemic, the can come in.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh wow.

An Bui: And before the pandemic, there the can, and then we have a few more tanks come in. So, literally, if those tank didn't come in, we wouldn't can a lot of beer. But it's nice that during the pandemic, we installed some tank 'cause it came in, and we installed some tank, test

some canning stuff. So we start canning some beer. And still, I mean, even selling beer here, it's just about 30% of what we make before, so still it's —

Sarah Rodriguez: It's still very small.

An Bui: —short of rent and salary. Yeah. Throughout the past years that whatever money we make, we save up, so we just slowly put it in.

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It's kind of like our reserve that we put in that we tap into. And the month before the pandemic hit, I was actually in Florida 'cause there was a brewery in Florida was up for sale. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh wow.

An Bui: And I wanted to check that out, and think about open a branch down there, down in Florida. But I had a deposit down, and then, bam —

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh gosh.

An Bui: —the pandemic hit. And luckily, I was like, "Oh, this is not good." So I have to call my lawyer and say, "Oh, this is not good. We might have to bail, and lose the deposit."

Luckily, the deposit's small. But, anyway, so that brewery didn't happen. The pandemic hit.

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And, luckily, we have that reserve that we were thinking about buying that place, that brewery in Florida, which slowly we tapped into the reserve, and it lasts to this day. And then once the pandemic slowed down, our goal is to come out of this pandemic is to focus back on the beer. So

the last year that we've been trying to focus on the beer, try to improve the beer, so we're just now where we want the quality of beers. So our next goal is to focus on the food.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's exciting.

An Bui: It's that—to me, I can't do multitask. I can only focus on one at a time. But, I guess, I'm a slower speed, so make sure. My passion is still in beer, so make sure that beer get back to the level that I'm happy with before we move to something else.

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And now that we're kind of happy where the beers are, up next, let's focus on the food, try to get this place back.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. Speaking of food and beer, you talked about, early on at Mekong, doing pairings. Could you talk about what, if you remember, what some of those early pairings were, what dishes, and then what beers you remember pairing together?

An Bui: Yeah. So Vietnamese food are fresh and spicy; lots of vegetables. So it go great with Belgian beer, especially like a blonde, like a Saison, right? So it could be like a chicken in like a spicy lemongrass sauce. It go well with a Belgian golden or even a Belgian blonde or a Saison or a trippel. It go great.

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But for a wine, I mean, you have to dig deep to find a wine. But, then again, if that wine pair well, not many people know what it is, or they might not like the wine. But beer, I mean, a lot of people drink beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

An Bui: It's great to pair the beer with. And then like a clay pot chicken or pork, it's like a soy sauce, heavy base, with black pepper and brown sugar. A lot of people say, "Yeah, that would be tough to pair a beer with." But, no, you can pair that with a Belgian quad, German doppelbock. Like a sweeter, maltier beer would go well with it. So when people come in and say, "Yeah, gimme a clay pot chicken. What's a new beer that you got that I can pair that with?"

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I say, "Oh, I got some new Belgian quad that you can taste." Literally, I will email or call every importer in the U.S. that import Belgian beer as, "Hey, what kind of beer you got? How can I get it to Virginia?" And then you start getting a connection, and then the next thing, you know what, maybe I should start going to Belgium, and start tasting beer. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Hey, go to the source.

An Bui: Yeah. So you got the connection from the sales rep to the distributor to importer, so when you get to Belgium, "Hey, which brewery should I visit?" They say, "Oh, you know what? I got a connection to this place. Let me introduce you to the brewer or to the owner." So it's great to have a connection. So you get to Belgium, and then you go to the brewery.

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They show you around like, "I'll just show you around here. This is the front bar, back of the brewery." So they would give me a tour of the brewery, and then taste the beer. And then if the brewery's in a small town, they would take me around town, go to places that carry their beer, and then they have their beer paired with food at that place. So that knowledge start building in

my head. So I take some of that knowledge back home, and start building the beer event. There were times when I do a big beer event where U.S. beer versus Belgian beer, so like U.S. Belgian-style beer versus Belgian beer. So, back then, there's like Allagash.

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Allagash White would go up against like Whitaker or Hoegaarden, so have that. Here's Allagash for the U.S. Here's Hoegaarden from Belgium. So people would come by and taste them.

Sarah Rodriguez:     Hosting these at Mekong?

An Bui:             Yeah, out there. And back then, it was not quite legal [Laughter] because, literally, you can't give out alcohol. That's the law. You can't. But you can give out two ounce. That's a taster. That's two ounce.

Sarah Rodriguez:     Because it's just the tasting?

An Bui:             Yeah. So there's this style here. They're the same style, but make from the U.S. and Belgium. So people would taste it. "Oh wow, man." They can taste the difference. And there's quadrupel that brew in the U.S. or quadrupel brewed by a Trappist monk. They would taste it, "wow," get people to talk, and eyes wide open, jaw on the floor.

