Kathleen Purvis
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Annemarie Nichols: I'm recording now.

[0:00:02.2]

Kathleen Purvis: You're for sure recording?

[0:00:02.9]

Annemarie Nichols: I'm for sure recording.

[0:00:04.2]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] It's okay. Don't worry about it. Actually, one time I interviewed an editor who used to terrify me, and I had to interview him several years later for a story that he actually, you know—and I had him on the phone. We had a brand-new computer system, and I got off the phone and I was so proud of myself for not showing how nervous I was interviewing this man who intimidated me, got off the phone and realized I had actually killed the whole interview. [Laughs] Had to call him back, do it again.

[0:00:38.0]

Annemarie Nichols: I'm not used to these—

[0:00:38.2]

Kathleen Purvis: It's all right. Stuff happens. Don't worry about it.

Okay, so you asked me for my name. Kathleen Purvis. I'm the food editor for the *Charlotte Observer*. I was born February 3rd, 1959, in Columbus, Georgia. I was actually born the day the music died, February 3rd. That was the day of the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly and Richie Valens, and "The Big Bopper," which is why I can't dance, because I have *no* musical ability. [Laughs]

My family's from Georgia for generations. My mother's from Atlanta, my dad's from Americus, Georgia, and they met and married in Columbus, Georgia, which is where we were all born. My father was a combat veteran of World War II. He was with the 1st Marine Division in the South Pacific, saw a lot of very bad action, had issues with post-stress the rest of his life, actually, from that. Dad had gone to work for RC Cola right after the war, and started as a truck driver for RC and then worked his way up to salesman and eventually plant manager.

He had used his G.I. Bill to build a house rather than get an education, because he was not from an educated background. He didn't know anything about education, really. He had dropped out of school at twelve to work at a bakery during the Depression, to help support his family. My parents, though, were very well-read people. They were people who really admired writing and the power of literature. My father had a subscription to *National Geographic* his entire life that went from the day he and my mother got married. That was like the first thing he invested in, was *National Geographic*, read them cover to cover. My mom didn't go to college till she was in her sixties, so they didn't really know a whole lot about being educated, but they knew a lot about appreciating writing.

I think that I fell in love with newspapers at a very young age because in my mother's family there was a lot of ties to newspapers in Atlanta. My great-grandfather was the circulation manager of the *Georgian*, which became the *Journal*, and my grandfather was a pressman for the *Atlanta Journal*. So there was a lot of newspaper sort of mystique and romance and lore around our home, and so when I really kind of discovered newspapers when I was about ten and started reading them and understanding that, you know, here was a job that they would pay you to do, that you could be paid to write, was a very attractive idea to me. But I knew I didn't have any money to go to school, and my folks didn't really know how to help me. I went to work when I was sixteen in a grocery store, and so my grades were terrible. [Laughs] So there were no scholarships in my future.

So I talked my way into a high school internship at the *Palm Beach Post* in West Palm Beach. Oh, yeah, you had asked me earlier. We lived in Columbus until 1961, so I was about fourteen months old when my dad got transferred to eastern North Carolina, to Wilson. Lived in Wilson till I was ten, and then Daddy got transferred to Florida, and that's how we ended up in West Palm Beach eventually.

Then my father got laid off in 1972. There was a bad recession, and a lot of men who had gone to work for companies right after the war in the early [19]70s, those guys were coming close to time to earn a pension and all those things, and the economy really took a dive in the [19]70s. It was a very hard time, and my dad got let go. So there was no money. My mother had to go to work, and Daddy was out of work for almost two years. So the idea of my parents sending me to college, there was no money, you know. It was pretty much my sixteenth birthday, my father bought me a 1966 Volkswagen [Laughs]

and had me drive him, following him, to a local Winn-Dixie, and he took me in and introduced me to my new boss, and that was my sixteenth birthday present. [Laughs] "Here's your job."

So I've been working ever since. Other than six months off when my son was born, I have worked since I was sixteen. So when I was in high school, they had a high school internship and I applied and got it for the *Palm Beach Post*, and that's how I started in newspapers.

Then after the internship ended, I used that familiarity with the newsroom and the contacts I had made to talk my way into a job as a copy boy, and it was in the grizzled old days when there were a lot of old editors who called you "boy," and you had to learn to be smart, you know, have a smart mouth and be fast on your feet. I actually had an editor, when I was a copy boy, who decided that I was too young and innocent-looking, and so he made a rule that no one was to acknowledge anything I said unless I used at least two obscenities in every sentence. [Laughs] So it taught me how to cuss. Hated to tell him I had a father who was a Marine. I already knew how to cuss. Took a long time to break myself of that habit. I could cuss a blue streak.

I talked my way into a job—I worked for free—for a small newspaper that was owned by the same company, the *Delray News Journal*, was a weekly paper, and I went to the editor and talked him into, "Hey, how about if I come down there on my days off, will you actually let me work so I can learn?" I didn't want him to just treat me like a pet, you know. And then he used those clips and that experience and helped me get a job, a full-time job at the *Palm Beach Daily News*, *The Shiny Sheet*, and that was my first full-time paid job as a journalist. I started out there as an editor, copy editor, and then they

figured out I could write and I could write really fast, and they started handing me stories to write.

[0:06:50.4]

Annemarie Nichols: I have a question too. How did your gender kind of impact how you were treated in the newsroom?

[0:06:55.6]

Kathleen Purvis: Oh, dear Lord in heaven. [Laughs] It was 1977, [19]78, [19]79. There were not many women in the newsroom. Women in the newsroom were still barely tolerated and considered very suspicious. I learned early how to flirt, how to joke, how to get editors, male editors, to want to let me do things because I could use my personality to get them to do that, but you did learn to do that.

I remember on Friday nights after 6:00 o'clock, the only two female editors on the copy desk had Friday night off, and the only female reporters all went home by about 7:00, and I was working until like 11:00 or 12:00 o'clock at night, and it was only men on the desk. I remember one night I went out to the composing room to drop off type. I was a copy boy. I was moving paper around the room. I went back to drop off some proofs, and came back into the room and all the men on the copy desk had decided it would be loads of fun to shoot me a moon, the entire desk, ten guys, all with their white butts hanging out. Of course, the response had to be walking over to my purse, pulling out my sunglasses, and saying, "Damn, it's bright in here, boys," and putting on my sunglasses. If I had screamed bloody murder and made a fuss, I would have gotten no opportunities

the next day. I mean, it was very much a show you can play along and be a fun girl and you get a chance to edit things or do more serious work the next day, you know.

