



**Nicole Buergers**

**Bee2Bee Honey Collective - Houston, TX**

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Evan Stern: Today is Wednesday, April 30th, it's 3:29 p.m., and we are recording at Bee2Bee Honey in Houston, Texas. Now, to begin, could you state your name and occupation?

Nicole Buergers: My name is Nicole Buergers. I am the founder of Bee2Bee Honey Collective.

Evan Stern: So, no matter whom I'm speaking with, I always like to begin by asking if you could describe first your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up?

Nicole Buergers: I grew up in New England until my mom remarried a Texan, when I turned 9. So, at age 10, we moved, relocated to Houston, to the suburbs, and I grew up mostly there.

Evan Stern: It's true because people don't move to Houston the way that people move to New York or Los Angeles or even Austin for that matter. What was it like for you, moving here at the age of 9? Did you go through culture shock?

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What was it like for you?

Nicole Buergers: Yeah, actually, I did have some culture shock. I went on a hunger strike. I refused to eat for about a week. Then, I remember, my first day of school, I was in line in the cafeteria, and I said, "What day is calzone day?" The student next to me said, "What's a calzone?" I almost burst into tears. Calzones were my favorite food. They said, "Every day, we have chicken fried steak." I said, "What's chicken fried steak?" So, yeah, there was a culture

shock, the outside nature culture shock of it all, the people, yeah, I had a hard time adjusting [laughter].

Evan Stern: But decades later, you're still here.

Nicole Buergers: I am. I moved away when I was 17.

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I went to college in Dallas. I spent my 20s in Atlanta, and I kind of boomeranged back to Houston. Cheese brought me back to Houston, so it was food blogging [laughter].

Evan Stern: I'm gonna ask, and I wanna hear all about that, but we were talking earlier about your childhood a bit. When I was a kid, I was terrified of bees. What did you think of them as a girl?

Nicole Buergers: I had been stung. I remember my first sting, I was about 5 or 6. I was averagely afraid of them. My mother is French-Canadian, and the Quebecois are very superstitious, and her folk remedy would be, "If you saw a bee, bite your tongue, and they will leave you alone." So, every time I saw a bee, I would bite my tongue, a little scared, but I was never stung again.

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So, I never thought it would, you know, I thought it worked [laughter]. It doesn't work [laughter].

Evan Stern: Well, my grandmother was Quebecois, and she was definitely allergic to bees, unfortunately. So, what did you wanna be when you grew up?

Nicole Buergers: I wanted to be a librarian, that was my-- you know. All the little girls wanna be teachers, they wanna be nurses, like their moms or the women that they're around all day. I thought the school librarian was like the coolest job, so that's what I wanted to do.

Evan Stern: Well, books are cool.

Nicole Buergers: Yeah, they are [laughter].

Evan Stern: They're very cool. But you end up instead pursuing a career in internet marketing and as a cheesemonger, and I'd love if you could tell us all about that.

Nicole Buergers: So, I had accidentally stumbled into marketing.

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I was working in a call center, and my boss had a product he wanted marketed on the internet. How do we do that? So, I learned about SEO and pay-per-click ads and website optimization, and started learning that as a trade, and took that knowledge, and got a job in Texas. I moved back to Texas, and moved in with my parents in Corpus Christi, which was, again, another culture shock, from Atlanta [laughter]. I had a job at an agency there, and I quickly learned that I needed to do other things to keep myself busy. I started a food blog, and I would go and run up to Houston and check out the new burger place or check out the food scene. There was this cheese shop here and still here in Houston called the Houston Dairymaids.

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I had them cater my 30th birthday.

Evan Stern: Well, all of my family is from Corpus Christi. That Quebecois grandmother I told you about, she ended up in--

Nicole Buergers: [Laughter] Are we related?

Evan Stern: I know. She ended up in Corpus Christi.

Nicole Buergers: Oh, weird.

Evan Stern: With all due respect to the good, wonderful people of Corpus Christi, it is a food desert. So, I understand [laughter], you know--

Nicole Buergers: There's great barbacoa, great breakfast tacos. There is food there to be discovered. They have this really cool Raspa culture, like, there's stuff there. I embraced it when I was there.

Evan Stern: But I can understand why you'd be making these trips.

Nicole Buergers: I make to Houston, yes.

Evan Stern: Absolutely. So, you end up working as a cheesemonger, you're here working in internet marketing, but it's during this time you start taking up beekeeping. If there's an origin story behind what sparked your interest in all of this, I'd love it if you could tell us about it.

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Nicole Buergers: What first sparked my interest about beekeeping was I was living in Atlanta at the time, and it was a rainy Saturday afternoon, and I was watching PBS. I'm a big nerd, as you have discovered. They had a series on Georgia public radio or public television with a beekeeper. Georgia has the University of Georgia. The Southeastern Conference in general has really good beekeeping programs throughout the Southeast. They were doing a series on beekeeping, and it was called *A Year in the Apiary*. I followed the year, each episode, and

became fascinated, and thought it was achievable, doable. I was like, I could do this. It's just completely fascinating. I always kept that in the back of my head.

