



Kate Lee

Hardywood Park Craft Brewery

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Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is March 16, 2023. I'm here in Richmond, Virginia. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Kate Lee: Sure, this is Kate Lee. I'm the president here at Hardywood Park Craft Brewery.

Sarah Rodriguez: And just because we don't have the forms just to confirm you consent to do this interview with me.

Kate Lee: I consent to do the interview, yes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Amazing. Could you tell me, just for the record, what your birthday is?

Kate Lee: March 28, 1976. So coming up [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Yeah, I'm also a March birthday.

Kate Lee: Aries or Pisces?

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm a Pisces.

Kate Lee: Okay, all right, my son's a Pisces.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, oh bless you.

Kate Lee: Pisces are good.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yes. We do our best.

Kate Lee: [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about you growing up? What your childhood was like, where you were born and all that?

Kate Lee: Sure. So, this is where it gets a little lengthy.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Kate Lee: I think some people have short answers to this question, but I was actually born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My mom and dad both went to school there. My mom went to nursing school, my dad Duquesne. They met, got married there, had both my sister and I there, but I actually moved away when I was two and a half years old. Up to Syracuse, New York. To the land of snow.

Sarah Rodriguez: [laughter] Yeah.

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Kate Lee: So, growing up, all I knew was snow. That we wore snow suits to school, and the gloves with the little like string on them to hold them into your jacket. And, was in Syracuse, New York until first grade when then I moved down to Vicksburg, Mississippi—stayed there through third grade and then moved up to Simsbury, Connecticut. Then, actually, in eighth grade, sorry, sixth grade, moved back up to Syracuse, New York. Then, down to Raleigh, North Carolina where I finished high school. So, growing up for me was not really living anywhere longer than two and a half years so constantly always making new friends. We didn't have cell phones or the internet back then so had to keep in touch with people via letters, which I did, which was great. Facebook has actually allowed me to reconnect with some of those people in my younger years which has been kind of neat.

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It was very cultural, very dynamic, very diverse—my childhood. Living in all those places, saw everything from what we talked about in Vicksburg, Mississippi to how it was growing up in the very cold north in Syracuse.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. What did your parents do for work?

Kate Lee: My mom was a nurse. She worked in various aspects of nursing. She was a pediatric nurse for a little while, she's been in the ER as a nurse. She worked actually with a plastic surgeon, as his nurse. My father started out in advertising, moved into manufacturing and so he was with Cooper Industries for twenty-plus years and then somehow kind of moved into the private equity business area. Started running quite a few companies and those moved him around quite a bit. The last company he had, he was actually in Boston. Actually, sorry, in Richmond, Virginia. And then the company was sold, and he's actually started his own businesses and still does a lot of that to this day even though he's technically retired.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Busy guy.

Kate Lee: Yeah, he's a busy guy. So, he's a huge inspiration, as is my mom with both their careers.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. Did you have any siblings growing up?

Kate Lee: I do, I have a sister. Her name is Nina [sp], and she's two years older than me. And, she also moved around with us all the time. We separated for the initial part of our adult life, but we've all actually ended up back here in Richmond. So, my mom and dad live here, my sister

and her family live here with her three kids, and my family's here—so we see each other all the time. We're all back together, so we pretty much consider this home now.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, nice. What was food like growing up? Your parents were working, you were moving around. Did you take food practices from where you were or what did that look like?

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Kate Lee: So, my mom was a health nut. She was an avid marathon runner. She, in every state that we lived in, always found a running club to join and that was her life. And so she was very into—hyper aware of her health, her body, what helped fuel her. So she cooked pretty healthy at home. Which, is interesting, she was raised on a farm where they ate a whole lot of bacon grease and the stuff—the animals that they raised and killed for food. So, it was very interesting the way that my mom kind of shifted her food dynamic. A lot of home cooked meals. Even when my mom worked night shift, she always had food on the table for us. We would eat out every once in a while, but it was always, you know, there was meat, there was a vegetable. For a little while, my mom was vegetarian, and I think we kind of dabbled in that quite a bit. It actually turned me into a vegetarian for quite a few years until I married my husband who was a chef. Then, he talked me out of it but—[laughter]

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Sarah Rodriguez: That can be challenging.

Kate Lee: But, I mean, there wasn't really any one singular focus. We would try new things. When we were in Mississippi, we got to know crawfish, and hush puppies and that kind of stuff

which we never had when we were up in Syracuse. Just a lot of home cooked meals, and healthy food.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you have any favorite dishes that she did?

Kate Lee: I used to love my mom's tuna noodle casserole. And I still love it to this day.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really!

Kate Lee: Yeah, she doesn't really make it anymore, I should probably request that one. But, that is a childhood meal that I remember and I think it had the peas in it and whatever made it creamy, I don't know. Those egg noodles, it was just very comforting.

Sarah Rodriguez: Tastes like nostalgia.