Oh, and there was the thing with my paycheck. [Laughs] Okay, so this is what the world was like in 1977. So there were two copy boys, me and a guy named Paul Jenkins, who was the son of our futures editor, Allen Jenkins. Paul worked three and a half days a week and I worked three and a half days a week. Paul had been there, I think, a month longer than me, but I had actually been in the newsroom for four months longer than Paul because I had been there for free as a high school intern. Well, right after I got hired, about two weeks after, Paul comes to me one day and he says, "Hey, let me take a look at your paycheck."

And I said, "Okay." And I pull out my paycheck and hand it to him.

And he said, "Yeah, I thought so. That's really funny."

I said, "What?" We were both supposed to be paid minimum wage.

And he said, "Well, it's the darndest thing. My paycheck's bigger this week and I don't know why."

So we went together to the editor of the paper, a man named Jim Kelly, and asked how come Paul's paycheck was suddenly larger than it was supposed to be. And he kind of blushed and said, "Oh, you know, I feel really bad about that, but it's the policy of the publisher," who was an Irish Catholic man from Boston named Dan Mahoney, and Dan Mahoney had a rule that if any woman was hired for the same job as a man, the man had to make more money than the woman, even if it meant giving the man a raise that he didn't deserve yet, hadn't earned yet. So Paul had been given a raise, 25 cents an hour more than me. Crazy thing was, is I was living on my own and supporting myself by that

time, and Paul was living at home with his parents, saving money to go to college. But he was making more than me because that was the policy of the paper. [Laughs]

When the Democratic National Convention was here in Charlotte in 2012, I actually got to meet Lilly Ledbetter, and I started to cry when I met her, because I checked, when the Lilly Ledbetter Act was passed, I missed it by five years, being able to retroactively sue Cox Newspapers for wage discrimination all those years later. Can't happen now, but it did then. And that's what the world was like then.

[0:11:02.4]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really challenging.

[0:11:04.3]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah, it was, you know, but I had no choice. I mean, I was supporting myself. I moved out of my parents' house when I was eighteen, and I wanted to be in the newspaper business more than anything, so I had to prove and fight and start over again and work my way up, and I did, over and over.

When I went to Tallahassee, I wanted to go to college, couldn't really afford it, so I wanted to go to Florida State and I needed to work while I was there, so I wrote the same letter to Florida State Admission Department and the editor of the *Tallahassee Democrat* and literally just changed the address and name at the top of the letter, but I wrote them both a letter explaining who I was, and I got accepted at both. So I worked while I was at Florida State, and actually my grades were terrible because, you know, I was at the *Tallahassee Democrat* and they kept giving me more and more responsibility

and more and more work, and, of course, every time they would do that, my grades would suffer. So I ended up dropping out of college. I'm actually the only, as far as I know, the only person on the staff at the *Charlotte Observer* who's not a college graduate. I know for sure I'm the only columnist they've ever had who's not a college graduate, except for me and I think Ron Green, Sr., the famous sportswriter. We were both college dropouts. But I worked my way up.

[0:12:36.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Seems like the newsroom was a very good spot to educate you.

[0:12:40.2]

Kathleen Purvis: It was, if you could think on your feet and you could pay attention. I taught myself—I've always said I taught myself how to put out a newspaper, because when I was a copy boy in high school, you'd strip the telex machines and then you would sort the stories into baskets, and then you would pick up the edited stories with the headlines on top, and I would look all the time at, okay, what were the hand-editing symbols and what did they cut out and what did they piece together. I would take that out to the composing room. And then later on in the night, I would bring back the page proofs and be able to kind of hook it all together in my mind, "Oh, okay, that's how they cropped that picture, and that's how the type on that headline is larger than the type on that headline." So, really, I taught myself how to write from looking at how things were written and how they were edited. I'm a good learner, you know. Even though I'm not

educated, I'm somebody who can study on things and figure out how they're put together. So, yeah, that's how I taught myself.

When I got to Tallahassee, they had a whole series of—I think there were six of us who were—they called us clerk reporters. We were called super clerks, and we basically would do, like, the grunt work, the obits and the weather and running things back and forth to the composing room, just like you did in any other clerk job, but you could also—they would let you write stories. I was the news and record clerk, and one of the things I would do is assist the police reporter, and if she couldn't do all the stories that day, she'd let me take the other stories she didn't have time to get to, or if she missed one in the basket at the Police Department and I spotted it, I could do a story and get a byline.

One of my most fun ones was one afternoon I swung by the Police Department to get the news and record arrests and break-ins and all that stuff, and they'd just had a report come in that the circus train had been robbed, and she had already left to go to the paper. So there's no cell phones in those days. You were really on your own most of the time.

So I thought, "Well, damn it, I'm not missing that," and I jumped in the car and I drove over to the railroad yard where the circus train was, and interviewed Gunther Gebel-Williams, the lion tamer. They brought him up to the—I literally walked up to the circus train, and I was like, "How do you knock on the door? Where's the door?" [Laughs] So I went to the front, to the engine, and I started yelling until the engineer came to the window, to the front, and he leaned down. I told him who I was, what I wanted to do, and he said, "Wait a minute."

A couple of minutes later, here comes Gunther Gebel-Williams leaning out of the window of the cab at the front of the train, and I interviewed him. His daughter was the one who'd been robbed. She'd been held at gunpoint. And he was hilarious. [Laughs] I had said, "Are you worried about another robbery?"

And he said, "Oh, no, just tell 'em we've let the lions loose." [Laughs] So, yeah, I got to do crazy stories like that.

Police reporting was something I really enjoyed. I liked being around cops. I kind of speak their language, I think because I'm very working-class and so are they. And, of course, they mess with you. Cops mess with you. In Tallahassee, that was always interesting because the Ted Bundy murder case had happened there, and one of the things they used to do sort of as an initiation rite, if you were looking for a report, you know, they'd put the reports in a basket and you'd go through the reports, then one of the reports they would throw in there was the Ted Bundy crime scene photos from the Chi Omega sorority house, and you were supposed to look through those very blasé and make jokes and not act upset, you know, at those kind of pictures. If you could do that and be cool, then you'd get invited to go ride with the cops that night, you know. It's the same thing as back in the newsroom, where as long as you were willing to be cool and make a joke, they'd let you come along and do something, but if you showed that you were offended or showed any kind of umbrage, then you'd be punished and not given any opportunities. So that was part of being a girl and a cop reporter.

