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Maribel Gonzalez Interview Part 1

Mark Naison

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Bethany Fernandez

Okay! All right. Good morning. Today is Tuesday, June 2nd 2020. The time now is twelve o'clock. This is the Bronx COVID-19 Oral History Project with Maribel Gonzalez and interviewing is Bethany Fernandez. Just so that we can start, could you just state and spell your name?

Maribel Gonzalez

Sure! Maribel Gonzalez; M-A-R-I-B-E-L G-O-N-Z-A-L-E-Z.

Bethany Fernandez

Thank you so much. And thank you for coming here to share about your experience. You know, I think you have a wonderful perspective to provide of, like, life during the pandemic. So, I guess I should ask, like, what do you do? Like, what's your job? How would you describe that?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, I am owner and operator of a small business, a restaurant called The South of France, on Westchester Avenue in the Bronx. And we have been there now almost 24 years. And I do everything from A to Z. Though I have staff—or I should say, had staff—I, you know, greet, I host, I cook, I bartend, I clean the bathrooms, I do whatever is necessary.

Bethany Fernandez

[laugh]

Maribel Gonzalez

Even now, presently, I'm even doing deliveries. So, small business operator!

Bethany Fernandez

Right. And so could you just tell me a bit about, like, how The South of France became? Like, how do you choose a name called, like--how do you name a restaurant "The South of France"?

Maribel Gonzalez

[laugh]

Bethany Fernandez

How did the restaurant develop and become what it is today?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, actually, that's a funny story. We inherited the name. And because of the backstory, we decided to keep the name to pay homage to it. Legend has it that when the building was bought, the place was gutted, and the landlord at the time was unsure of what to do with the place. So he decided to take a break and vacation. He went to the south of France, where he frequented a restaurant over there, and eventually met a lady, fell in love, married her, and when they came back to the Bronx, as they stood there in an empty gutted place, they actually decided to recreate the restaurant that they met at in the south of France. So the reason why I kept the name is to pay homage not only to their love story, but to why the place looks as it does, because it's an exact replica of a restaurant that existed in the south of France. So that's why I kept the name.

Bethany Fernandez

That's quite an interesting story.

Maribel Gonzalez

[laugh]

Bethany Fernandez

And--what would you, like--obviously, you know, I doubt you are a French restaurant. So what would you say is, like--what type of food do you serve at your restaurant?

Maribel Gonzalez

Right. Well, I wasn't going to begin serving frog legs in the middle of the southeast Bronx. It probably wouldn't be a popular dish, though, you know, there's no reason why it couldn't be. But I am a Puerto Rican-American restaurant, you know. I have traditional authentic Spanish recipes, and I also do steaks, chops, salads—all the general stuff.

Bethany Fernandez

Okay. And so, like, obviously right now, we're in the middle of a pandemic. But I sort of want to get a sense of, like, what life was like—you know, owning, managing, handling a restaurant before the pandemic. So what would you say was like a regular day for you, if you walked into The South of France?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, it's--I'm happy to say that the memories that we have, and hopefully will continue to have are of a very loving, warm, welcoming place. We were known as the cheers of the Bronx, if you will, because, you know, everyone did know your name. It was a very loving atmosphere. It was a gathering place. My place is not just a restaurant bar, but it was very much a community place—a venue where people had their meetings and planning for charitable events and nonprofits and everyone had, you know, their favorite times to go, whether it was for poetry nights or karaoke or for their favorite dishes. It was a place of gathering, of community gathering. And that's one of the things that we missed the most.

Bethany Fernandez

And I guess now that you have, like--based on, like, the executive orders by, like, Cuomo and, you know, just social distancing and all of that, it must be hard--have you found a way to sort of keep the magic of community that came from The South of France, like, when you go in? Or have you, like--how would you--how would you try and--how have you been able to? Or if not, have you struggled to keep that sort of environment?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, obviously, it's very hard when you can't continue to operate in the same manner. Being only, you know, doing takeout and curbside pickup and some deliveries, the place is empty. And, you know, there's a certain sadness to that, that you can't find the same camaraderie, though the spirit is there, the dedication is there. But, you know, we still keep our same philosophies, the fact that, you know, we are of the people, because of the people. Our motto is, "We do it all for

you." And that has been what we do—that's always going to be what we do. And, you know, we still bring forth that spirit and how we deal with people coming in to pick up food and how we answer our calls, how we make our deliveries. And so, you know, we tell people, "Don't forget us; we're still here. We're still doing it all for you, authentically, fresh." And we're still in the same manner, loving and waiting for everyone to come back.