Kate Lee: Yeah, tastes like home.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Kate Lee: And matzah ball soup.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh! Ok.

Kate Lee: Yeah, from Syracuse. Yeah, that was the other one that is a big childhood memory for me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool, very cool. What was your introduction to beer growing up? Did your parents drink it?

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Kate Lee: My parents drank it. My parents definitely were not sheltering parents. They were responsible parents, but they weren't sheltering parents.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Kate Lee: When I was little I'd be like, "Can I try that?" And they let me try it. I always kind of liked the taste of it, but I never was like "Give me a beer," at the age of 7 or anything like that. But I always was curious, and I always thought it was interesting, and I was always exposed to it because my parents did drink beer, they drank wine, and they drank spirits. They never really overindulged in front of me; if they did, I didn't know. But, I knew what it was so I was familiar with it. When I was in college, I went to NC State and had interest in nutrition. They didn't have a full nutrition program, but they had a food science program. And that's what I ended up getting my bachelor's of science in was food science, and it wasn't until we took a class called, "Preservation Science," and it focused on fermentation.

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And the first thing we fermented was sauerkraut—which was really cool, but I was like all right, I don't know that I'm going to be doing this for a living. But then, we started talking about wine and beer. I was in college at the time, so I had tasted a few more times of what it tasted like and I was just fascinated. I love science, and I was just super fascinated with the fact that this natural process—this fermentation process—created something so interesting and different and you were learning about all the different styles—and this was wine as well—just like, you can have a porter, you can have a stout, you can have an ale, you can have a lager. Some were light, some were dark, and it was just fascinating to me that you take the same ingredients—mix them a little bit differently for the most part, use different varieties of them and you can create a completely

different beer. So I honestly started my interest in beer and brewing when I was in college and knew that's what I wanted to do. Really out of that fermentation class.

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And then my food microbiology class just won me over because I thought it was the coolest thing in the world to learn about bacteria and learn about how you have to keep things clean and how things can grow so—I'm science nerd [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, no that's cool. That's a cool introduction. Would you consider that your introduction to craft beer as well or when did you do your personal dabbling into that versus just what was at the grocery store?

Kate Lee: It was in college. Craft beer was not very popular when I was in college at all. I think the craftiest thing I drank initially was Newcastle [laughter] which because it was darker, you know, but at the time, that was super fancy. Once I started kind of learning the fact that there were different styles I got really curious about it, so once I was of age and could go purchase my own beer that was when I really started to dabble in the craft that was available.

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Kate Lee: I remember quite a few Saranac variety packs in my life. Sammy's Oatmeal Stout was one of the first stouts I had tried. And that was probably my first introduction there. Then we put on a Oktoberfest for our food science club, and we got to really dive into all the different German style beers which was really cool. So, it really kind of started then and there wasn't a lot available, but it was still interesting at the time.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. And so take me to after college. Did you come back here to Richmond?

Kate Lee: So, no. My parents didn't live in—so I was in college in Raleigh, North Carolina. My parents had actually moved while I was in college four different times as well. My dad continued on his moving track. They moved to Boston. So, like the first time I went home to visit them for college was to Boston—to a new house I had never been to before. So, I never got that go back home from college feeling.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Kate Lee: They were in Boston, they were in Ohio. And then they actually moved here to Richmond, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Kate Lee: So, they moved here my senior year. After college, I actually interviewed at Anheuser-Busch in Williamsburg, Virginia. Because I knew I wanted to go into the brewing business, and again craft breweries weren't really a thing, that was 1998. They were a thing, but they weren't huge at all. Jobs weren't readily available. I applied for an entry level supervisor position called a group manager at Anheuser-Busch, got all the way through to the final interview—very extensive interview process. And this is one of those moments that was pretty critical in my career—met with the plant manager there and had a very unfortunate interview and the one question he asked me was, “What makes you think a little girl like yourself can come in here and tell these men that have been here for twenty-plus years what to do?”

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Sarah Rodriguez: In an interview?

Kate Lee: In an interview. That was the only interview question. I answered it as best as I could. And I still stand by my answer today. And basically it was a, “No thank you, I don’t think you’re the person for this job.” And, after three, four months of interviewing where it was perfectly clear who I was and what my experience was, that was pretty shocking to hear. So, I did not get the job, and I ended up actually interviewing and receiving a job at a company called Eastern Foods down in Atlanta, Georgia who makes salad dressings—dips and sauces—Naturally Fresh, they’re in the refrigerated section. And, got a job as a research food science specialist for them. Interestingly enough, the day after I accepted the job and I was driving back to my parents’ house in Richmond, Anheuser-Busch called me and apologized for everything and basically offered me a part-time job and I said, “No, thank you.”

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Sarah Rodriguez: Mm-hmm!

Kate Lee: So.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did that feel?