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I would tell people, "Hey, one day I'm going to do this." I made a vision board [laughter] when I turned-- for my 30s, and I said, "I'm gonna have a backyard beehive. I'm gonna sell honey. I'm gonna capture my first harvest in this vial necklace and wear it around my neck." It all came true [laughter].

Evan Stern: What was it, if you can name it, what was it in that documentary that specifically just really grabbed you?

Nicole Buergers: Anybody who gets into bees can tell you, as soon as you start learning about how a bee colony operates and the behavior of bees as a superorganism, as this like feminine super organism, it starts to blow your mind a bit.

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Just a little bit of bee knowledge that you can glean from an intro course is enough to spark interest, so it really drew me in. I just thought it would be such a neat hobby to have. I just told everybody that I want bee books for Christmas or my birthday. I thought I was gonna do it one day; I was gonna have a beehive.

Evan Stern: You did just that and, if I'm not mistaken, you start out in your backyard as a hobby. I'd love it if you could tell us about how you got started in that very first experience, fresh out of the gate.

Nicole Buergers: So, I got my beehive. It's an interesting story. It was a gift. My then boyfriend, now husband, he took me on a scavenger hunt for my birthday, my 33rd birthday. We went to a local apiary here in Bellaire, and did a tour.

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I thought it was the coolest gift. We got home from the whole little day of massages and my favorite restaurants, and there was a beehive waiting for me in the living room, empty [laughter], of course. So, he said, "It's time for you to get started on this dream." I said, "Yeah, I'm gonna do that." So, the next spring, I got started; I got bees.

Evan Stern: I know, whenever you start something new, there are always challenges and mistakes that are made. So, looking back on that, can you tell us about some of the challenges and maybe mistakes you encountered first learning?

Nicole Buergers: Oh, I was a terrible new beekeeper. I think most new beekeepers, especially if they're going in blind, they make a lot of mistakes. There's a level of confidence that needs to be built in order to beekeep correctly.

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It's been over 10 years, and I still have my doubts sometimes. There's a lot of this kind of imposter syndrome that happens when you start beekeeping, 'cause there is so much you don't know. I had taken two intro courses. I had read a bunch of books. I felt pretty confident, until you actually get into a beehive by yourself, and then all that confidence goes out the window. I made a ton of mistakes, just easy beginner mistakes. I was maybe led the wrong way a little bit here and there. I made a pretty major mistake once early on. I rent here, and my landlord asked me to move the hive 'cause she wanted to have new tenants at the duplex.

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I never moved a beehive before. Didn't really know how to do that. Read some stuff online, figured out how to do it and, in that process, did not zip up my veil all the way, and had this terrible incident where I had probably over 100 stings to my face and my head. They just all got into my veil, and it was pretty horrendous. It took about three or four days. I mean, I was okay, but I did not look okay [laughter]. It took about three or four days for the swelling to come down. But, after that point, I really thought perhaps this hobby was not for me, and who did I think I was keeping bees? Did I really think I could make this a side hustle?

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'Cause that's kind of where it was going. I really doubted myself for a while.

Evan Stern: I guess, what was it, I mean, obviously that's a traumatic incident, but what was it about this that fueled you so much that made you wanna keep going?

Nicole Buergers: Beekeeping is beautiful. It is such an experience to be in touch with nature, and to kind of get a glimpse into this whole world of this other society of the bee colony. It's really special. So, that sort of connection, it's a spiritual connection, and that sort of connection really keeps you engaged with bees. They're special to me.

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Evan Stern: So, thankfully, you do get past that, and you keep working. At some point, you come up with the idea of what is now Bee2Bee. I'd love if you could tell us about that. Was there an aha moment? What led you to creating this?

Nicole Buergers: There were several aha moments. One, I was working as the cheesemonger at the Houston Dairymaids, that was my part-time job, and I worked there on Saturdays. I had a woman come into the shop and make a beeline to the honey that we sold at the time. She asked where it was from, which common question. I told her it was from-- the honey that she had chosen was from a city called Shepherd, Texas, which is about an hour, hour and a half north of Houston.

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She kinda turned up her nose, and she put the jar down, and walked out of the shop. I was taken aback because not many customers come into the cheese shop and walk away empty-handed, first of all. Second of all, that, you know, what we had wasn't good enough for her. At the time, I had started beekeeping. I knew many beekeepers. I was part of all the bee clubs, and I thought, why aren't these beekeepers selling their honey? The Houston Dairymaids finds farmers and brings their products to Houstonians. I thought, I can be that liaison, connect these beekeepers to this public that is looking for a very local product.