[0:17:03.1]

Annemarie Nichols: What a challenge.

[0:17:03.3]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] It was a challenge, yeah. But I worked my way up there. I went on to the national wire desk, worked on the "A" Section, learned layout, learned a lot more copyediting, started running wires, editing off of the wires, incoming stuff. The *Tallahassee Democrat* in those days was owned by Knight Ridder and the *Charlotte Observer* was owned by Knight Ridder, so you could use connections within the papers. So I wanted to go to a bigger paper and a more challenging market, and I heard about an opening at the *Charlotte Observer*. I actually got married on my lunch hour to my husband, was a paste-up guy in the composing room, and he was going to Florida State to get an art degree, so I got the job up here, and we got married in my lunch hour and I moved up here that weekend, and he stayed down there for eight months, so I was here in Charlotte by myself for the first eight months, working on the night desk.

[0:17:57.3]

Annemarie Nichols: How did you guys meet?

[0:17:58.7]

Kathleen Purvis: In the newsroom. He was in the composing room. [Laughs] He jokes about my flicking his pica pole. You know what a pica pole is?

[0:18:07.1]

Annemarie Nichols: No.

[0:18:07.2]

Kathleen Purvis: Okay, when they laid out newspapers in the old days, it was a physical thing. You had to build—you got printed-out type and you actually physically built the page. They had tools, specialty tools, and one of them is a pica pole. I still have one on my desk. It's a long, skinny metal ruler. And my husband is rather short, and he would stick his pica pole in his back pocket and he would be leaning over those boards. They had these big art boards, you know, that they would stand at and build the pages on, and he would have to stretch way over because he's very short. His pica pole would always be sticking out of his back pocket, so I'd go by to drop off copy or pick up, you know, whatever the editors needed, and when I walked by, I would flick the pica pole. [Laughs] And that's how I got his attention. [Laughs] We've been married for thirty-four years.

[0:18:55.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Well, that's nice.

[0:18:56.5]

Kathleen Purvis: Have a twenty-five-year-old son, yeah. Yeah, he's a graphic designer. He's very portable.

So I came up here in 1985 and I started out on the night layout desk, which was a brutal job. It was actually, in all my memory, the worst job I ever had, because it was six editions a night and we often had fifteen minutes between editions, and editors would be yelling to move faster. I mean, a good night was a night when you didn't screw up really,

really bad, you know, but you'd always screw up a little bit. I called it meatball surgery. I mean, it was like battlefield stuff. You were just slamming it as fast as you could. That was how I got to where I could work very fast. I've always been a very fast writer, oddly. I don't know why. I can usually write much, much faster than people around me. I don't know. I've just always been able to do it. It's like the sound of a newspaper story has always been in my head, so I can just pull that out. So most stories, even the really long complicated stories I've done, I generally can write in three or four hours. So it pays to be quick. [Laughs] If you aren't as smart as everybody else, you'd better be faster. [Laughs] So I taught myself that way.

And then I talked my way onto the night copy desk, which was a great job, had a wonderful copy desk chief, and then I went back to features to be a copy editor in features, and along the way, I discovered food writing. I tell people the story that, you know, I never read the paper—I never took the next day's paper home and read it when I was working nights, because if I didn't have the paper to get up for in the morning, I'd sleep too late, you know, because I always loved to get up and read the paper. But the one night of the week I would make an exception was the night before the food section would come out, and the food section would be in the stack of pre-runs. I would take it home and I would sit in the middle of the night and read the food section, because I sort of had this—my parents loved to cook. That was what we always did as a family. I loved the cook, but I had been working nights, I had been working these crazy jobs. I really had forgotten everything my parents had ever taught me about how to cook, but I had sort of this dream that someday I would have a life where I would get to cook.

So I liked to read about food, and food writing at the time was nothing. I mean, it was not a big deal. It was sort of the women's pages, you know. And I would read the food section and think, "God, why is it if I want to read about food, I have to suffer bad writing?" Because it was always this sort of clichéd, you know, "Ladies, please your husbands with this," you know, and you'd read it and think, "Damn, there's something better here. There's a better story here, and I want to tell that story."

So when I went back to features to be a copy editor, I started talking to them about I'd like to be a food writer, and at the time, the food writer was a home economist, not somebody who knew how to write, and she had retired and they were literally getting ready to kill the food section.

Food advertising, those full-page supermarket ads, were beginning to drop away because people had changed how they were shopping, and so they weren't making that much money with the food section as they had been before, and so they were planning to just kill it. They thought food writing had become irrelevant, that no one cared anything about it, that nobody wanted recipes because women were working outside the home, and who had time to deal with this? They're getting nothing but takeout. Why would they want recipes? And I kept thinking, "Wait a minute. You're missing something here. You're missing good stories and a good way to tell stories and a good way to put the world in perspective. People want to know how to cook, and they need help with that more than ever, because they weren't at home with their mothers teaching them at the counter anymore. Somebody needed to be able to do that."

So I went to them and said, "Hey, how about giving me the food section and let me see if I can make it better?"

They said, basically, "No one's interested, and we're going to kill it, but, okay, you can have six hours a week to work on the food section, and the rest of the time you do your other job."

So I was supposed to just be filling it with wire, you know, syndicated stories, that kind of stuff, and I would sneak stories in that I—

[End of track 1]

[0:23:26.0]

Annemarie Nichols: Okay, we are back. It's Monday, March 19th, and you were talking about the Charlotte food scene and how you started writing pieces and putting them into the food section.

[0:23:37.3]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah. I think people also responded to them because I was writing with voice. I've always been able to do that. There's a generic sound to a newspaper story, and while I learned to do that, I also always wrote a little differently than everybody else, I think partly because I'm self-taught. I always say that I didn't have to worry about how to think outside the box because I was never in the box. I was always sort of out on the outside, trying to get in. So when I went to write food stories, there was no model, you know. There wasn't a food editor that I took over for. I literally picked up a fallow beat. I didn't have a Rolodex that I inherited. I didn't have any set of instructions, "Here's how to be a food writer." I just had to make it up.