Bethany Fernandez

Right. So I guess I want to sort of talk about, you know, logistics, you know. While barriers that, you know, social aspect where you are making sure that a customer feels welcome and at home, how would you say that, you know--you've mentioned that you were handling deliveries, you were cleaning up the bathroom, cooking, doing all of that stuff. How would you say that that has become more burdensome? How would you describe the transition into doing all of these things, in the scope of a pandemic?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, it's heartbreaking to be honest with you. It's heartbreaking because not only am I and the one or two persons that I'm still able to employ, trying to do the job of many, you know, it's heartbreaking because I don't have the funds and I can't bring back and support the staff that myself and my patrons have counted on. And so, you know, in trying to do it all, it's debilitating, it's exhausting. You know, you can't be everywhere at every moment, so certain things, of course, have suffered—thank goodness, not our quality. But the exhaustion, you know, the lack of sleep, the trying to still stay vibrant, and go purchase, and cook, and pack, and deliver, and maintain and sanitize the place, make sure that everyone who comes to pick up food knows that,

you know, the place is clean and safe. And all those things are extremely time consuming. And so the days have become even longer, because you're covering all bases with no help.

Bethany Fernandez

Right, right. So I guess I want to sort of get a better sense of, like, you. Like, and how you've been facing, you know, this pandemic. And I guess, I would want to start off with, like, what sort of inspired you to, like, take up The South of France as a restaurant and sort of get into this business.

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, that, again, is another interesting story. My background was in radio and television. I did marketing and sales and promotions for a long time in the Spanish and the English-Spanish speaking media. And so my mother was an entertainer, a singer, and the owner who purchased before myself The South of France was not expecting all the work that it actually entails to run this business. And so he searched my mother out to come and manage the place. Also, you know, have entertainment and etcetera. But unfortunately, in spite of her best efforts, he was not a kind, understanding man. And so he was abusive, and he was disrespectful. And so he had an ulterior motive that he wanted her to put in all the work and yet, he wanted to, you know, popularize the place so that he can sell it. And so he was cruel to her one day, and when I found that out, I took it upon myself to gather his information—have my lawyer speak to his lawyer, if you will. And eventually after a two-and-a-half month period, I became the owner, unbeknownst to him, because he talked with my mother and he really wasn't aware of my name or my surname. And so when he came to present the contract to my mother, to throw her out, and throw her out in the

garbage, if you will, as he termed it, I came in and showed him that the contract that he had was the name that pertained to me, and I was her daughter. So if anyone was going to go out in the garbage, it was going to be him because he was trespassing on my property. So, much to his shock, he tried to, you know, say he couldn't accept it. But, you know, when the checks are cashed and the contracts are signed, it's too late. So therefore, after some time of back and forth and working with the radio station, having a baby, if you will, living in Manhattan, coming back and forth to the Bronx, I had to make a choice. And, you know, I wasn't gonna let my mother be there by herself. At this point, the restaurant was being thankfully very successful. And so I retired from that industry, and I started to work at the restaurant. And it was one of the best things that happened, because it afforded me some time to raise my daughter. You know, I was available to do the mommy thing with after school, and the piano, and the swimming and all of that, and still operate a business, and become an entrepreneur, and so many blessings that come with that.

Bethany Fernandez

That's actually really inspiring to just hear sort of a story of how you became a restaurant owner. And so now you have this history of, like, dealing with the restaurant. You're of the people, for the people, you know. You do it all for, you know--you say that you do it all for them—like, all for your customers. Well, we have to talk a little bit more about you! Like, how have you personally been faring, like, with this during this pandemic? I know, you've said that you've lost sleep, that, you know, days have been longer, and it's been harder. But could you speak a little bit more on that?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, you know, I mean, like in everything there's both good and bad. And it's certainly--thank goodness that I'm a person of faith, and I come back to find strength in my faith, guidance and wisdom. And in pursuing my business and continuing to build on it, you know, as we have now new elements to it, and that we now have these delivery services in addition, you know, with the Grubhub and the DoorDash and the Uber Eats, which we didn't have before. But it's still a struggle, because you don't know, if you're going to be around the next day so it's mental anguish; at the same time, it's maintaining positivity, bringing forth the best quality product that you can do, and trying to fight the system, waiting for help that you're not getting, so, you know, there's a lot of doubt. So it affects you emotionally, mentally, physically, but as an entrepreneur, we face that all the time. And, you know, you have to be positive. You have to know that you can never give up, that it will get better. You have to believe. You have to have faith in everything that you've poured into the community, the work that you've done—that you've been recognized for—and that other people will come back, that the business will come back, that the community will come back, that the Bronx will come back. And so you know, you stay positive no matter what. Never giving up is key.