Kate Lee: Yeah, it felt good. But, three years later, I still was kind of yearning to be in the beer business and still knew I wanted to do it. The folks at Anheuser-Busch who I spoke with were amazing, and they had always said, “Please contact us if you’re ever interested again in the future,” so I contacted them, and I then got flown out to Columbus, Ohio by them, interviewed for the same job that I had interviewed before and was pretty much hired on the spot.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Kate Lee: And so that started my twelve-plus-year career at Anheuser-Busch. [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Nice. Could you tell me a bit more about the kind of earlier years? Because you I guess had been in food and beverage broadly defined before, but what were your early years getting to know kind of the beer side of things at Anheuser-Busch?

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Kate Lee: Well, I remember my first day. It was actually a bit awkward, because although I was hired to work at the Columbus brewery, they actually shipped me out for a few months to the Fort Collins, Colorado brewery. I got to spend about four months there which was amazing, it was very cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Kate Lee: One of my first days of work, they took me into the taste panel. And, they sat me down with various beers in front of me. And they were just—asked me, “Tell me, tell me what you think. What are your tastes?” And you know, I’m like “Oh, uhhhhh, yeah.” For those people who have had Budweiser or Bud Light, they’re very light, they’re very clean beers. I mean, they’re intended to be that way, but if you don’t know anything about it, it’s really hard to decipher what those flavors are. And I remember it being just so unbelievably intimidating. In my head I’m like, “They taste like beer, I don’t know—what do you want me to say?” [laughter].

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Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Kate Lee: Yeah, but everybody at that brewery was unbelievable. The experience that I had right out of college was highly unrepresentative of when I first started there at Anheuser-Busch, and the Fort Collins brewery was amazing. I then was at the Columbus, Ohio brewery after that. The Merrimack, New Hampshire brewery. Then I finished off at the Williamsburg brewery, believe it or not.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh wow. Were these just production sites or did they also have tasting rooms?

Kate Lee: They were the full breweries. So they were the production sites, and I actually started in the quality department. I was hired as a Quality Group Manager which is the frontline supervisor—worked in quality way up through all the different positions until I was in Merrimack, New Hampshire, and then I was promoted to Assistant Brewmaster down at the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, the Williamsburg Brewery. So, yeah, they were production facilities.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool, cool. And what was the typical day like there?

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Kate Lee: Um—

Sarah Rodriguez: Especially, kind of, as you got your stride in.

Kate Lee: Yeah, it was a lot of putting out fires honestly. I was the supervisor and we were a unionized work force. I was not unionized—the people who worked for me were part of the Teamsters Union. I didn't do any of the hands-on labor, any of the actual making of the beer or packaging of the beer. My job was to strictly oversee the people who did those procedures and help them with decision making.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Kate Lee: If there was a problem, I'd help them solve it. If there were any questions, I'd help kind of figure all that out. It wasn't until I got into the quality material side of things and microbiology where it was all more hands on. Where I got to read the plates under the microscope and do some of the techniques.

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But, a typical day was really just whatever was thrown at me for that day, that's what I would do. I worked all three shifts, so it would rotate on a regular basis until I became more in the management side of things then it was more Monday through Friday unless we were running on the weekends, because we do. So, there is not a typical day in the beer business.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, sounds like it. For sure. And so, you go through Anheuser-Busch, you're in Williamsburg—what happens after that?

Kate Lee: Yep, so when I was in Merrimack, New Hampshire, I had had my son, so when we moved down here, we had a 1 year old. While I was at the Williamsburg brewery, I got pregnant with my second. And she's a girl—Elizah [sp]. So, I was pregnant while I was working there. Unfortunately, the dynamics that were present at that brewery, at that time, were not what I had experienced at the other three breweries. I was living in Richmond, and I was commuting, 62 miles one way.

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I had initially interviewed for a packaging job—a manager's packaging job. But, they had decided to transfer me over as Assistant Brewmaster. It's not a position I applied for, but it was

the position they offered me and I thought it was a really cool opportunity to learn. I don't think that the manager at the time wanted that to happen nor was in favor for it. It was a constant struggle for me to be in the position that I was in. I had very little support. It felt doomed from the beginning. I went from, the feedback I got being a very successful employee, a very motivated, outgoing, energetic employee to completely the opposite. I was really unhappy every day going to work. I felt really unsupported. I lacked energy, I lacked motivation. I felt, just, wrecked all the time.

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I felt like I could never do right, and so it was just a very toxic environment for me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Especially, I imagine, with managing little kids as well.

Kate Lee: Yeah. So, I had my daughter and there was just too many demands and the culture wasn't ideal, it was really not—I didn't feel supported as a woman there. I certainly didn't feel supported as a new mom there at all. And, it was a very, very difficult time for me. It kind of got to the point where I was tired of going home and crying my eyes out and being miserable, so I started looking for another job. It wasn't until my father, who at this point in time, was kind of working in consulting and helping some small entrepreneurial businesses start up, asked me to go to a Venture Out gathering.