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I thought I could build a community of beekeepers, as well, and specialize-- Houston is such a large city-- specialize in doing honey by neighborhood. I saw it happening in other cities. I went to Minneapolis. They had a company up there that did it. I went to Portland. They had a company there. There's a company in Austin doing it. I reached out to these companies, and asked them questions. There's companies that are doing it on a national level in these cities as well. The Best Bees Corporation out of Boston, I went up there, and sat down with the founder,

and I was like, "I need to understand why you're not in Houston." They are now but, at the time, they weren't. He was like, "Well, we're in Austin; that's close enough."

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I was like [laughter], "Houston and Austin are very different places. They're very far away from each other, first of all, and it's a much larger city, and you're not represented there. Houston doesn't have this." He said, "Well, you seem very passionate about Houston. Maybe you should start doing this there." I was like, "Maybe I will." [Laughter] It was on that trip, it was a trip actually to a cheese conference in Providence, but I was on that trip up to New England, where I had decided that I was gonna quit my full-time job as a B2B internet marketer, business-to-business internet marketer, and become a beekeeper full-time, and make a business.

Evan Stern: So, business-to-business is where Bee2Bee comes from, huh?

Nicole Buergers: Mm-hmm.

Evan Stern: That's fantastic. Before we get much further, I should ask at this point, what is Bee2Bee Collective?

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Nicole Buergers: So, Bee2Bee Honey Collective is a collective of urban beekeepers, beekeepers that are learning how to beekeep in their backyards, businesses, farms, other nonprofits that have beehives. Collectively, we share equipment, knowledge, we share resources throughout the collective. I'm the mentor, and so I go and I teach these students to beekeep. I get 35% of the harvest; they get 65%. I sell that honey to help support the educational programming.

Evan Stern: I was gonna ask this later, but you brought it up. Just out of curiosity, I mean, obviously, when you're starting a business, your background in marketing plays a huge role in all of this.

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But in what ways, would you say, working as a cheesemonger prepared you for what you're doing now?

Nicole Buergers: So, the Houston Dairymaids and working in the cheese industry, even just part-time, really opened my eyes up to specialty foods. It opened my eyes up to agriculture. I saw-- we would go to visit these farms. I'd see these farmers struggling, that they weren't marketing their product. They needed some help. I was very inspired by what the Houston Dairymaids are doing to do that with honey, so much so that I didn't wanna step on the founder's toes. I had dinner with her, and I said, "Hey, I'm thinking about kind of stealing your business model here [laughter], and applying it to honey." She was like, "If I could do this with a product that wasn't perishable, I would do this in a heartbeat."

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She gave me the green light. Our business models aren't the same, by any means, actually, but she did teach me a lot about that, about how important wholesale is. The Houston Dairymaids has a very robust wholesale program. They work with a lot of chefs, a lot of restaurants, like, hundreds of chefs and restaurants. It's just really consistent good revenue, that sort of angle. So, that really opened my eyes as a small business. They also did farmers markets, and used it as a like stepping stool for their retail space. So, I wasn't a stranger to farmers markets through the cheese world.

Evan Stern: You kind of touched it, you referenced this maybe a little earlier when you said, you know, they said, "Oh, well, we have this operation in Austin." You said, "Well, Houston's very different."

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You've said that honey is the ultimate expression of terroir. For those unfamiliar with the concept, what is terroir and why is honey its ultimate expression?

Nicole Buergers: Terroir is basically the taste of a place. It's the very specific environment that lends its essence to the flavor of food. So, what the cow is eating is going to affect the cheese. The spring-fed, wildflower cows versus the hay winter cows' milk is very different. I learned that through cheese and wine and beer and all this stuff I was very much interested in. Honey, since the bees are only flying in, say, a three-mile radius around the hive, it's very, very specific to the taste of a very specific time and place.

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So, it's the ultimate expression of what's surrounding us.

Evan Stern: Towards that matter, I mean, well, I will ask though, I mean, each harvest tastes different, so what someone raises in Montrose is gonna be different than what someone's raising in The Heights or Bellaire. But how would you describe, generally speaking, how would you describe the terroir of Houston, and how is that reflected and manifested in the taste of the honey that you get around here?

Nicole Buergers: So, Houston is a very green place, very diverse place in plants and in people. It has a very long growing season. That's what I mean by green. Basically, from early March through December, we have blooms.

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So, it has a long season compared to even the Hill Country, Austin, other places in the South. It has a lot of citrus. It has a lot of gardens, so a lot of like herbs and other vegetables, a lot of different types of trees. It has an invasive species in a very Houstonian way [laughter]. This tree called the Chinese tallowtree that master naturalists really despise, it is our main nectar source, and it makes sought-after honey. The honey is deep and rich but not out of balance. It's a darker looking honey, but it doesn't taste as dark as it looks. It's kind of like a Negra Modelo of a [laughter] lager.