And I think that's part of what people responded to, was I started learning how to write in a very direct tone that felt like I was talking directly to you, and that's because that's how I would think it through. When I would sit down to write a story, I'd think, "Okay, how to get my Aunt Rosalie really interested in this story," you know. So sometimes I would actually start a story—like my notepad, I like to work with a notepad and a pen and kind of scribble down headlines ideas and that kind of thing, and I would start out my first draft in handwriting and I would even do things like "Dear Aunt Rosalie," and then I would start writing it, then I would take "Dear Aunt Rosalie" off the top of it, so that it would have this very personal sound.

[End of Track 2]

[0:25:17.7]

Annemarie Nichols: Okay, back to the third installment. [Laughter] Okay. You were talking a little bit about—

[0:25:23.8]

Kathleen Purvis: Writing with voice and writing differently.

[0:25:25.6]

Annemarie Nichols: Yes, ma'am. Can you continue? Do you have any more you want to say about that?

[0:25:31.6]

Kathleen Purvis: Well, you know, I think that before there were blogs, before there were websites, there was a real hunger for people to feel like they could relate to writing, that it was to them, and I've always been able to do that, always been able to write about food in a way that sort of pulled people in as a story. I always looked at food as a lens to tell other stories. I mean, that's where that came from with me, was realizing that people could respond to the subject and not be frightened and intimidated. Like if you write about economics, you know, it's scary. It's math. It's homework. Who wants to read that? But if you write about the cost of food, people can relate to it and they can understand, "Oh, okay, this is how the world works." So I started doing that.

For a long time, the *Observer* would only give me a few hours a week to write about food, and I had to keep convincing them to give me more, and they finally got up to thirty-two hours a week. When I came back from maternity leave and said, "I only want to do one job. I want to write about food," instead of doing this and copyediting and all these other things I had been doing. And they would not give me forty hours a week. Food, I was told, would never be a forty-hour-a-week job again, that it was considered the day of the food writer was over, the food sections were dying, and this was not going to be a full-time job.

[Laughs] So I actually drew a line in the sand. It's one of the only times I've ever done this. I went and interviewed for a job at *Southern Living*. And the publisher of the paper at the time, a great guy named Rolfe Neill, and Rolfe heard that I was interviewing with *Southern Living*, and he went to the editor of the paper, Jennie Buckner, and said, "I heard Purvis is looking to leave." And he said, "What does she want to stay?"

And Jennie said, “Well, she wants forty hours a week.”

And Rolfe said, “Well, give it to her.”

And Jennie said, “Well, I can’t. I don’t have the money in the budget.”

And Rolfe said, “That’s a lie. You’ve always got money in a budget. You know you do. You can find it if you want it, so you find it and make her stay.”

And they did. They went ahead and let me be a full-time food writer. But it had taken me six years to convince them that it was actually worth forty hours of their time.

[0:28:02.2]

Annemarie Nichols: That’s crazy. What year was it that you started?

[0:28:05.1]

Kathleen Purvis: Full-time? Let me think. It would have been 1996 or [19]97. My son was born in [19]92, and I had come back part-time after being out on maternity leave. So it was probably [19]96 or ’[19]97, and I think I actually officially started a small amount of food writing in 1989, so it took six or seven years to convince them. And I’m sure that had this been a beat that was a male beat, a male subject—you know, the home editor who dealt with home repairs and had a “fix your gutter,” he never had to fight like that. The sports writers certainly never had to fight like that. I had to fight like that because I was a food writer and it was considered a woman’s beat, and therefore was less valued by male editors. Even though we had a female editor at the time, she had the same outlook, that the things that women wrote weren’t as important.

[0:29:03.1]

Annemarie Nichols: I want to ask you, too, about—so Charlotte is growing and continues to grow.

[0:29:08.8]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] At a ridiculously fast rate, yes, it is.

[0:29:12.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Just driving around here, to me it's amazing how much, like, diversity as far as immigrant culture goes with the pupusas or the tiendas.

[0:29:24.0]

Kathleen Purvis: Oh, yeah, a lot more than people think.

[0:29:25.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah. There's a lot of it. I was wondering, too, at this time when immigration was starting to happen to North Carolina generally and the Sun Belt, you write and you privilege that. You privilege those stories in your column.

[0:29:40.4]

Kathleen Purvis: I privilege that? What does that mean? [Laughs]

[0:29:42.0]

Annemarie Nichols: Well, I think it's really—

[0:29:44.6]

Kathleen Purvis: I don't quite understand how you're using that word. What do you mean? [Laughs]

[0:29:47.7]

Annemarie Nichols: By "privilege," I mean they're there.

[0:29:50.5]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah, yeah.

[0:29:50.6]

Annemarie Nichols: You know?

[0:29:51.9]

Kathleen Purvis: I try and find them and tell them.

[0:29:52.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah, you and Tom Hanchett too. You wrote about that in a *Cornbread Nation* piece, and I was wondering how have the immigrant populations kind of like impacted Charlotte's food and its evolution, and how did you go about choosing to write about that in your columns?

[0:30:13.9]

Kathleen Purvis: I don't know that it was a choice. I have just always looked for what's different, what do people need to know that they don't know, how can I show people their world through the food around them. And the food, to me, that's interesting and that's real and not a trend or, you know, some restaurant company that's overthought their messaging, are the things that people eat every day, so when you write about what people of different cultures each every day, you're telling their story. You're telling how they live.

I have always tried to avoid, although I get nervous about it, you know, do I have the right to tell that story, and this is a debate I've had with a number of African American food writers. When I wrote this big story I did on cornbread, you know, wrote a story on cornbread, why is cornbread so different in white culture and black culture, and it was a controversial story. It was one of those tales everybody always said and nobody had actually put their foot on that third rail and written about it. And I worried do I have the right to do that.

