

097 Judy Perly

Please note that any items that were difficult to transcribe are marked with an [indiscernible] tag.

[0:00:00]

**Interviewer:** The date today is 19th of March. I am Eleanor Levine, and I'm having a conversation with Judy Perly, and Judy, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Respondent:** Hi. My name is Judy Perly. I run the Free Times Café at 320 College Street right in the Harbord Village, and I've been running the Free Times Café for the last thirty-two years, and it's a very special place. [0:00:30] It's the home of seven-days-a-week live acoustic music, as well as a very special Jewish brunch on Sundays called "Bella! Did Ya Eat?"

**Interviewer:** Any reason you call it that?

**Respondent:** Yes. That's a long story.

**Interviewer:** Okay. That's story number one. Let's go. [Laughs]

**Respondent:** Well I was at my grandmother's place when I was a university student and I had to do a history project, so I took a tape recorder and I recorded my Bubby telling stories about her life, and in those days it was a [0:01:00] reel-to-reel, big deal box, and then after dinner I put it down in her lap and I said, "Bubby, listen to this." And she didn't know what a tape recorder was. She thought the voice coming out of the tape recorder was my mother on the telephone.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Respondent:** So she picked up the tape recorder as if it was a telephone and started shaking it and said, "Bella! Did ya eat? Did ya have supper?" [Laughter] So when I decided to do the brunch, I needed a name. I remembered that incident and that was the name.

**Interviewer:** So [0:01:30] Bella. Okay. But you also have Free Times Café.

**Respondent:** Okay. So Free Times Café I bought as Free Times Café. It was open for three months. It was a vegetarian and seafood restaurant. The original owners called it Free Parking Café. After a couple of months they went for their liquor license and they said, "You can't call it Free Parking Café because you don't have any free parking," so they said, "How about Free Times?" They said, "Yes," so it became Free Times Café. There you go. So when people [0:02:00] walk in the door and they say, "What a great idea," I say, "What a big mistake." [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** So you've had this restaurant for over thirty years.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Talk to me please about why you – you were an artist before.

**Respondent:** Mm-hm.

**Interviewer:** So how did you move into the restaurant business?

**Respondent:** Well I was an artist who always had a hobby cooking, you know? I loved to cook and I was about ten years old, and [0:02:30] then I got into whole foods and natural foods in the early '70s, way ahead of my time, and I left teaching after a few years. I was married and the marriage split up. I left teaching, became an artist, and then I went back and I started a whole food catering business out of my home in 1977. Had that for one year. I was actually so successful that I quit it because I couldn't manage it. It was too much for me, and I didn't want to go into a regular business. [0:03:00] Went and worked for my parents for a while, then I did an art project of eighteen paintings called "High." I went natural childbirth, so I said after that, hm, I could be an artist, but I'll be a starving artist, so I better establish myself in some kind of a business, and then I can choose to be an artist after two or three years. So I called up my girlfriend, Ophira Sutton, who had bought a house and was renovating it, and I said, you know, "I'm going to ask my father for some money. I'm going to buy a house, I'm going to renovate it, I'm going to sell it and make money." She said, "What do you know about [0:03:30] real estate and renovations? You know about food.

You should buy a restaurant." I said, "Oh, that's a good idea." And I looked in the newspaper, and sure enough this place that I had been to a couple of weeks before, it was a modern café on College Street called Free Times Café was for sale, and it was one of two cases that I pursued, and that's...

**Interviewer:** So Ophira really turned you around.

**Respondent:** Yeah. It was never a plan. It was never a plan. Even though I [0:04:00] was brought up in restaurants, I went to a lot of restaurants as a child, my father designed menus for restaurants on Eglinton, I never had the idea in my mind I would ever own a restaurant. I was just driven by a love of cooking and a need for cooking, right? So I really had no idea what I was getting myself in for.

**Interviewer:** Can you talk about the early days and how it's evolved?

**Respondent:** Well you know, I didn't have enough money to buy it myself, so my brother suggested I get a working partner. I found this guy [0:04:30] who's somebody I knew, briefly knew. I got involved with him as a partner, and he wasn't very good. Basically, the place was bankrupt after nine months.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Respondent:** And during this time my mother broke her arm, my grandmother died, my father died.

**Interviewer:** Oh, what a nine months.

**Respondent:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** Terrible.

**Respondent:** Disaster. And my father left me a little bit of money, so I bought out my partner and I started different programming, and I started to turn the place around.