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And then they start bringing friends in. The foundation's getting bigger. Now, the foundation's there. Now, we're building structure now, which is like brewing town start to open up, because there's like people demand for good beer. So lots of brewery open up.

Sarah Rodriguez:     Oh cool.



An Bui: Yeah, it's awesome.

Sarah Rodriguez: Like you mentioned, kind of building that community foundation, are there any specific memories or events that you have in your head of connecting with the Richmond community? You have talked a little bit about it.

An Bui: There's the community that we built next door, to one person at a time.

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So, to me, it's like every time that someone come in, and they say they like beer, there's a connection there. So, to me, each individual that come in that likes beer, it's like, okay, they are part of the beer community, so the conversation start to flow. I say, "Where did you have your first beer? What kind of beer you like? What's your flavor like?" I mean, the conversation's ongoing, and then just have different people, different conversations. And every time you get them into the same room, it's you introduce them to a different person, to another person that like mind, that like beer. We built this from small communities to a bigger one, and you're just walking around, say hi to people. People start talking about craft beer.

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Like before, nobody's talking about craft beer. I mean, if they drink beer, it's Bud Light, Miller Lite.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: But now, I'm like, wow, people are geeking out, talk about hops, talk about beer, or go visit a brewery or go to Belgium, go to Germany. And we start seeing like husband and wife, or boyfriend and girlfriend, come by together, tasting beer. Before, it's pretty much like a

guy thing like here. But now 'cause it's not just—beers are not skunky, bitter. I mean, they're a different beer. There's also fruited beer. The Belgian make fruited beer too. So we start—on a beer taste, I start getting some fruited beer too. I'm like, "Ladies, beers are not skunky or bitter. This area tastes like wine."

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[Laughter] So we started having fruit beer taste, or beers that are on the sweeter side, like a trippel, or a quadrupel or a doppelbock or even like a gose from Belgium or from the German. They're like on the dry side, but if they like wine that's on the tart side, this is the one they can taste. It's nice and refreshing. So seeing people get together and talk about beer, geeking out on beer, I'm like, you know what, I never thought a dream that I'd see that day. But it's just like an accident on my path that I see it, and it's like, whoa, with my own eye. This is amazing. This is awesome to see. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, I can imagine.

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Are there any favorite memories that you've had from either your time with Mekong or The Answer that stand out?

An Bui: I think, I mean, you know, a lot, but —

Sarah Rodriguez: Of course.

An Bui: But I think there's one, I think, that till now, and now that I've seen it, when I go hang out at Mekong is that Mekong has been open for so long. And then the people I hang out back in the day, now, sometimes when I walk in, I say hi to them, it's like, whoa, it's like three

generations. I hang out with them, drinking beer. Now they have kids. Their kids bring their kids. I'm like, three generations! It's like, oh my god. I'm like, wow. I mean, I've never imagined like open a place, and then try to survive. Hang out,

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have a good conversation back in the day about beer, and create that bond with them, and they bring their kids in. Throughout the years, they bring their kids in. And now, they introduce their kids to beer, great beer. And some of them that I talked to, "My kid travel. They move. They get married. They sent me beer, An. [Laughter] They sent me beer." And then sometime I run into them next door. They say, "Yeah, An, look, my son's coming back." And they're proud of their kids, so it's like whoa.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh wow.

An Bui: I'm like wow.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's special.

An Bui: I mean, a change of generation. Yeah. It's like, wow. It's just that bond. It's a father and their kid. To me, to be a bond with me to them, and then seeing me, they talk about beer with their dad and their kids. It's like, wow, this is amazing, just the bond in the family.

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Sarah Rodriguez: And what your place, I imagine, contributed to these conversations happening in their family.

An Bui: Yeah, well, with the people that I know, it's amazing. So when I see that, I mean, literally, a tear drop.

Sarah Rodriguez: Of course.

An Bui: Just seeing it, it's like, wow, it's just amazing. 'Cause having next door through a rough time to a good time, it make our family bond. We stick together. And seeing some of the family here as kids. They grow up. They graduate high school, and then they go to college. They move away. It's like, oh my god. But I've seen that they come back. They want to be here. It bring tears to my eyes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Of course, yeah. Well, speaking of kids, you have a couple kids?

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An Bui: Yes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you have two or three?

An Bui: Happily married back in 2005. I have three kids. My first one, my daughter is 16. She's in junior high school. And then my second, he's seventh grade. So, it's funny, we have a gap in every kid. [Laughter] We have one, and then we try to have fun a little bit, relax, and then have the next one. I don't know about the third one. It wasn't planned for. He's 8 years old. He's the most troubled one in the house.

Sarah Rodriguez: And are they involved with Mekong or anything right now?

An Bui: Yeah. So the oldest one, she start working at Mekong now, so I'm trying to get them into the business, slowly.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you think they or their cousins or anyone are interested in staying involved?