What I have finally come around to understanding is that I can be a third place. I can, in writing, be a third voice, because I can be sort of in the middle, you know. I can be telling this person's side of the story and that person's side of the story, and somebody has to be in the middle who can see both of those sides and help interpret it for each side. And I think there's a real value in that, I hope. [Laughs] I could just be doing major justification of why I'm still alive and still have a job. [Laughs] But I think that there is in some of these very controversial food culture stories, there needs to be a slight remove,

and in newspapers, we always were taught to do that, you know. Back before we started writing first-person, we were always taught to tell both sides of the story. That was the mission. That was the core of everything we did, was just go out and try and tell everybody's side.

So I still try to do that in writing about food cultures, but I'm always worried that I'll be misled or I'll misunderstand or I won't see something in the way that it's true. I'm really always worried about stereotype all the time, you know, and I do have—I've developed over the years a pretty good Greek chorus of people that I reach out to when I write stories, and I say, "Hey, is this reading true? Is this real to you? Do I have a giant blinder here that I'm not seeing?" There is a real responsibility in writing those stories and getting it right, but there's always been a responsibility in journalism to get it right. That's in our DNA.

Does that get to what you were asking? [Laughs]

[0:33:16.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah, that's great. I have another kind of question to kind of like veer off with that. I notice, too, like there's a thoughtfulness that you bring to your work, especially with—like the piece you wrote about when is it time to stop calling ethnic food ethnic.

[0:33:32.3]

Kathleen Purvis: Ah. Thank you. I like that column. I was very pleased with that.

[0:33:35.5]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah, it's interesting to me because some of your work, it's fibrillated, but you're trying to get people to think in more deeper ways about the things that they're consuming.

[0:33:45.9]

Kathleen Purvis: Use food as a lens to see something else.

[0:33:47.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah. So how does your audience—like what kind of conversation do you have with your audience when you do things like that?

[0:33:55.9]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] Some of 'em are pretty ugly. It comes in handy that I've got a very, very thick skin. You know, I've had cops yelling at me when I was twenty years old. I think it helps now that I'm almost sixty. You know, some of the feedback I get is ugly. People don't like to be challenged. They don't like it when you step into their safe space. And I got some real harsh reactions to that one. I'll tell you an interesting one I got on that one, though. I got a phone call from a lady, and I could tell by her voice that she was much older, that she was probably in her seventies, maybe even in her eighties, and she called me up and she said, "Kathleen, I just hate it that you told me I can't use the word 'ethnic' anymore. Why do you keep telling me I can't use words I want to use?"

And I said to her, "Well, ma'am, you know, you and I've been around a long time. You remember there were words back in the[19]60s and [19]70s that people said, words like 'kike' and 'spick' and the word with two G's in the middle, that I still cannot bring myself to say? Do you remember a time when we could say words like that, right?"

And she said, "Yeah, I do."

And I said, "Has it hurt you in any way that you can't say those words now?"

And she paused and she said, "Well, I guess you're right. I never thought about it that way. Thank you. You made me think about it differently." And I talked her in from the ledge. [Laughs]

But there are people who, you know—we had a really great editorial writer here at the *Observer*, an African American woman named Fanny Flono, who's one of the great, great editorial writers. And Fanny said to me one time to always remember that a hit dog will holler. Doesn't mean that dog didn't deserve to be hit just because they holler. [Laughs] And so I kind of keep that one in mind all the time. If I piss 'em off, if I make 'em yell, I probably maybe did a good thing that day. If you challenge people a little bit and make 'em uncomfortable and push 'em, you'll be able to push 'em a little further the next time.

So I think that food can be a way to do that. It can be a way to not only help us understand each other, because we all eat, you know, we all value the food of our lives, but I think it can also be a way that we can bring people a little further along in their understanding of the complex world around them and maybe get 'em a little more comfortable. If I can write a story about why "ethnic food" is a devaluing term, then I can

maybe get a couple of people to look at that and go, "Huh. I never thought of that before," well, then maybe I did okay that day.

[0:36:30.6]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really great. So from the several years [Purvis Laughs] you've been food editor here—

[0:36:38.1]

Kathleen Purvis: One or two, yeah. Let me see. 1996 to—what is this, 2018? [Laughs] Dear lord, I never thought I'd still be doing this. [Laughs] How'd I get so old? Yeah.

[0:36:49.7]

Annemarie Nichols: So from that period of time, how has your job evolved and how has the food section evolved?

[0:36:54.5]

Kathleen Purvis: Oh, dear lord.

[0:36:55.4]

Annemarie Nichols: More broadly speaking.

[0:36:56.2]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah. What food section? You know, ours is gone. We no longer have a food section; we have a food page. It is filled with wire stories. [Laughs] Talk about everything old is new again. And we spend the majority of our time focused on an online audience. Newspapers are struggling, as everybody knows. We are focused very heavily on trying to gain a digital audience. The print medium is going, you know. It's not going to be around much longer, and, you know, if our publisher is asked that, she would say it's going to be around longer, but I have a feeling it's probably not, and, you know, it grieves me. It's a terrible, terrible thing.

On the other hand, I can reach a hell of a lot of people online, and it's one more teaching myself how to do it, you know. I'm teaching myself how to be a social media phenomenon. I'm teaching myself how to do video and how to do Instagram and how to come up with good SEO keywords and how to come up with a headline intriguing enough to make you want to click on it. It is shameful and embarrassing, some of the things I spend my time doing. I'm no longer allowed to write about cooking at all. I cannot write about recipes at all. People won't click on 'em. They have Food52 and Pinterest and allrecipes.com, and they have no reason to get their recipes from a newspaper anymore. So our audience for food writing disappeared, so I had to pivot again, once again teach myself to do a new thing. I am very adaptable.

So now what I do is chase breaking restaurant news. We have some very active millennial publications here, online publications, that are also chasing that audience, so we're competing with them all the time. Sometimes I still—it's sort of like the old days of newspapers, you know, you're trying to beat the other guy and get it first. That's the same as it's ever been, but it is frustrating. You know, the most number of clicks I've had

this year in a story were for going and trying a quarter-pounder made with a fresh beef patty. I mean, you know, this is what I spent forty years training to do? And it got more clicks than anything that I've written on cornbread or macaroni and cheese or any of these other things about culture. Does that make me happy? Not terribly. But I also look at that as there's two guys who sit near me who are investigative reporters who cover abuses in the prison system in North Carolina, and if I can help us make enough money by writing about a stupid quarter-pounder and it keeps them working another couple of days to chase prison reform, then I'm okay with that. I can sleep with that at night.