- Interviewer:** What was the nature of [0:05:00] the restaurant initially, and then after that nine months when you took over? How did you...
- Respondent:** Well it was more like a restaurant with home cooking. I was doing a lot of the cooking. You know, we did everything from cabbage rolls to quiche, to you know, falafel, to all kinds of world foods that we still do today, different kinds of world foods. We didn't have a deep fryer, we didn't have a grill. We had a stove, we didn't have a microwave. We just had a stove and a Salamander.
- Interviewer:** A salamander? What's that?
- Respondent:** [0:05:30] That's a very high-powered broiler.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh.
- Respondent:** And I did a lot of the cooking. There was no entertainment at night. Didn't start that for a bit. And it was very stressful because...
- Interviewer:** Please remind me, what years was that?
- Respondent:** 1980, '81.
- Interviewer:** '80. Okay.
- Respondent:** '81. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** And it was stressful because of what?
- Respondent:** Because I didn't know what I was doing. [Laughter] And my partner was a very negative person who also knew even less of [0:06:00] what he was doing, but you know, of course since he was a man, he had to pretend he knew what he was doing. Plus all the other things that were happening in my life that were very difficult, you know? My grandmother dying, my father dying, my mother broke her arm. You know, all this stuff.
- Interviewer:** Huge, huge.

- Respondent:** And the money drained because when you're not successful you have no money. So money is always a big, big problem.
- Interviewer:** So you were working very hard...
- Respondent:** For very little money.
- Interviewer:** ...yeah.
- Respondent:** With a partner who was very negative. **[0:06:30]** And I was only thirty-one years old. Thirty, thirty-one years old. I was quite young.
- Interviewer:** Who were your customers at first? Who was coming into the restaurant?
- Respondent:** Mostly it was lunch. We had lunch customers in mostly from, you know, what is now CAMH, which was – what was it called before?
- Interviewer:** Clarke Institute.
- Respondent:** The Clarke.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** A lot of lunch customers from the Clarke and the university. There's still customers. We have less customers from CAMH now because most have been moved down to Queen Street, **[0:07:00]** but we always had a good customer base from them. So I would say it was middle class professionals, more women than men, and in those days people would drink at lunch. They would have wine. It was drinking and smoking in the '80s.
- Interviewer:** Oh my god.
- Respondent:** Yeah. We had this room in the back, nice little room, so there weren't a lot of restaurants around. There weren't a lot of alternative places, so we were one of the alternative places with the fresh, homemade foods. And all well prepared with a liquor license. **[0:07:30]** There weren't that many places with liquor licenses then.

**Interviewer:** And what? Did you close early at that time because you had such a big lunch?

**Respondent:** Well I started to – we started to stay open for evenings, but we didn't have much business for dinner. And we did. I guess we probably stayed open until about ten o'clock or something like that at night.

**Interviewer:** And has that changed? Is it busy for dinner, or is lunch still a busier time?

**Respondent:** I would say yeah, lunch is probably a busier time for us than [0:08:00] dinner, but then now we're busy later at night.

**Interviewer:** With what?

**Respondent:** Because of the entertainment. Gets very busy at night, and also young people coming in to drink, and hang out, and have snacks at night.

**Interviewer:** So please talk about the entertainment. When did you introduce that, and how many nights a week did you do it?

**Respondent:** Okay. So at the time when I started the restaurant, I was going out with a man who was a part-time jazz musician and his nephew was studying jazz at Humber College, and he asked if he could come and play on a Saturday night at this little room in back. So I said [0:08:30] "Okay," and so we started, you know, once a week, then it became twice a week, then it was three times a week, and people didn't have places to play because a lot of musicians asked me if they could play, and that's how it all started.

**Interviewer:** But Judy, isn't that interesting that it started because you were dating a man at that time whose nephew blah, blah, blah?

**Respondent:** I told you, it's a big mistake. It's not a plan. Life is not a plan. Life is a mistake.

**Interviewer:** It's a mistake, but look what you've done.

- Respondent:** That's right. You take mistakes and you make them into [0:09:00] something. So I'm a very positive person on the whole, and I'm very arts oriented, so I always thought of the arts as being a way to generate revenue, which is proven to be so. The government, you know, looked at that. They would be going in different directions, but people are attracted. People go for tourism, they go out for the arts, and for the restaurants, you know?
- Interviewer:** You have this entertainment now. Is it Friday, Saturday, Sunday?
- Respondent:** No, no. [0:09:30] It's been seven days a week.
- Interviewer:** Seven days a week?
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. For the last thirty years.
- Interviewer:** Oh. I didn't know that.
- Respondent:** We've had more than ten thousand nights of music.
- Interviewer:** My daughter-in-law has performed at your...
- Respondent:** Yeah. [Laughter] Almost every musician in Toronto has started out at Free Times, and at sometime performed at Free Times, whether I booked them or they played with other people, or whatever. But oh yeah. Every single night.
- Interviewer:** Do you have somebody who takes care of that? Because it's a whole...
- Respondent:** I do.
- Interviewer:** That's just another hat that you wear.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah.
- Interviewer:** In your own restaurant.
- Respondent:** Just another part-time [0:10:00] job, right? Now I have other people who book some of the nights on – because they have their own

business and they put people in, but yeah, I'd been doing – the majority of the time I've been doing the booking. I have had people at certain times, but I would say out of the thirty years, I've probably booked it solidly myself for twenty-five of it. Maybe five years, I don't know.