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It has a lot of depth and flavor, and the tree produces a lot of nectar, so beekeepers from all over the country try to get in on this tallow flow that we have here in Southeast Texas. But, in the city, we just have a lot of gardeners. It's a place where people garden, and they garden a lot and for a long time, and a lot of different flowers. These are my students, these are my customers, and I've learned so much from the garden community, honestly.

Evan Stern: It's interesting because I think many people's conception of Houston, they think of highways and they think of concrete. But you've actually said that this is a fabulous environment for bees. Do you care to elaborate on that?

Nicole Buergers: Sure, we have highways and skyscrapers and parking lots. It's a very car-heavy culture. But we also have big yards and we have, like I said, a long growing season, and we have a very robust garden community here that truly exists.

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There's a lot of tropical, subtropical types of flowers and vegetables that you can grow here in Houston. I have members of the collective growing things like pineapple and coffee, and they see how far they can take it. It's this excellent place to just grow so many different types of fruits and different flowers. It's amazing. The only thing beyond the, you know, there's pollution and pesticide use and mosquito spraying. Besides those kind of chemicals, which you would find in any city, the biggest challenge we have is our hurricane season.

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So, having a hurricane plan for your bees is something that I teach and go over. But, you know, we've gone through it [laughter]. I've been in business since 2016.

Evan Stern: I believe Harvey hit in 2017.

Nicole Buergers: It did.

Evan Stern: I definitely wanna ask about all that. But before getting to Harvey, since you brought it up, can you tell us about how you first got this off the ground, and how did you first start [laughter] at the very beginning with all of this?

Nicole Buergers: So, I quit my job after that conference in Providence, that cheese conference. I quit my jobs shortly thereafter, and I didn't have much of a plan. I didn't have

money. I did not have an idea of how I was going to start this business. I just had the idea of the business. [Laughter] So, I used my marketing skills.

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I started an Indiegogo campaign, and I raised about \$15,000, which was enough money to get me started. I pretty much emailed everybody I'd ever met [laughter], and told them, "Hey, I'm doing this project. I need your help." I was shocked by the response of just random people in my life being these like unexpected cheerleaders and rooting me on. I pitched it, I did a lot of PR for it, and told the story about how I quit my job to become a beekeeper, and I'm trying to do this now, and it caught on.

Evan Stern: Are there any stories you can share with us about the initial beekeepers that you first started working with?

Nicole Buergers: [Laughter] Oh yeah, I think about them all the time. They are dear to me to take this sort of risk, as I wasn't-- I was pretty green as a beekeeper, to be honest.

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I thought-- you get this confidence in your second year that you know everything, and you really don't [laughter]. But, yeah, so some stories. I've had all kinds of people, but the first students I had were a couple. They did alternative medicine out of their garage, but they had regular full-time jobs. She was a nurse, she is a nurse, and he was a teacher, and they did like Chinese medicine, acupuncture for fertility-type of stuff. So, they were kind of on the edges of spirituality and health.

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They were interesting people, and they were good students, honestly. I learned how, through this process, I learned how to choose not just gardeners or people interested in bees but really people who were interested in being like students of life. They read books. They really like to learn stuff. They would get obsessive about a subject, and go to the library. These types of people that could get really nerdy about something, that's who I learned, like, those are the people that need to be members of the collective, not just people who think it's cool. I learned that lesson early on.

Evan Stern: Then, a year later, you learn another lesson by Hurricane Harvey, which you just referenced. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

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Nicole Buergers: So, the week that Hurricane Harvey hit, I was sick with food poisoning. I had moved a beehive the Sunday before. Hurricane Harvey hit like on a Thursday. So, the Sunday before, I had moved a hive at night, and got some shrimp tacos to go, and they did not sit well with me. So, I was violently ill for like three or four days after that. There was an eclipse that week, so I went outside for the eclipse, went back inside, and basically was very ill, and kind of concerned about this storm that was brewing, but nobody in the city was too alarmed. I actually went to a meeting, a bee club meeting [laughter], during my sickness. Thought I was okay; I wasn't. But I went to this bee club meeting, and no one even brought it up.

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It was that Monday night. It wasn't even newsworthy yet. It was just a storm at that time, and didn't really think it was going to impact us. But a few days before the storm, I started getting concerned, and I put out a message to all of the collective, stating, "You need to have a plan for yourself but also consider your bees in your plan. Here are ways to secure your hive." It was

mostly worried about wind, 'cause that's what you think of when you think of a hurricane. So, it was ways to weigh down your hive, to like strap it into the ground. It really wasn't about flooding.

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I went, and I have a few rooftop hives, so I went to Home Depot, and bought some like paver stones and ratchet straps, and strapped down all my rooftop hives. I did that before the storm, but it's really all I had time for because of the magnitude of my sickness [laughter]. My partner was out of town. I was all by myself. I was running an Airbnb out of my house at the same time, and dealing with that person with the hurricane prep, it was a lot. Anyway [laughter], when the storm hit, and I saw where it was flooding, I had like Twitter alerts for all of my neighborhoods on my Twitter monitoring screen.