Bethany Fernandez

Yeah, I think you raised some really good points about, like, positivity and things like that. Have you--I just have to ask. You know, since you are a restaurant based on, like, community, have you found yourself, like, while you've been handling deliveries and whatnot, that you are sort of, like, that person that sort of has to present, like, you know, sort of to give people sort of that,

like--how do I say it? Like the--you have to sort of give them sort of, like, that pep talk? Like, you know, "You got to stay positive too."

Maribel Gonzalez

All the time.

Bethany Fernandez

You know, like, I guess, you know, I want to know a little bit more about your interaction with, like, your customers, when, you know, you're delivering food and sort of, like, being on the frontlines and making sure that the people have things to eat.

Maribel Gonzalez

Right. Well, I mean, you know, it's--I'll give you a perfect example. Often, you know, when some people that we haven't seen in a while, are being, you know, very kind and supportive to the restaurant, and they're coming in to order food—and these are patrons that have been with us for years—when they come in, I've sometimes gotten emotional and I cry at the side of them, because I can't hug them, I can't thank them, I can't shake their hand. And so I just have to say, you know, "Thank you for supporting me." You know, "We love you still." And we're grateful for them—we're grateful for their support and not forgetting us, you know. But it's heartwrenching in so many ways because you want to stay strong, but then, you know, you're human, and you miss people, you missed the camaraderie. And often when I deliver to people, I see so much sadness, I see devastation, I see food insecurity, I see hunger, and—which we're also trying to address as a restaurant—and I am giving pep talks. You know, I'm like, "Thank

you for supporting and ordering." You know, "It's going to get better." You know, "I've been told that you can also go here to the local school to pick up, you know, free food for your family," and everything. And, you know, I'm giving them encouragement, you know. I'm their mother, I'm their sister, I'm their friend. I'm often the only person that they've seen, you know, in a long time, because they've been in their house. And they're people who are alone, and they don't have conversation. So, you know, I'm often giving them encouragement, I'm telling them that it's okay, that the world is out here, and that, you know, it may not be the same, it may come back different, but it still exists. We will overcome this. And, you know, it's a matter of giving encouragement all the time, whomever you run into.

Bethany Fernandez

Yeah. And I also heard you mentioned that you were--that you as a restaurant were trying to deal with the food insecurity that has sort of arisen out of, like, dealing with the pandemic. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Maribel Gonzalez

Right? Well, I've teamed up with another lady named Minerva Aponte, who has a GoFundMe page for hot meals for healthcare workers. And her mission has been to feed the frontliners doctors and nurses in various different hospitals throughout the Bronx. And she has hired me. And I've been very lenient in my cost and in my effort to bring forth the best product. And together we have now fed hundreds and hundreds of meals to various hospitals—St. Barnabas, BronxCare, upcoming now North Central and Montefiore—for all the hospitals, doctors, nurses, security, lab specialists. And, you know, we're trying to address that, that they feel recognized

and appreciated. And as such, I'm also giving food certain hours to the community. I'll limit it one to two hours, and whoever comes to my restaurant, I cook a surplus and they will get it. And that's at no charge. And so, you know, I believe that you can't live and work in a community without giving back to the community. We always did that when we were open under normal hours for the past sixteen years. We provided a free buffet every Wednesday for three hours where we replenished it constantly, never missed a Wednesday—thank goodness, knock on wood [laugh]—in sixteen years. And we often also did it in the summertime on Sundays. And, you know, you have to give back and you have to be grateful. And that was available to not only patrons, but everyone in the community. And we on a regular basis would feed eighty, ninety, a hundred people every Wednesday.