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Which is kind of a group of entrepreneurs that get together to help educate each other and help each other out. They met periodically. He was like, "It's at this new brewery called Hardywood." And, I was like why not, I've been wanting to check it out—I'll go. So, I went with my father.

Sarah Rodriguez: Because you're living in Richmond?

Kate Lee: I'm living in Richmond. Yeah, and commuting. And my father is now also in Richmond. And, I go out there and I see Eric [McKay] and Patrick [Murtaugh], who are the owners here at Hardywood, and I see them, and I'm like well, I may as well introduce myself to them. And, I did. And, honestly, everything just kind of went from there. They made a joke that night about calling their lawyers to see if they could hire me, and I kind of laughed and I was like ha ha ha ha haaaa.

Sarah Rodriguez: [laughter]

Kate Lee: And we kept in touch after that, and a year later, I made a huge risk—I mean, it was certainly a risk. Anheuser-Busch financially took very good care of me. Moving into a small, privately-owned business was definitely a big jump. Best decision of my life. [laughter]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. That's awesome. Around when was that?

Kate Lee: That was in January, 2014.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay, so right at the beginning-ish of kind of, not just Hardywood growing, but breweries—

Kate Lee: Yes, craft—

Sarah Rodriguez: —breweries in general growing.

Kate Lee: Yes, yes. We were the second craft brewery in Richmond; Legend being the first one, the only other one that existed. Hardywood started—they started in October, 2011, so they were

just over two years at that point. It was crazy. It was very different than working at such a large brewery. I almost couldn't even figure out how to use my knowledge in applying it here at all. They hired me as the Quality Assurance Director.

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My responsibility was to start, create, an entire quality program because it didn't exist. It's not like there was a lab for me to step into. It was just day one—

Sarah Rodriguez: Just show up.

Kate Lee: —Go! And I'm like, but I don't have a lab, and I don't have equipment. And I don't, like, how do I even do this? What's my budget? I don't know. [laughter]

It was pretty amazing, but I think I would not do anything any differently. It was tremendous. I have been supported since day one. And that feeling alone was just the most wonderful feeling in the world.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. I've done a switch like that, and it feels great to be in a supportive work environment. Could you tell me a bit more about what you were doing, especially after—that's a huge shift—what you were doing here early on? What did the day to day look like? And, maybe, also, what was going on in Richmond at that time as well?

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Kate Lee: Sure. Although I have lived in Richmond the whole time, being in Richmond was actually very new to me. I was really just taking at that time to getting to know my own city. But, as I had mentioned, I was hired in as the Quality Assurance Director. So, initially when I started, it was like, okay, I need a tool of some sort. What's the one tool I need? And a hydrometer is

what we use to measure the amount of sugar or the specific gravity of a beer, and we had a hydrometer. But, I somehow got an opportunity to get something called a DMA 5000, which is basically a pipette that will measure the density of the beer for you, as well. Instead of having to use the hydrometer, it's much more accurate.

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We invested in that, which was a tiny investment compared to what we've put into the quality department at this point of time. But, day to day in the early stages was me just sampling every tank of beer we had made every single day and doing everything that I possibly could on it. We also had a microscope, and so just really dialing in our yeast pitches, understanding what yeasts we were using. Getting to know those yeasts. Because at Anheuser-Busch, we just used one strain of yeast. So this was me meeting new friends. I was getting to know what a California Ale Yeast was and what an English Ale Yeast was. And, we weren't doing any lagers at the time but those ferment so much faster and so it was crazy to me in understanding how they worked. Dialing in a consistent fermentation time. So, my main focus when I first started was really just getting to know the beers, the yeast, and how we could make what we were doing consistent.

Sarah Rodriguez: And you were the only person doing quality control at the time?

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Kate Lee: I was. Absolutely. We still only have one person. A lot of sampling, a lot of working directly with the brewers. A lot of pitching the yeast myself so I could understand how it was working. A lot of getting to know how you were taking apart equipment. Working in the cellar with the guys. Just really trying to be as hands on as possible. Every day consisted of me just

sampling every single tank, tasting, analyzing what I could. Looking at the cells, seeing how they were growing. Seeing if they were happy. Checking viability. Keeping as many records as I could. Creating policies and procedures not just for the quality department but for the brewers. Also noted that there was an opportunity for safety and an entire program around that so kind of took that into my own hands and started creating a safety program. It was very hands on when I first started. So that's when I was the Quality Assurance Director. I was then promoted to the Director of Operations and Quality. I had started getting a lot more involved in the logistical side of things.

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As I saw opportunities, I just kind of decided to take care of them whether they were in the realm of quality or not. When you're that small of a business, you just start doing what's needed and that's what I did. So, it was Operations and Quality and then moved into the role of VP of Operations and Quality when I then hired another quality assurance analyst just to help out. He then became our Quality Manager. We still have a Quality Manager at this time. He gets some part-time help from some of our packaging folks which is pretty great. They're all educated. He has taught a lot of our brewers and packaging folks in how to do a lot of the things. And now, as President, my day looks a lot different. I'm not in the brewhouse, really at all. I'm not analyzing the things like I used to. I love it when they call me and they need me to do one of those things. It feels good to get back into it.