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Anytime someone would mention flooding in one of those neighborhoods, I would try to pinpoint it on the map, and see how close it was to the hives. I didn't wanna bother all my students, who were evacuating or, you know, they had bigger fish to fry than like, "What about your bees?" I didn't want to interrupt their experience with getting out and all of that, inquiring about their bees, so I kind of just stayed quiet, and checked in on them via email soon after the storm, and went and checked each one of the hives. We did have hives that flooded away, especially I had hives up in Cyprus. It wasn't a lot that we had damaged. I had a couple of homes that they had to evacuate, but their bees made it through okay. It was like their first glimmer of hope that their life was going to be okay in the long run.

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They were like, "My bees made it," you know, it was a little special. But the biggest problem with Harvey wasn't actually the flooding, it was the concern of the mosquito spraying afterwards. We had to run around town, without much notice, and put bedsheets over all of our hives to protect them from the spraying, and that was very hard [laughter]. It was a very long night.

Evan Stern: But, thankfully, you do get through Harvey.

Nicole Buergers: I do, I only lost three hives.

Evan Stern: Oh, see, that's mirac... bees are resilient. Bees are incredibly resilient. But that's 2016, 2017. How many hives are you currently working with in 2025?

Nicole Buergers: [Laughter] It's kind of interesting.

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I am still working. I'm more not taking on new mentors at the moment, so I don't have a current class of students. But I have all my former students, who still need help from time to time. Especially on hard things and tricky things that you have, it's helpful to have another beekeeper join you do. I do a lot of consulting. So, I'm not currently taking students. I am looking to move. So, I am looking to relocate to New Mexico, and I am looking to sell the business. I'm in the process of that right now. So, I didn't think it would be fair to take on a new class of students, knowing that I didn't know exactly where in the timeline I was going to be able to be their teacher.

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So, I made this decision two years ago, and made a timeline for all of my students, and let them know at a certain point that they would have graduated from the program [laughter], and they would call me when they needed me.

Evan Stern: But the students, though, I mean, I'm looking at this bounty of honey here that you, you know, but you're still working with many of these backyard beekeepers. How many backyard beekeepers are you working with and collecting honey from?

Nicole Buergers: It's complicated. I mean, I've installed over 100 hives, for sure. At our peak, we were doing 37 yards at once. Now it's, you know, I do a few a week. So, today I went to Montrose. Tomorrow I'm going to Memorial. I'm gonna go to Third Ward tomorrow. It's more here and there as opposed to, like, we have exactly 25 locations.

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It's when they need me, so it's probably a dozen, I'd say. Currently, I only have one beehive. I use it, I keep it for educational purposes, using it as an observation hive for classroom talks that I do. A lot of my day-to-day now, beyond the farmers market, is giving presentations.

Evan Stern: Do you have, like, I know you mentioned the people with the alternative medicine, and the people in Cyprus who found hope. But reflecting on the incredible journey that you've had with this, are there any favorite stories you have of hive owners that stick out in your mind?

Nicole Buergers: I've had the coolest hive owners, honestly. They are some of the coolest people I've ever met, I mean, I'm not just saying that because they're like members of my own personal club.

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They came to me. I didn't know that they were an astronaut. I did not know that they were the first Australian in space. I did know that Annise Parker was the former mayor of Houston, but she was a student, and it was intimidating [laughter]. But for the astronauts, it's a couple in Seabrook, I knew they were scientists. I knew they were smart, 'cause they would ask really smart questions. I did not know that they were astronauts, 'cause I didn't google them [laughter]. But I didn't know they were astronauts until one of them got called into space, and she had to be quarantined. It was during COVID, and so she's like, "I'm not gonna be able to be with you at the beehives. I'm going back up." I looked at her, and I was like, "Oh, okay."

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I knew she worked at NASA; so do a lot of people I know [laughter]. They're not astronauts. So, I quickly went to my car, and put her name in Wikipedia, and realized that she was like the only native Houstonian to ever be in space. Yeah, it's pretty incredible. Most of my students, they're very curious. They're very nature-minded. They become friends. You have this years-long relationship, where you struggle doing this activity together, 'cause there is a lot of struggle of stings and sweat and stickiness. It's not always a fun time to beekeep, honestly, so you struggle together, and you grow together, and you form this relationship.

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[Unrelated conversation]

Evan Stern: On a different note, can you tell us about how and when you got involved with the Urban Harvest Market?

Nicole Buergers: I got involved through my friend Shelley Rice. Shelley Rice is the godmother of Houston beekeeping. She has been doing beehive management for almost 20 years. She has been through the ringer. She has done everything I've done and more. She's a good friend of mine. She doesn't sell her honey. She uses her honey to fundraise for causes she cares about. She's just this amazing woman.