Bethany Fernandez

That's amazing to hear that you're still able to support folks even in the pandemic—you know, the providing meals and whatnot. I guess I have to ask, like, has it been harder to do so now that, you know--getting ingredients, getting all of these things cost money and now you have to get, like--you probably have to spend more on, like, cleaning supplies and whatnot. Like, you know.

Maribel Gonzalez

Definitely.

Bethany Fernandez

I guess I want to hear more about, like you know, more so, like, the financial concerns. I know you say that as a restaurant owner it sort of is always looming in the back of your mind, but is it more on the forefront now since there is the pandemic? Like, I'd like to hear more about that.

Maribel Gonzalez

Absolutely. Well, you know, you have to do with what you can, and you have to do more on a lot less. And so, you know, you're still not being able to operate financially, normally as we would. And actually, we, you know--losing eighty-five to ninety percent of your regular income is gut wrenching. But nonetheless, you borrow from Peter to pay Paul, if you will, and you get what you can, and you go purchase, and you go do. And, you know, I come from the mindset when where one eats two can eat, where two can eat five can eat, where five eat ten can eat. And so, you know, you do that, because you know that you have to because there's need. And though there's certainly a struggle of financial hardship, you figure it out. And, you know, that's what Bronx people are known for. We are warriors. We are Bronx strong. And so it takes a lot more time to find specials to go. Maybe where you once could buy everything in one location, now you have to go to four locations, because they have another item at a lesser cost. And so it takes a lot more effort, which is where the exhaustion comes in. But to do it, because, you know, to know that you're feeding people is very heartwarming, very satisfying.

Bethany Fernandez

Now, I know that you mentioned that you have to go to, like, multiple locations to buy ingredients and things like that. And I know that I tried to reach out to you one day when you were, like, in the process of moving those ingredients. So I guess I want to hear a little bit more

about that process now that it's not just, like, going to one specific location and buying everything that you may need.

Maribel Gonzalez

Right. Well, you know, you have to do it alone. So where I would go to, let's say, Jetro or Restaurant Depot, and, you know, buy fifty, diverse different items, you know, now I can only buy five items here; I have to go to the Bronx Terminal Market and buy a different five items here; I have to try to also support other small businesses, and so I will go buy the beans in another location, where it'll cost me more to buy a twenty-pound bag as opposed to buying a fifty-pound bag in one location but they also need the help. So I have to spread my wings, if you will. And in the process, when I had staff that I would employ to either give a list to and come back with all the items, you know, I not only have to go purchase it, but I have to carry that fifty-pound bag of rice myself, because there is no staff. There is no monies that have come in from any particular loans or anything like that, that I'm still waiting on to allow me to bring back my staff, to bring back help.

Bethany Fernandez

Yeah, it seems like you're doing a lot of this stuff on your own. And so I just also want to know, like--how are you taking care of yourself? Because, you know, if you were lugging around a fifty-pound bag of beans, or like, you know, carrying all of these things, moving all this stuff on top of, like, you know, maybe getting less sleep, putting in more effort into your work, like, how do, you know--how are you taking care of yourself? [laugh]

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, I mean, I am trying to sleep more. You know, the fact that you can't operate under the normal hours, then I have to close earlier, so I am sleeping more. But, you know, in all of this devastation, there are also a lot of blessings. Because you find that you're more resilient, that you're stronger than you may have thought. And so I'm stronger than I thought, you know. I feel that, when you need to lug that fifty-pound bag because you have to make whatever money you can because maybe some of that can go to feed families that can't afford it, you find the strength, you get the stamina, you find the hutzpah, if you will, to lift that bag because there's so many dependents on it: myself, my business, my future, the future of my employees, and those in my community. So I take a little better care of myself, and I've developed a couple of muscles in the interim. [laugh]

Bethany Fernandez

So I guess I just want to know, like, what would you like Bronx sites to know about, you know, working at a restaurant during a pandemic? Like, what would you think is something that's really important to know during this time?