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I helped brew the Pink Boots [Society] Brew that we did last week and that was really fun to get back in there and talk to some of the people who weren't as familiar with it. But, day to day looks a lot different. There's a lot of meetings now. [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. Could you tell me a bit about what it was like getting to know the Richmond beer community? Because you kind of came in also when it was changing really quickly.

Kate Lee: Yeah. I was super intimidated by the craft beer community. I was really apprehensive in starting here. I was afraid I would be judged for where I came from. I was afraid that they would look at me like "Ugh, she just knows how to brew Budweiser and Bud Light and Natural Light, she doesn't know anything." But, it was 100% the opposite. The amount of respect I earned before even having to earn any respect was crazy.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Kate Lee: And that, I think, was unbelievably motivating. It felt good that they valued what the larger companies like that do. These domestic breweries. And they should, because they're amazing at doing what they do. And so, from day one, honestly, even though I was scared, everybody was unbelievably welcoming, unbelievably supportive. The craft beer community as it started to grow is a very close community. It's kind of like when you need to borrow sugar for something, you just call up your neighbor—you call up the brewery next door and you ask for some sugar. You need some malt, you need some hops, you borrow things. Everybody's very supportive. There's a lot of collaborations. Yes, you're all competing against one another, but I

think Richmond breweries have been very good at developing their niche, and being good at different things.

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So, it really gives an opportunity for each of us to excel at what we're doing as well as the community kind of very different places to go. My biggest involvement with the growing scene of craft beer was the quality side of things. Not many, if any, breweries in Virginia or small craft breweries our size had anybody in the quality department. So, it was really a focus of mine in educating people on the importance of that. I actually joined the Virginia Craft Brewers Guild as the co-chair for the Quality Committee which is something that I started along with Shawn Phillips from Spencer Devon Brewing. We just focused on educating anyone and everyone who needed any kind of information. Offering policies that already existed, offering help where needed, and slowly it became a pretty big focus. And now, I think, a lot of craft breweries in this state have it as a high focus. Which gives a lot more street creds to the brewing industry here.

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Everybody can make beer, not everybody can make great beer. So, it's really great that Richmond and Virginia is making such great beer. That was kind of my in into the craft beer community. I held a little bit of knowledge that not a whole of people had and it was really cool to be able to feel needed, and to watch people succeed with information I gave them. I never felt that I had that kind of value so it was pretty cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'd imagine it's one thing to help folks within your business, but I imagine it feels really interesting to help folks in the neighborhood.

Kate Lee: It's great. I think that some people still refer to me as the Quality Gal over at Hardywood. It was definitely cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Could you tell me a bit about what it was like being in this neighborhood and kind of watching it change?

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Kate Lee: Oh gosh, has it changed. This building we're sitting in now, we had when I started but it was just a tasting room. What's in back of us which is now this barrel room and the brewhouse was just storage. This is where we stored everything. So, it didn't look nearly as nice as this—this beautiful glass door was not behind us. It was where we had all of our barrels, all of our pallets of beer, all of our grain.

Sarah Rodriguez: Was production happening here?

Kate Lee: So, production was happening over to our right next door, in our old 2408 Ownby location. So there was a whole another building there—a brick building. I deem it as kind of iconic, and when I started there, I had no lab, there were no really offices or anything so we built out a lot internally, but that's where the brewhouse and everything was—was over there. Around us was all just industrial and I don't even know what it was, it was that uninteresting.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. That makes sense.

Kate Lee: [laughter] It was very industrial, there was really nothing by us, no one living by us. Just nothing really. Watching it develop into what it's been now has been insane. We're surrounded by apartment buildings right now. People are starting to move in. We've knocked

down that original location with the land development all around. We've moved into this building so that brewhouse that you're looking at is the same one that was next door. A lot of the tanks that we had next door were moved over to our West Creek location. We just kind of focused our attention and our money on investing in this spot right here, making this taste room as nice of an experience for our customers. We built a pizza kitchen. We've completely renovated this.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did the pizza kitchen open?

Kate Lee: The pizza kitchen opens—when did it—?

Sarah Rodriguez: When did it open?

Kate Lee: It opened right during COVID.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh! Okay.

Kate Lee: Because what better time to do it right?

Sarah Rodriguez: It's great timing [laughter]

Kate Lee: Well, this had all kind of started—the development had started pre-COVID—the deals were already in the making and in the works and the development company has been really supportive and helping implement all of this for us. They're committed to having us here which is great. They're very supportive and it's kind of being built as the brewers row type thing. We've got two other really great breweries down the road right here on Ownby. It's a great location for people to be if they're interested in that type of scene and being close by. It's been

pretty crazy to watch this and then build our other location out at West Creek while that was all happening too.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. What involvement do you have over West Creek?