I do write books. I do a lot of freelance, so I still get to feed the writing I like to do. It's usually not writing for here anymore, because there's no audience for that. So I try and peel off four or five good stories every year that I can sink my teeth into, like this year's macaroni and cheese story, like the one I did last year on the Bessinger family and racism in barbecue. I was *really* proud of that story.

[0:40:22.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Can you talk a little bit about it?

[0:40:23.9]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] Yeah. That was a story I did on—there's a barbecue restaurant in Columbia, South Carolina, that was owned for many years by a man named Maurice Bessinger. It's called Maurice's Piggie Park. He was an unreconstructed segregationist. He fought segregation in restaurants before the Supreme Court. He would hand out leaflets, tracts, videotapes at the front of his restaurant about how slavery was

the best thing that had ever happened to black people, and they should thank God every day for being brought to America as slaves, really offensive stuff, flew the Confederate flag over his restaurants, all of them, in protest after they moved the Confederate flag from the top of the State Capitol in South Carolina.

So my policy for many, many, many years in writing about barbecue was that I never went to the Piggie Park. I refused to go there. I would not eat his food. I would not buy his products. And I was actually at a Southern Foodways event in Birmingham, Alabama, where I had been asked to speak on [laughs] gender and food writing, where there was a very hostile crowd, it was very angry about a piece I had written for the *Bitter Southerner*, so I was trying to be real quiet and sit in the back of the room by myself.

This woman came walking over to me in a break and she said, "Hey, you know, now that Maurice is dead, is it okay to go to the Piggie Park?"

And I thought, "Maurice is dead?" [Laughs] Honestly, I didn't even know. [Laughs] He'd been off my radar for so long, I had not even realized this guy had died. And I thought, "Well, that's interesting."

So I came back and started digging around, and sure enough, he had died a couple years before, and as soon as he died, his heirs, his kids, had taken all the racist stuff down from the restaurant. And I thought "Well, that's interesting." So I started calling the family to say, "Okay, so can you talk to me about the changes?" And they did not want to talk about it *at all*, which led us into doing a story about if you make a change that's for the better, but you're not doing it for the right reasons, have you still made a change for the better, and that was how we tackled that story. And it actually was kind of a thrill. *The New Yorker* ended up following me in doing a story, you know, a follow-up of their

own, which is sort of like, well, hey, this is kind of cool. [Laughs] They called and interviewed me. I got interviewed by *The New Yorker*.

[0:42:47.3]

Annemarie Nichols: That's pretty cool.

[0:42:48.8]

Kathleen Purvis: You know, that was a cool thing, yeah. Wish my parents had both been alive when that happened. My mom would have gotten a big thrill out of that. So, you know, for an uneducated person, I didn't do too bad. [Laughs]

[0:43:03.2]

Annemarie Nichols: I want to talk a little bit about that you're a spitfire [Purvis laughs] and you take on the establishment.

[0:43:09.2]

Kathleen Purvis: I have tended to, yes.

[0:43:11.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you talk about a little, I guess, most positively—well, you've told—

[0:43:18.4]

Kathleen Purvis: What you want to ask?

[0:43:20.2]

Annemarie Nichols: You've told me—

[0:43:20.5]

Kathleen Purvis: I don't care.

[0:43:21.5]

Annemarie Nichols: I ask a lot of things. [Laughs]

[0:43:22.2]

Kathleen Purvis: It's okay. I have no judgment. Go ahead and ask.

[0:43:25.1]

Annemarie Nichols: So you've told me a little bit about the challenges you faced as a woman journalist in the [19]70s and in the [19]80s. Can you talk about, like, the evolution of that and the evolution in your career of how you've been treated? What other kind of challenges have you faced going to the future?

[0:43:43.9]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah, I mean, I think I also mentioned that I think I wouldn't have had to fight so hard to be a full-time food writer had I been covering a beat that is considered

more male. That was definitely something that affected my ability to be a food writer. You know, I've been in the newsroom a long time, and I have learned that I have to push, because if you don't push, you don't get anything, and I have always had to push because I didn't come into this with a college degree and, you know, a nice, impressive internship behind me, you know. I have had to stand my ground and be willing to do that.

How that is now, you know, the food world has gotten interesting. There's all of this coverage of food now. I mean, once upon a time, food almost dropped away as a thing anybody wanted to cover. I mean, people ask me, you know, how'd I get my job, and it's like, you know, when I started doing it, there were no websites, there was no *Epicurious*, there was no *Saveur*, there was no *Serious Eats*, you know. None of these things existed. Now everybody and their brother wants to be a food writer, and it's a little frustrating. I think what I face now isn't so much discrimination of gender as it is discrimination of age, and this has really become an issue here in Charlotte, where there is this sort of constantly moving restaurant scene, and everybody wants to go to the hottest, newest place, and everybody wants to be the first person to shoot a picture of the menu and the room and the first three dishes, you know.

We don't review restaurants anymore. There's no time or patience in the public for that, you know. If you don't have it first, then you don't have it, and I'm oftentimes at restaurant previews where I'm surrounded by people who are less than half my age, I mean more than half my age, I guess—I'm not good with math, never have been. I'm surrounded by all these young people, God bless 'em, and I have nothing against young people. I like young people. They're a lot of fun. They teach me new stuff all the time.

But a lot of them look at me with this look like, you know, "Who's the fat old lady over there?"

Food coverage has become, you know, hip, or whatever, hipster, for whatever good that is, and I worry that that field is rushing to grab the new so fast that *nothing* gets a chance to be old. And if you have any perspective, well, nobody cares. That perspective leads me to write an online story that might be two inches longer and you're not going to read it. You're going to get bored. So it's trying to keep yourself relevant in this world is really, really hard to do.

I do reach out a lot to the young marketers in town. I tend to go out to lunch with them. I like—I've got a list of maybe six or seven of them, young writers who write for magazines and websites, marketing people who are young and very smart, and I usually—you know, each one of them, I'll go out to lunch with them at least twice a year so I can sit down and talk to them about, "Okay, what's a hashtag again?" [Laughs] "Explain to me what I should be doing." And, you know, they're very grateful that I take them seriously, and I'm very grateful that they tolerate me. But I do worry about that all the time. I do feel a bit like, you know, I'm the old fart at the party, and who the hell wants me around, you know? So there is some of that.