Maribel Gonzalez

Well, [sigh] I think that people have to be aware that there's a lot of sacrifices. You know, frontline workers are not only in hospitals, but they are people like myself, who are risking themselves and my staff to stay open, to purchase and make a meal, deliver a meal. We are risking our--contracting the virus. And, you know, we're doing it because we're providing a service because we have compassion, because we have a need. And I think that, you know, the

next time that people go back into a small business, that it's important to recognize the efforts, you know. This is their livelihood. Tipping is important; people do depend on that. And, you know, we can't take things for granted anymore. We realize that essential workers, you know, people that were blind to us before—grocery stores, truck drivers, etcetera, you know, delivery people—that now we depend on them greatly. So I think people have to have a better awareness that, you know, we are more alike than we are different. And gratitude is extremely important. And I think that people have to be more cognizant of knowing that, you know, every little bit helps. And we're all in this together.

Bethany Fernandez

Now, I know that--have you found that even in the midst of the pandemic, that people don't really see you, as an owner of a restaurant as someone who's making sure that people are getting fed? Like, do they not--do you see that they don't really deem you as an essential worker? Because I know that a lot of times, essential workers focus, you know, kind of on doctors, maybe even like, you know, people who work in, like, grocery stores and things like that, but I don't think I've heard much about, like, people who work in restaurants,

Maribel Gonzalez

Right. Well, you know, it varies. Some people are going about their business, and they just get their food and, and to them, you know, it's just another day, and other people are extremely aware, and appreciative. And they are grateful that they did not have to step out of their homes, and that someone brought or gave something to them right at their doorstep. And they tip better. They say "Thank you." They say "Stay safe." You know, they are more more cognizant of it.

And they are surprised many times and they say, "Oh my God, it's you bringing me the food?" or, you know, they say, "Oh, now I can finally"--like you started this interview, put a face to the voice or to the name, you know. And it doesn't matter who may not always acknowledge it. It matters those that do.

Bethany Fernandez

And I guess so, obviously, you know, you had a very interesting and inspiring story about, you know, becoming involved in the restaurant industry. What advice would you give to someone who would be--who is aspiring to do the same thing, in light of everything, in light of all of your experiences throughout the pandemic?

Maribel Gonzalez

Right. Well, I'd say that you have to do a lot of soul searching, that you have to make sure that this is something that you really want to go into, that you have to understand that it's going to affect your personal life, that it is in your--you have to be in all the way—there's no halfway in this—and that you have to plan. You have to know that you're only going to have yourself to depend on as an entrepreneur. There is no, you know, nine-to-five and leaving it all at the office and getting a paycheck, that if you don't put in the work, and have a backup plan—plan A, B and C—that there is no paycheck unless you are the one to pay yourself and make sure that you're going to have to be able to do that along with the responsibility of your staff. So I'd say do research, plan, do a long-term plan, and make sure that you have enough passion to stay with it. It's not going to be easy. It's an amazingly rewarding industry. You have to love people. And when you do it right and you're in it for the right reasons, it'll come back to you.

Bethany Fernandez

Thank you for such insightful words. And lastly, I would have to ask: how would someone get in touch with you about, you know, supporting, ordering from The South of France? Like, if someone wanted to, you know, support you...

Maribel Gonzalez

Yes, order from us! [laugh] Well, you know, you could call the restaurant directly, The South of France at (718) 823-1133, or also we're on The South of France Uber Eats, Grubhub, and DoorDash. And, you know, our email if you ever want to send us some information, it's sofbx1@yahoo.com. Thank you.

Bethany Fernandez

All right, thank you so much! I mean, the last thing I have to ask you, because this would not be a Bronx African-American History Project interview without a picture: do you mind if we take, like, a virtual picture?

Maribel Gonzalez

Sure!

Bethany Fernandez

All right.

Maribel Gonzalez

Yes.

Bethany Fernandez

Ready?

Maribel Gonzalez

Ready!

Bethany Fernandez

And...wait. Yeah, I think we got it. All right, thank you so much.

Maribel Gonzalez

Yay! [laugh]

Bethany Fernandez

[laugh] Thank you again for taking the time--

Maribel Gonzalez

Thank you so very much. You're doing wonderful, wonderful work, and we appreciate it. And keep going. The Bronx is bigger and better; it will always be.

Bethany Fernandez

And you too are doing wonderful and amazing work.

Maribel Gonzalez

Thank you.

Bethany Fernandez

I mean, just hearing your story and, like, the passion and motivation you have for, like, you know, managing a business is really inspiring.

Maribel Gonzalez

Thank you.

Bethany Fernandez

I just have to thank you again; it's been an honor to interview you.

Maribel Gonzalez

It's my pleasure. I appreciate it. Be blessed.