Kate Lee: I actually have a bit more involvement over there. That's where I was for the most part before becoming President here at Hardywood. That's where my office is. I was over operations and quality and most of our brewing and packaging happens out there. That's our distribution brewery so to speak.

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We do still do taproom stuff out there and we have a gorgeous taproom out there. But that's where a majority of all the nit and grit happens from the production side. So that's where I spend a majority of my time. It was not until seven months ago when I stepped into this new position that I started coming here twice a week, and then I spend probably three days a week depending on the week out at our West Creek location.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh okay, nice.

Kate Lee: So, it's important for me to be able to see everybody. We have some folks that are here most of the time. We have some folks that are there most of the time. We also have people that rotate. So, it's just important to get that face to face time with as many people as I can. And just get a feeling for how the taprooms are operating and how things are going.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm sure that's easier to see if you actually go to the place.

Kate Lee: Yes.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. Could you talk, kind of thinking back over your time here at Hardywood, maybe some unexpected challenges that stand out in your mind that you came across that going into it was not even close to being on your radar?

Kate Lee: I think this was on my radar but I had never ultimately been responsible for making the decision if we were going to dump beer or not dump beer, right? So, we had a lot of policies and procedures at Anheuser-Busch so you didn't even have to make the decision, you just looked at the policy and were like, sorry, it's got to get dumped because the paper said so. But, here, it was like, "Oh, I've found something wrong, I now need to tell somebody and they're going to look at me and say, 'What do we do?'" and I'm going to have to say, "We need to dump it or we're going to keep it," and both are risks, right?

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a lot of pressure.

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Kate Lee: So, although I knew that was a thing, I don't think that I had realized initially how much of that responsibility would fall on me. It still does to this day and I'm obviously more comfortable with the decisions I've made. I've made the wrong decisions in the past. I have let go of beer when I shouldn't have and I have dumped beer when maybe it would've been fine. But I've also learned that, when in doubt, dump it out. [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Kate Lee: I think we've gotten smarter, but of course in a brewery like this as compared to one of the larger domestic breweries, you have to worry about financials a bit more. And it's not as

easy to just say, “Let it go.” Becoming more creative with solutions, so it’s just let it go or dump it. There is a middle ground and as long as it doesn’t jeopardize the quality or any of your core values as a company, then it’s an option. That was probably one of the biggest challenges.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That’s intimidating.

Kate Lee: For my position now, people challenges. I consider myself a people person. I think that’s a good thing. But, I’m pretty in tune to what people’s feelings are. I don’t know if that’s a blessing or a curse. That’s been, I think, the biggest challenge for me in this position is just really trying to make sure our people are happy, are motivated, are communicated to, have the ability to communicate to myself or to their coworkers, and that they feel safe. When you’re not ultimately responsible for that I think you just assume if you’re good, everyone else is good. Now that I hold a higher responsibility in ensuring everybody’s happy, I’m aware that not everything is good. Not everybody feels the same way, and not everybody has the same needs. So, that’s been a challenge that I don’t think I was quite—I think I was ready for in handling it, but that’s 100% been a challenge.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. On the other side of that, what were some, are there some successes that stand out in your mind that you weren’t anticipating? Any specific memories of either an event, a beer, a moment?

Kate Lee: I think lines are few and far between now. But, my first gingerbread stout release that we had in 2014 that I was here for. I had heard about the lines and the this and the that, but I didn't really understand the concept of what that was and what that meant.

Sarah Rodriguez: In terms of the people.

Kate Lee: The people lining up outside. So, our taproom, I don't know when it opened but we'll say 12 on whatever the Saturday release was. I remember Brian [Nelson], our now brewmaster, he was the head brewer at the time being like, "I'm going to get here early tomorrow to come and see how long the line is, talk to some people, get some pictures." Like, "You're going to take pictures of the line? What are you talking about?"

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So I came here and I met him early. I remember coming down Hermitage over here. I saw these people lined up all the way back to the traffic light and I was like, "What?" And I like keep driving and I'm like, "Oh my gosh—that's the line!?" [laughter] I'm just thinking a little line out the parking lot. So, that was one of those moments where, I already knew I had made the right decision, but that was like my confirmation that I was like this is why I wanted to do what I'm doing. This is why I wanted to make beer. This is where I need to be. I don't care if I took a pay cut [laughter], this is where I want to be. Because look at all these people are about to stand in line and enjoy what we've worked so hard at making for them.

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That and every line after that and every release after that has probably been one of the most—every single time, it's a success. It's a great feeling.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. That sounds amazing. Speaking of that, what can you say about how you have seen either you personally or Hardywood engaging with the community whether that's Scott's Addition community, the brewing community, Richmond in general?