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Tyler, the manager of Urban Harvest, invited Shelley to sell honey at the downtown City Hall Farmers Market. Shelley was, you know, she's like, "I can't commit to this every week. Maybe I can bring my friends, and we can all sell honey there together." That quickly turned into, Nicole is going to be selling honey there [laughter] 'cause no one else wants to do that, and she really does. I started through Urban Harvest at their smaller Wednesday lunchtime market at City Hall, which is a hard market. You're dealing with customers that aren't shopping, per se. They're looking for a food truck. But if they're interested, they'll buy some honey, and I had little nice core customers there.

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It taught me a lot about how to prepare for a weekly market and set up a table. Then Urban Harvest, their Saturday honey vendor decided to-- she kinda got too big to do farmers markets, in my opinion. She's just a large beekeeper. She was at a bigger level than to go to a weekly market. But she loved her customers, so she stayed for a long time. Eventually, she was like, "I wanna spend time with my grandkids. I want my weekends back. It's been almost 20 years. I can't do this anymore." So, she stopped coming to the farmers market. Since I was already a honey

vendor at the Wednesday markets, it was a natural fit for me to be invited to Saturday. It really completely changed my business.

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I suddenly had revenue that I never had before. I suddenly had customers I never had before. I had all this exposure. I was able to rent a kitchen [laughter]. I didn't have to work out of my house anymore. It allowed me to expand, and have help, hire people. It was really just life-changing for Bee2Bee.

Evan Stern: You said, before we started recording, that you do feel that there is a broader story to the market that not every-- that doesn't always get covered. Could you tell us about that?

Nicole Buergers: A lot of it's opinion, but I do feel like there is a story to be told about the aging farmer.

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You go to the farmers market, and even since, you know, I started at Urban Harvest before COVID. Since COVID, since many climate issues, you know, storms, heat waves, droughts, all these things that have been happening, farmers are an endangered species. I feel like the farmers that we do have at the farmers market are tired. They are usually in their 70s or above. They're ready to retire. Sometimes they can't afford to retire, but they'd like to. It's a struggle to be there every week, and set up your tent. Hopefully, you make enough money to sustain you for another week.

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Then you have a rainy Saturday, and your sales are down, or you have a pest at your farm, and your stuff gets wiped out in a storm, in a freeze. It's just such a struggle, even for the non-farmers, just the added value, you know, people making products. The cost of doing business for a small business, it has increased so much in the last five years. Our packaging, all of our valuables have-- all the prices have increased. Customers complain that the prices have increased, but you say, "Hey, you understand [laughter], like, I'm living below the poverty line. [Laughter] I might sell really expensive honey. You may be a Costco honey type of person. Please go there."

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Evan Stern: [Laughter] What would you like the customers to know about the honey that you're selling at the market?

Nicole Buergers: The honey that I'm selling at the market is an extremely local product that is the product of this tutelage, this program of students that are just like them, just regular people that are really interested in something, and they pursue it. This is the result of a lot of hard work, a lot of money invested, a lot of time invested, and a lot of, I mean, the bees' work of course is paramount.

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But people don't see-- they might see that in a bottle of wine, but they won't see that in a bottle of honey. I would definitely say that it takes a lot more work to make a pint of honey than it does a bottle of wine. These bottles of honey should be going for hundreds of dollars. That's what they're worth [laughter]. That's how much money it takes to make them.

Evan Stern: But are there any stories about lengths that customers have gone to to get their hands on your honey?

Nicole Buergers: Oh yeah. So [laughter], I have to remind myself that there's no such thing as a honey emergency, because my customers tend to act like it's life or death, getting their honey. On one hand, I'm very grateful of the support and the passion that people have for the honey.

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On the other hand, sometimes, it's a little too demanding [laughter]. But we do offer 24/7 pickup for our honey that's ordered online. Sometimes people will order it in the middle of the night, and expect it in the middle of the night. I have to tell them that I'm not Instacart, I'm not Amazon; I'm a human, and I'll get to it when I finish beekeeping for the day, 'cause that's where I am right now, you know, or whatever's happening. They are very particular about the neighborhood. That's a whole thing. I've created monsters. They will only have honey from their neighborhood and not from the neighborhood next door. That becomes a problem when that honey isn't available anymore, you know, that yard shut down, or that customer graduated, or they moved on, or they moved.

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One of the most popular neighborhoods that we have in Houston is The Houston Heights. I had a location at a kind of a marketplace, coffee shop-type of community space. They had bees. So, I sold Heights Honey from this business. They got new owners recently, last fall, and they decided they no longer wanted the bees. It became too much of a hassle for them. So, they had me move

the bees, and I don't have honey from The Heights anymore, and my customers are not happy [laughter].