An Bui: Yeah. So, talk about the next generation, actually, the next generation is taking over at Mekong.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh wow.

An Bui: So my oldest brother, his two kids are next door. My sister, her two kids are also next door. So now me, my daughter's there. The second generation's taking over here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh cool.

An Bui: I don't know if they'll keep it open. I don't know how long they'll keep it open. [Laughter] But at least they're getting into it. At least they get into.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, how cool to see, I'm sure.

An Bui: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. Well, that's, for the most part, the questions I have. Is there anything I didn't ask about that you wanna mention? Anything you thought of?

An Bui: Let's see. Oh. Well, this place, we didn't win, but we get into the James Beard semifinal a couple times.

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Sarah Rodriguez: You did?

An Bui: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: The Answer did?

An Bui: The Answer did, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, no way.

An Bui: Both. The first one was—it's all beer-related.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's huge.

An Bui: Yeah. A couple times: '18 and '19, yeah, 2018, 2019.

Sarah Rodriguez: Third time's the charm maybe?

An Bui: No. It's the pandemic, yeah, just the pandemic.

Sarah Rodriguez: Ah, I see. That's cool though. That's huge.

An Bui: Yeah. I mean, it's stuff that I've never dream of.

Sarah Rodriguez: How was it learning about that you had been nominated?

An Bui: So here's a question. Here's a funny story. So when I got this call and the email, it say, "Congratulations, you are a James Beard semifinalist." So Mike Owen that you met next door, he has a store in town.

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I call him, "Hey, Mike, I got this phone call and this email that say I'm a James Beard semifinalist." And I'm like, "Dude, man, in my life, I can never grow a beard." [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: But, here you are, a semifinalist. [Laughter]

An Bui: [Laughter] And then I got a text from one of the food writers in town that said, "Congratulations, you're a JB semifinalist." And I text back, "It's only Thursday. Don't fuck around. [Laughter] Don't fuck with me." [Laughter] Literally, that's right. "It's only Thursday. Don't fuck with me."

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: 'Cause I know this. It took me for so long, I can never grow a mustache or like a beard.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

An Bui: And then she called me back, and explains it. "Oh. So that's what it is." [Laughter] Literally, I didn't know what it is. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Really? [Laughter]

An Bui: Yeah. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] That's funny.

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An Bui: So passion, hard work, and things sometime fall in your lap.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, they work themselves out.

An Bui: Yeah. But, knock on wood, I'm lucky to find I accidentally found my passion that I like. 'Cause in high school, the counselor asked me, "An, what you would like to do?" I said, "I have no idea." [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

An Bui: Yeah, literally, I have no idea. [Laughter] But working at Mekong, and struck out through the years, and accidentally fall in love with beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Well, Richmond is definitely better for it, so we appreciate it.

An Bui: Yeah. And another input I'd like to put in is that with all this, I have to give thanks to all the sponsor that sponsored us here in the '80s.

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They opened their arms, welcome us in, and help us.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who were the sponsors? Was it a family or a group?

An Bui: It was a group, yeah, it was a group, maybe like six families. But there's a family that I get along with and, till this day, I call them my parent, my adopted parent.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh really?

An Bui: Yeah. And they welcome with saying—we're totally strange to them, and my mind's like, yeah, we're stranger. I don't know. How do they open their arm, welcome with saying, take us to the grocery store, go get clothes, take us by their house, play with their kids. So that generosity instill in my head. And I'm like, yeah, whenever I have a chance, I need to give back to this community.

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So throughout the years here in town, the best way I can give back to community is what I know best is through beer, so try to build this beer community, one taste at a time, and build a



foundation. And being part of Mekong, building up this beer scene, now, I just had a dream or just a goal one day. It's like, god, I wish that Richmond would be like a tiny dot on a beer map somewhere one day. And so, voilà, I was just —

Sarah Rodriguez: It's more than a tiny dot, for sure.

An Bui: And you know what, I mean, Richmond had never been a destination, anything. A lot of city, they have destination, an excuse for people to travel there. But now people can travel to Richmond to taste beer, and they take beer vacations to Richmond now.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Well, they do. They do.

An Bui: Yeah. And then they plan out their route, when they come into town. This is the place that we need to visit. Yeah, the food scene's getting good here, so they come by, drink beer, eat food. Even music here too. So it's great. Nowadays, you can go to Richmond, and drink good beer, eat good food, and there's music. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: A lot of change.

An Bui: We kind of are centralized, right by the highway. So Midatlantic can come down, North Carolina, South Ca...all the way down to Georgia. We just meet right in middle, and just it's good for Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. For sure. Well, thank you so much, An. I really appreciate you sitting down and talking with me. Go ahead. Anything else you wanna mention?

An Bui: No, I think that's good.

Sarah Rodriguez:     Feel good?

An Bui:             Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez:     Awesome.

An Bui:             Yeah.

[End]