Kate Lee: Hardywood has always embedded the community. From the very beginning and that was something that Eric and Pat and Brian had already started well before I started with them. It was something I came into the brewery understanding that that's what we do and there's a reason we do it and it's very easy to understand why we do it. When you have your community support, you are part of the community and people want to support you.

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We have what was initially called the Reserve Series, which is now the Virginia Roots Series. We actually engage with a lot of local farmers where our Virginia blackberry—we're using blackberries from AgriBerry as well as their raspberries for our raspberry stout. Our ginger, we're using local baby ginger from Casselmonte Farms. We've got Hopkeeper where we use local honey from Bearer Farms. We've got malt from Murphy and Rude which is out in Charlottesville. So, we have that type of engagement. We also have a lot of events that are community sponsored meaning nonprofits that have either come to us, we've developed really great relationships with, or we seek out because we see a need or a desire on our end to support them.

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We'll do a lot in support of them, we'll do give-backs, we'll do promotions, we'll have them come out to the brewery and educate people. They have us come out and experience some things

on their end. One of our most important partnerships is with the James River Association. We've got The Great Return which a portion of those proceeds go back to the JRA on a regular basis, and that's our longest-standing partnership in the community. The Great Return being representative of the great return of the Atlantic Sturgeon into the James River which has been successful; I'm not going to say because of The Great Return, but the efforts that the JRA has put into cleaning up the river has allowed us to start seeing the Atlantic Sturgeon come back in for spawning. We've done trips with them where we're taken out on a boat and we get to see the sturgeon breach out of the water which is amazing. We have the JRA here quite regularly educating some of our customers. That's a really cool collaboration. So, really just finding unique ways to embed ourselves.

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I could keep going on and on. My gosh, we're at Brown's Island for the Live Loud Festivals. Just trying to make ourselves just as apparent and supportive as possible. Our motto is 'brew with purpose,' so you can brew to drink, but there's a whole lot more purpose behind what we do.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure, for sure. Now tell me about what your experience was like leading into not very fun but COVID? Do you remember some of those early days?

Kate Lee: I remember all the days [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: Seared into your brain! [laughter]

Kate Lee: So, I think my experience during COVID is probably quite different than a few other people. So, a lot of businesses shut down. A lot of people started working from home. It was quite the opposite for me, and a few of our employees.

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Unfortunately, we did have to furlough quite a few people. It was all intended to be temporary. We knew at some point in time we were going to need everybody back. But financially we were only able to support a core team. And that core team was responsible for doing everything. Fortunately, in bad times, people still drink beer. They also drink beer in good times. So, we weren't in a huge amount of jeopardy. I think our biggest challenge is how we're going to get the beer to the people, because we couldn't be open as a taproom. Grocery stores were fairly limited. So, we had to become extremely innovative with this small group of people that we had. And we did just that. We became unbelievably innovative, unbelievably flexible. We had our CFO and our owners and our HR manager and myself and Brian, our head brewer, out on the line packaging the beer.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Is that over in West Creek?

Kate Lee: In West Creek. We had a couple core brewers and a couple core packaging guys which were great during the entire time. It was the hardest I've ever worked. It was the most hours I've ever worked. It was also some of the most memorable, in a good way, times that I've had at this company, because I love a good challenge [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: That's definitely one!

Kate Lee: I'm motivated by a challenge, and it just felt so good at the end of the day to accomplish something. We, Brian and I, implemented virtual tastings every Friday and Saturday where we would deliver sets of beer that we were going to taste to people's houses along with some sort of local treat.

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So, we'd pick like a local bakery or a local restaurant or a charcuterie—Truckle Cheesemonger was one of them—and we would deliver whatever the food package and the beer was, and we'd give them a Zoom code and we'd do these virtual tasting panels where they were like an hour long, and Brian and I would give them some sort of education nugget on beer and it became a family. And, we truly got to know people and we have everlasting friends that we still have to this day who we now know their children, their dogs, their grandkids, their friends, their aunts, their uncles. We know them all just from these virtual tasting panels.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Kate Lee: We also implemented delivery to people's front door, and just became very flexible in how we operated as a business, and it taught us a lot about operational efficiency. It was also great, because my husband was at home during the time. He worked at the University of Richmond as a chef, but his café downtown had been closed down. They continued to take unbelievably good care of him financially even though he didn't have to work full time.

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So, I would work really really hard, I would come home to a home cooked meal, a very clean house, a beautifully manicured yard, kids that were happy and entertained. I was living my best life during COVID [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a great time. That's a great time.

Kate Lee: Any of my social anxieties I didn't have to deal with because I didn't have to talk to anybody. So, I don't know, I miss COVID [laughter].

Sarah Rodriguez: [laughter]. That's true, I definitely think I, in my own experience and talking to other people, there were parts that were really hard but then there were parts that were meaningful in some way for sure.