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I'm like, "Well, you can take it up with them [laughter], like, it's not my fault. I want Heights Honey. I would sell a lot of Heights Honey, but it's just not gonna happen anymore. I'm sorry. You're gonna have to go with the next neighborhood over, Garden Oaks, which I think is even better honey, personally." So, they turn up their nose at it. It's pretty funny. It's a little troubling, to the point where I'm currently dwindling the number of neighborhoods I have. I technically only have one neighborhood right now, because the bees are making the honey as we speak. It is spring, and the first harvest will happen sometime in May, usually. So, I am at the very end of my season, and I have one neighborhood left, and they are not happy with that.

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Evan Stern: But towards this matter, on the other end of the spectrum, you've said that a lot of what you get on the shelves and supermarkets isn't even honey. So, what is it, and why is this, in your view, a problem?

Nicole Buergers: Honey is one of the most faked foods in existence. I think it's third behind, like, olive oil and something else. So, honey is an extremely fraudulent food, typically. It's either cut with other sweeteners or it's mixed. Honeys from different regions are mixed together to produce this consumer product that we know as honey. The honey that the consumer typically knows has a very specific taste, look. It doesn't crystallize. It is, like, light amber, and it has a very particular taste. In reality, honey is very varied [laughter].

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It has, you know, it can be dark, almost purple, black as night. It could be almost clear. It has a spectrum of flavor and of viscosity and of appearance. Most consumers, the market, isn't really supporting local honey as, I mean, they're getting around to it, but on the supermarket shelves, there are honeys from all over the world. Even if it says local, especially here in Texas, it could be anywhere in Texas, and Texas is a giant state. It's not really local. It's just there's not a legal definition for "local," so you could just say anything's local, and people will be like, "Yeah, I want some Texas honey." That makes sense.

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It may be a commercial farm with one million beehives, 'cause we have those in Texas, but they don't really understand that [laughter], that there's a difference between like a craft burger and McDonald's.

Evan Stern: But bee colonies, well, actually, I should ask though, too, reflecting on your time at the market, are there any interactions with customers that stick out in your mind as particularly impactful, or do you have any stories about that?

Nicole Buergers: I love my customers. They're always so supportive and friendly. I have a lot of regulars, and I have people that I've seen grown up. I've had people pass away. I've gone through life with a lot of these customers.

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I think of people like Jay Hamburger, who comes every market and collects food for the homeless, and he buys honey from me. I think of-- there's this man that comes during the holidays, and he gives us cards with money in them, all the vendors, sometimes. He's not there every year. But that guy, he's amazing. We have famous customers that come through. I had like

the coach of the Texans stop by, and I was like, you know, I knew who he was. I don't think anyone at the farmers market knew that he was the head coach of the Texans at the time [laughter]. I'm a little bit of a sports nerd, so I recognized him immediately, and I was like, "Hey, how's it going, coach?" [Laughter] He bought some honey for me. He wasn't feeling well.

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A lot of my customers come to me not feeling well. They have allergies or a cold or a sore throat, and they're looking for relief. I want to provide a product that will heal them, give them some relief. A lot of my customers come back, and they tell me how much comfort that they received from my honey, and it really touches me. It's moving.

Evan Stern: Towards this matter, bee colonies are communities, and honey is the product of that community. How has this work strengthened or helped foster engagement in the communities that Bee2Bee works with?

Nicole Buergers: I find that there are several layers of community that I find myself in. I have the customers, the farmers market community, which is so important.

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Tyler likes to call it food church. It's these individuals that understand the importance of locally grown food. So, that is a layer. There's the layer of the gardeners. There's a layer of beekeepers. I work with different clubs, and they have their own communities. I also work with a lot of female beekeepers, and we like to call ourselves, like, queen bees. We've just really forged very significant relationships with each other, and it was because we've worked bees together. It brings you together in a way that other people can't relate to [laughter]. It's really special.

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My relationship with Shelley, for example, Shelley Rice, she's a very close friend of mine, and will be for the rest of my life. I see her as family. It's definitely this-- it teaches you how important community is, and community is everything. Without it, we don't care for each other, and we don't operate in the same way as we do without. It's so vital to the human experience. I had to give a keynote speech [laughter] to the Houston Botanic Garden's fundraiser, and I spoke of community.

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That was what my entire keynote was about, because I knew I was in a room full of people who were there to fundraise, and I really wanted to spark that, foster that sort of giving aspect for the luncheon. I talked about how bees are a community, and how important it is as humans that we connect to each other on these special levels. I thought it was a really good speech [laughter].

Evan Stern: You are coming to the end of this, I mean, the end is in sight. So, looking back on all of this, what do you regard as your proudest accomplishment?

Nicole Buergers: I think my proudest accomplishment was to take the leap to get started, and to foster a community of bringing people into my life, these very special people into my life, and into each other's lives.

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I've met so many-- the people I've met is my greatest accomplishment, honestly, the people I've met. I just had a wedding. So many of them were part of it. So many of them came to the festivities or they helped. I needed a lot of help to pull it off, and these people stepped up. It's

like those unexpected cheerleaders that I got from the beginning at the Indiegogo campaign, these people in my life that I just really have special connections with, and it's all because of the bees.