As far as gender, you know, who knows? I got in trouble for bringing that up before. [Laughs] I don't regret bringing it up, not in the slightest. So I don't know. Did I answer your question?

[0:47:30.4]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah.

[0:47:31.5]

Kathleen Purvis: I ramble on and forget what the question was.

[0:47:32.8]

Annemarie Nichols: No. You made people think. [Purvis laughs.] I want to talk, too, you've taken on topics like spirit writing. You wrote *Savor the South* bourbon cookbook.

[0:47:43.7]

Kathleen Purvis: I got a new book coming out May 7th. It's called *Distilling the South*, and it is on the craft distilling movement. We did it as a travel food book. I went to fifty-four distilleries in thirteen months. [Laughs] We did six liquor trails across eleven southern states, and I'm really bummed that I couldn't get to Texas. I apologize in advance. I hope if I get a second edition, I will get to go to trail number twelve and add Texas, but I just couldn't do it in thirteen months, because I had to do it while doing a full-time job, so I was out every weekend, you know. My husband and my dog and my son really kind of had to learn to get along without me an awful lot.

But I had a ball. I mean, it's a blast what's going on out there, you know. It's tracking similarly to the craft beer movement. They're related and similar. But there is an artisan creation going on across this country that is exciting to see, you know, people really staking their lives and their retirement income on being able to make liquor better than Jack Daniels, you know. Boy, they got guts. You think I got guts? They got guts. [Laughs] And there's something there, a self-made thing that appeals to me. Being a self-

made person myself, I admire anyone who's willing to do that. So, yeah, I wrote a lot about whiskey. [Laughs] And brandy and gin and rum. [Laughs]

[0:49:12.3]

Annemarie Nichols: And pecans.

[0:49:12.4]

Kathleen Purvis: And pecans. I write about pecans, yes, ma'am.

[0:49:15.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you tell me a little bit about what made you interested in getting into, like, writing longer-form things like recipe books and travel guides, rather than, I guess—

[0:49:29.0]

Kathleen Purvis: Well, it was a good break. You know, all the time that I was writing food for newspapers, I would often take on stories that were not food stories. I would go to my features editors and say, "Hey, you know, I really want to write a story about the history of cemeteries in Charlotte." That has nothing to do with food, because when you write about food, it becomes kind of all-consuming all the time, and I get bored. I need to do things that are interesting to me.

I also always have—not always. Really in the last fifteen years, I started getting a lot of calls for freelance, magazines, you know, asking me to write things for them that

sometimes were more interesting, frankly, than what my editors at the newspaper wanted me to write. I had male editors for a long, long time, who really didn't get what I was doing, and by writing for other publications, I got the chance to write other things. Same thing with the books. I also—you know, I'm not stupid. The newspaper business started changing an awful lot, what, about fifteen years ago? We were starting to see the handwriting on the wall. I mean, it was pretty obvious that it was going to change drastically and that that drastic change was probably going to come before I had turned sixty-six and could retire, so I needed to find ways to diversify my income and diversify what I was writing, what I was having the chance to do and known for.

So I started taking those opportunities just because they're interesting and they pay well, and, honestly, I love writing freelance because most of the freelance editors are really, really—they're like what Benjamin Franklin used to say about, you know, making love to older women, "They're so very grateful." [Laughs] When I write for magazine editors, they're usually so very grateful, because, you know, as a newspaper writer, I have really, really good work habits. I can hit a deadline. I can hit a word count. I can hit the style you want, you know. And I have a number of magazines that will call me and just say, "Hey, I need a story like this, with that many words, and I need it by this date." And I'm like, "Yeah, no problem." And they know I'll do it. It makes me reliable, and I gather there are a lot of freelancers out there who struggle to do that because they don't have those newspaper work habits. So magazine people like working with us. [Laughs]

[0:51:51.6]

Annemarie Nichols: Makes sense.

[0:51:53.7]

Kathleen Purvis: I know. Does that sound conceited? [Laughs] It's true. We're very reliable. [Laughs] I think that's one reason why I do get a lot of work. [Laughs] If I tell you I'm going to finish your book in fourteen months, I will finish your book in fourteen months. [Laughs] It might be thirteen months and twenty-eight days, but it will get one, and that's a lifetime of always be on deadline. I've lived my whole life on deadline.

[0:52:21.0]

Annemarie Nichols: Put it in a [inaudible]

[0:52:21.7]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] In a way, I guess, yeah. Yeah, I suppose.

[0:52:29.0]

Annemarie Nichols: What sort of pieces do you write for freelance?

[0:52:32.0]

Kathleen Purvis: You know, anything from essays to—I've got one I just finished for *Our State* magazine that's for their Christmas issue, actually, on Venezuelans tamales, a family, a Venezuelan family that makes tamales, and why are they different from Mexican tamales. *Southern Living* called me last year and said, "Hey, you know, we need a short piece for our Christmas section. You got one?" [Laughs]

And that one really surprised me, because I thought, "Oh, my god, the only thing I have to do is so not *Southern Living*. They're going to hate it."

But, you know, I wrote it up and sent it to 'em and she said, "Oh, my god, I love this. This is very different from what we usually run." [Laughs]

"Well, okay."

You know, I don't know. People like—people will call and ask me to write with voice. They like that I write with voice, you know. "We need 800 sassy words on pie filling. Can you do it?"

And I'll kind of go, "Yeah, sure, I can do that. I can do that in an hour, no problem." I don't know. I write funny.

[0:53:42.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Let's see.

[0:53:46.3]

Kathleen Purvis: You wanted to ask me about the *Bitter Southerner* piece. What did you want to ask?

[0:53:48.8]

Annemarie Nichols: Well—

[0:53:50.4]

Kathleen Purvis: I don't care. Go ahead.

[0:53:50.0]

Annemarie Nichols: I just wanted to know about just what I asked you, about the challenges of being a woman journalist. In entering this field, not journalism, but food writing. I did have a question. What would you like to see for women journalists who are writing about food, or food writers, not even necessarily journalists, in the future? That's kind of generic.