Kate Lee: I think the hardest part for us is we are a family that loves to go out to eat and support restaurants and so that was super hard for us. So, when they did allow us to kind of start going and eating outside—I mean, even if it was 32 degrees outside, we'd put on all of our fuzzy winter boots, and our snow pants, and bring a jacket and we would eat outside at those restaurants. Like, that's what we did.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. [laughter]

Kate Lee: Yeah, that's exactly what we did. So yeah, COVID was hard, but COVID was probably one of the best learning experiences of my life. I also learned about myself that if I could stay in a hole forever, I probably would. So, it's good that it's over, and I know that I need interactions to make sure that—I mean, I thrive talking to people, but I also am like this introverted extrovert. I'm kind of like—and then I need some time to rest.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure, for sure, yeah. I think it definitely helped a lot of us kind of figure out that balance for sure. What has it been like kind of in the reopening process? What has that been like for you?

Kate Lee: Slow-ly. Not, it has not been slow. I mean, we've actually had some of our best taproom days in the last several months, which has been incredible.

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But it wasn't like one day we opened the doors and all of a sudden everybody was here. It's been slow. It's been, you know—people as they were comfortable started coming out. People were kind of outside. We weren't really encouraging people to come inside, but then we did, and then we were requiring masks and then we weren't, and then we were doing all this cleaning. So, it's been slow and long, but now, we're fully back to normal, and it seems like people are more eager than ever to get out. And, it has been great, as far as our taprooms go. People are coming to both locations. This taproom that we're sitting in now has had some record days even this year in January and February.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really. Wow.

Kate Lee: Yeah. So, we've got a lot of great entertainment opportunities here. We have an entertainment manager that hires a lot of the bands and stuff that come here, puts together a lot of the events. Our events team is incredible. So, we give people a lot of different reasons to want to come out and they're pretty diverse sets of things that we offer so it's been good.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Cool.

Kate Lee: I know. [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome, that's good to hear. What do you think right now you see going forward for Hardywood, for the industry? I know you're in a relatively new position for your role and all that.

Kate Lee: The craft industry as a whole—inflation has hurt everybody—it has hurt the craft industry. Especially the craft beer industry. Obviously, people are looking for ways to trade, I'll say down, when mostly I mean financially, and craft beer isn't always the trade down value. So, that has been difficult for us. So, I'm looking for craft beer to make its return for the reason it should, right? For the higher quality, the diversity that it offers, and the purpose that a lot of the breweries have.

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We're not completely unique in how we serve the community, and that's what's really cool about a lot of the craft breweries that are especially in town. It's something that I think we all kind of all feel pretty supportive about. Industry as a whole, but the only thing I can really control right now is Hardywood, I would love to see more diversity. As much effort as we put into it, I think there's still a whole lot of opportunity. I think we're starting to see an increase in women in the industry which has been great. When I first started in the industry, there weren't many and where I came from, it wasn't as completely supported all the time. I think now that is, but we would love to see more people of color. We would love to just have, just a more diverse work force and customers come and enjoy our beer.

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There's a whole group of people who have probably never tasted a craft beer in their life, and so I think a lot of our focus is figuring how to try and get them drawn in to something whether it's an event, whether it's a beer, whether it's a non-alcoholic beer, whether it's a soda, whether it's a food festival that we do. We're just trying to figure out how we can touch those points in our community that we haven't ever touched. So, I think that's a big focus for us is trying to figure out how to be more diverse, not just as a work force but also for our clientele just so we can establish more relevance in our community as a whole.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, that makes sense. Could you talk a bit about what it's been like to see more women join brewing and brewery staff and work but then also clientele? What has that been like? Especially compared to where things started for you.

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Kate Lee: Yeah, it has been awesome. It's a hard one to answer. It's been great. There is still opportunity. Just because women are in the industry doesn't mean that everyone treats them nicely; not everybody treats the men nicely either in the industry. And, not everybody treats everyone right, but I still think that there is opportunity for that to improve and to ensure that safety is the utmost priority for businesses. That is easier said than done. Which is, the things that I am learning. It is hard to hear about women in the industry and hear their stories about what they've had to go through, I have many myself. Fortunately, none of which are here.

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But, I do have stories from since I've been here whether it's at some sort of event or a festival, there's a lot of times where most people assume I'm somebody's wife. Still calling me the

‘Quality Girl’ and it’s—those are minor compared to what some people have had to deal with. So, it’s hard to hear that, so although it’s encouraging that people are willing to hire a woman, I think we have a ways to go in the education of where there’s opportunity to ensure that they’re treated the same.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, that totally makes sense. For sure. I think that’s most of the questions I have. Is there anything I didn’t ask about that you want to say or any particular stories or experiences that you thought of?

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Kate Lee: No, I don’t think so. No, other than I’m extremely happy where I am. [laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Good, good.

Kate Lee: All the challenges are what make it worth it, so.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Well, thank you so much, I appreciate it.

Kate Lee: Yeah!

[End]