Evan Stern: Back to bees for just a second--

Nicole Buergers: Sure [laughter].

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Evan Stern: --I mean, I'm sure that there are a lot of people out there who are afraid to learn that they have neighbors keeping bees in their backyards. There's a lot of fear around bees. What do you say to those people?

Nicole Buergers: Most people have no idea that their neighbors are having bees in their yards. So many people are stuck in their houses, behind their screens, they don't even notice the bees are all around us all the time [laughter]. When they do learn, sometimes the response is fear. A lot of times, the response is more curious interest. I haven't, I mean, I've done over 100 installs, over 100 locations, and rarely have I had an issue of a neighbor being upset. If there was a problem, like, one Easter, I was beekeeping.

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I was doing a very kind of intensive practice. I was splitting beehives, basically, and there's bees everywhere. The people next door were having like an Easter brunch outside, and I didn't know that when I started that that was going to happen. It was like, okay, this can be a problem. We learned to work together, and communicate [laughter], and make sure that they know I'm coming, and I know that they're having a party. Everything typically can be resolved through

communication or, you know, moving the hive to the other side of the yard usually does the trick. It's very rare that I've had a real problem and, if I have, we can always pack it up and move it out and move it somewhere else.

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If there's new owners that aren't keen on the bees being there, we will move them to a new location, and someone else will love them [laughter].

Evan Stern: But, also, speaking of nature and all of this, a lot has been reported in recent years about how bee populations have been declining. Why should people care about that?

Nicole Buergers: It's an interesting conundrum because bee populations are in trouble due to all kinds of stressors. Many of them are beekeeping stressors, so the beekeepers are at fault. A lot of them are environmental stressors, but some of it is rooted in beekeeping practices, and commercial beekeeping practices, and new-beekeeper-not-knowing-what-they're-doing beekeeping practices.

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So, education around beekeeping, and being ethical about beekeeping is really important. Yes, there are definite issues with honeybee populations. A lot of them can be resolved with better beekeeping practices. There are a lot of educators and researchers and people trying to change that. But it would require pretty large systemic change on like a commercial operational level, which our food industry isn't easily-- it isn't easily done. So, it's probably not gonna happen anytime soon, especially with environmental stressors building up as well.

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But it's definitely something to keep tabs on because pollination services is how most beekeepers make money, and when the bee populations are in trouble, our food is in trouble. So, it's definitely something to keep tabs on.

Evan Stern: What is your hope for the future of our world?

Nicole Buergers: [Laughter] I have a lot of hope for that future. Sometimes, some days I don't have any hope. I do hope that people understand and respect the work of a beekeeper, that it's seen as-- all farmers really, how hard of a job farming is, and that the economy and the food system can go through a change where people are supporting their local growers.

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They are understanding how food is grown, how honey is made, how this product gets from the ground to a package to their house. I hope people can really comprehend that.

Evan Stern: In regard to the future, looking decades ahead, after you've left this Earth, say someone out there hears about Nicole, and they wanna go somewhere where they can feel and commune with your spirit. Where should they look? Where should they go?

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Nicole Buergers: Wow, that's a good question. I would definitely say to be looking inside of a beehive, to be burning a beeswax candle, to be eating a spoonful of honey, possibly be playing a game of some sort. I'm a very playful person. I think play is really important to our existence as humans. So, some combination of those things. Where? I would hope it would be in my future home [laughter], which is Truth or Consequences, New Mexico [laughter]. That's where my spirit soars.

Evan Stern: Do you have anything else that you'd care to share?

Nicole Buergers: No. I guess, get to know your beekeepers. Get to know your local beekeepers.

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Find out their names, their favorite popsicle flavor. Bring them a popsicle; they're hot [laughter].

Evan Stern: I should ask, actually, I forgot to ask this, I mean, I know that beekeeping is incredibly taxing.

Nicole Buergers: Yeah.

Evan Stern: Over 10 years later, how are you keeping up physically with all of this?

Nicole Buergers: [Laughter] I've been through multiple rounds of physical therapy. I've gotten heat stroke, heat sickness almost every year I've been beekeeping. Probably taken years off my life. I probably have extra wrinkles from the sun. But, in all, in the end, it was worth it. I learned so much. I developed muscles where I didn't have muscles before [laughter]. I got a lot of grit, I think, from this beekeeping adventure. I learned how far I can take my body [laughter], and how far I can't.

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Lots of pain, lots of tears, lots of sweat, and blood. Oh yeah, I've stepped on some nails [laughter]. I've cut myself many times beekeeping. I've hurt myself a lot, but I feel stronger for it.

Evan Stern: Well, thank you so much for sharing with us, and thank you for all that you do.

Nicole Buergers: Thank you for asking. This has been awesome. I've really enjoyed this conversation.

Evan Stern: Enjoyed speaking with you.

[End]