[0:54:15.0]

Kathleen Purvis: Yeah. I'm not sure. I'm not very good at predicting the future. I'm not sure I can answer that. [Laughs] I hope that they will continue to do things that are meaningful to people and that bring meaning to people's lives. I think one of the things that I—the reason I wrote that, too, was I felt like the conversation was too limited, that there were a lot of people who were not being asked to speak or they were only being asked to speak on certain subjects, you know. This is one of the things we run into. You know, I was talking earlier about writing about food and culture and how careful you have to be, how important it is.

One of the things that has been brought up to me—how do I want to say this? Too often when we go to write about, say, African American cooking, we will call an African American chef and we will talk to them about African American cooking, but we don't think to call that African American chef and ask them to talk about French cooking or ask them to talk about fine dining or ask them to talk about service issue or anything that we don't think of as "African American," you know. These are one of the mistakes that we

make when we don't use these sources as a regular part of any normal story that we do. We only slot them into a "Well, you're the Mexican chef. Therefore, I have to ask you about Mexican stuff. I can't ask you about how hard it is to retain line cooks."

I think the same thing had happened with women in food writing, where if it was a story that somebody thought of or, you know, at Southern Foodways, honestly, if it was a subject that people thought of as a, quote, unquote, "women's subject," they might have—cake baking, they would invite—they might ask you to speak. But if it was a subject like whiskey, they weren't asking women to speak; they were asking men to speak. And it started to really bother me, and I had complained about it several times, that the voices that were up there seem to be so slotted into silos, that they weren't allowing people to be more than expectation, and I think that's a real danger that we get into in food writing, of thinking of it as the women's pages, again, that if it's food writing, it must be—well, if it's home cooking, that must be women, but if it's restaurant cooking, that must be men, you know? We think in these limited ways sometimes, and that had really started to irritate me, and that was one of the things that I wanted to speak up about and why I went ahead and wrote the piece that I did, was because I thought we were not allowing enough people in the conversation.

That help?

[0:57:07.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah. How do you think the piece impacted what was going on?

[0:57:11.0]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] Well, I kind of hope it did. One person that I found out later—you always find the perfect source after a story's done, you know. The journalist's hell. Always happens. After I wrote that piece, I did hear from a lot of women who really said, "Thank you so much." This was a conversation a lot of women were having in the back row at the symposiums, and, you know, people were having it behind their hands. They were having it in their hotel rooms afterward. So there were a lot of women who came to me, and men as well, quite a few I heard from who said, "Thank you so much. I had been thinking that for all along. I was uncomfortable in the same way. I really appreciate that you brought this up."

The person who was the perfect example to me, that I didn't find out about until after I ran the damn piece, was Sandra Gutierrez. Sandra lives in Cary, North Carolina. She writes about being a Latino in the South, Latina in the South, and how that impacts her food. She had tried several times to come to the attention of the Southern Foodways Alliance. She had asked, apparently, had approached, she said, she told me, had wanted to be a speaker there and was never asked to be. Instead, there was a man, wonderful man, do not mean to criticize him at all, Gustavo Arellano, who doesn't live in the South. He lives in Orange County, California. He was a tourist in the South, and yet he was the guy who was invited to speak about being a Latino in the South and where the crosslines were. How come Sandra Gutierrez wasn't asked to do that? How come Arellano, Gustavo Arellano was? You know, why was that? That's the perfect example of exactly what I was talking about.

Last year, Sandra finally got invited to speak at Southern Foodways Symposium, and Sandra was damn proud of that, and I take credit for that. Sandra herself said to me,

"You gave me the courage to push harder. You gave me the courage to make sure they knew I was here, because I thought I was being ignored because I wasn't important enough." And I got Sandra in front of the world. I got Sandra to have the courage to pick up that phone and make that pitch and to get herself taken more seriously. So, yeah, I give myself credit for that. It didn't help me. I think I've lost a couple of jobs because of it, but, you know, but at least I was able to some other women see that you know what? You can stand up. You can stand your ground and maybe they will laugh at you a little bit, but nobody's going to knock you down.

So Nancy McDermott got nominated for a James Beard Award this year for a piece on lost pies, and Sandra Gutierrez has come to the attention of the Smithsonian and the Southern Foodways people, and, yeah, I take some credit for that. I take some credit for helping those older women see that they're still valuable and have a lot to say and that you can say stuff that pisses people off and survive. I don't know that I survived without being undinged. I know I've lost some friends because of it and I've been treated fairly rudely sometimes by some folks in Oxford since then, but *c'est la vie*.

[1:00:28.4]

Annemarie Nichols: Thank you very much for talking about it. It's not an easy thing to talk about.

[1:00:32.0]

Kathleen Purvis: It wasn't. I had to hurt some feelings to do it, and that makes me feel really bad. John T [Edge] was always someone that I admire and love dearly. He stayed

at my house several times. I really—you know, I love the guy. I know that we're still—our friendship will never be exactly the same, and that's a pity, but I also wouldn't have not said it, because sometimes you got to say.

[1:00:59.6]

Annemarie Nichols: And on that note—

[1:01:02.2]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] What else do you want to know?

[1:01:01.5]

Annemarie Nichols: I don't have any other questions.

[1:01:06.1]

Kathleen Purvis: [Laughs] Yeah.

[1:01:09.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Is there anything you want to add that I haven't touched on or that you just want to, like, share for the record?

[1:01:13.5]

Kathleen Purvis: You know, I mean, I'm fifty-nine years old. I'm not sure what the next six years are going to be like. I trust that I will find a way to continue to be a writer and to

continue to contribute, but I'm not sure. You know, I've spent the last forty years reinventing myself, and I'm surprising people in doing things that people told me I couldn't do, and every time I prove them wrong. So, you know, we'll see what the next six years brings. [Laughs] And the years after that. One thing about doing this is you never completely retire. I'm sure that I will still be writing when I'm in my seventies, because that's just what I do and I can't not write. It's like not breathing. You know, I just hope I keep finding ways to be relevant.

[1:02:02.8]

Annemarie Nichols: I think you will.

[1:02:02.5]

Kathleen Purvis: I hope so. [Laughs]

[1:02:06.1]

Annemarie Nichols: Well, thank you very, very much. We appreciate you taking the time.

[1:02:09.5]

Kathleen Purvis: Well, hey. I was happy to do it. I can't believe you came all this way just to talk to me. [Laughs]

[End of interview]