**Interviewer:** And I've been there a variety of times, but certainly when Gus plays with his band.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And I brought my grandson. [Laughs]

**Respondent:** Yeah. Because we're all-ages. [0:10:30] We're actually a licensed restaurant. So we're all-ages, and that's been, you know, one of the keys to keeping Free Times going, and the other was starting my Sunday brunch because at the time when I started the Sunday brunch, we had gone through a difficult time after ten years. Also, we had a fire. The place burnt down. We were closed for six months.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Respondent:** I redid the whole place, and then I moved the kitchen and I put it in the front, and it took away a lot of the seating, so a lot [0:11:00] of our revenues started to drop down, and I kind of took some time off, and then I said, "You know what?" and my mother died and I was in her house. I said, "You know, I'm Jewish and I know how to cook Jewish food. I don't have any Jewish food in my restaurant." And then I thought of this fantasy of having this – getting Jewish customers and having a more Jewish restaurant.

**Interviewer:** And when was that?

**Respondent:** That was in 1995.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh. So you had been in business for fifteen years.

**Respondent:** Ten years. [0:11:30] Yeah, so I was in business for fifteen years before the brunch went in, and I spent a whole summer researching

it, and researching the food, and I was – I really analyzed the whole situation with Jewish customers as to how I could make it successful. So it didn't actually happen by chance. It was...

**Interviewer:** So you had lots of conversations with people about Jewish food.

**Respondent:** Not really. I just remembered all of the different issues that Jewish customers had, and I joke about it, [0:12:00] like they want the food on the table before they get there. [Laughter] They want to make reservations so they can change them, right? [Laughter] They like to go out in groups. They're very picky. They don't want this, they want that, da, da, da, da, da. And it's got to be, like, better than expected, unless – because then they go out a lot. So unless it's better than expected, why bother coming back? Move on, right?

**Interviewer:** So you know that population.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** You make fun of them, but you love them and you take good care of them.

**Respondent:** And I'm one of them. [Laughter] I try to be a more Anglicized, respectful [0:12:30] one of them, but I am one of them. So you know, so I said, okay, you know, it's going to be better than expected. Everything's got to be great. I've got to research it. And then I hired somebody and I trained him how to cook everything. I...

**Interviewer:** So you used your mother's recipes? Your recipes?

**Respondent:** A couple of my mother's. Mostly my own, because I have God gift to cook.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Respondent:** And I can make up recipes for anything, okay? And I made up recipes. I read cookbooks and then I made up my own recipes. [0:13:00] But it's based on, you know, they're based on how I remember my mother and my grandmother doing things, you know?

**Interviewer:** Has the population that comes into your restaurant, now that you have all this Jewish food, do you have more Jewish people coming in? Or what's the day-to-day?

**Respondent:** Since when? Compared to...

**Interviewer:** Since you made it – well because you...

**Respondent:** Since I started the brunch?

**Interviewer:** Since you started the Jewish food, or was that there the whole time?

**Respondent:** No. I started the Jewish food with the brunch, then after...

**Interviewer:** [0:13:30] So that was 1995?

**Respondent:** '95.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So it's at that point I'm wondering when you made it more Jewish...

**Respondent:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** ...did it change the...

**Respondent:** Of course. I had hardly any Jewish people coming before.

**Interviewer:** Okay. That's what I'm asking.

**Respondent:** Only just for maybe some of the entertainment or something, but no, no I wasn't.

**Interviewer:** So you're saying the Jewish people want the Jewish food.

**Respondent:** They do, but they want it – you have to figure out how can you do it for them that'll make it work because I wasn't starting this place from scratch. I was bringing it into an existing place.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Respondent:** So I said, okay, let's have [0:14:00] it once a week. I'll have this brunch, it'll be a buffet, over-the-top, and it'll be really holistic, and at first I used my dishes, my grandmother's dishes, my mother's dishes. I said, "I'm going to just give them to the gods. If they break, they break. That's it." And I said, you know, the recipes are going to be really authentic, I'm going to take the time to put extra things in to make it really, really good. I'm going to shop myself for the desserts and cut them up, and da, da, da, da, da, and this and that. And then I hired a publicist to publicize it, and [0:14:30] you know, we're talking about a long time ago, pre-internet, all this kind of stuff, and it was something new and something different, and it was very busy right from the beginning. You know? But then it got wrecked by 9-11, it got wrecked by SARS, got wrecked by three years of construction on College Street, and I had to reinvent it.

**Interviewer:** Oh my gosh.

**Respondent:** So then I added the all-you-can-eat smoked salmon about four, five years ago. It wasn't all the time on the buffet.

**Interviewer:** I'm not familiar with that. What is that?

**Respondent:** Well smoked salmon. Lox.

**Interviewer:** But you said [0:15:00] all-you-can-eat.

**Respondent:** Well, it's there. Platters of it. We didn't have it before the slices. And I haven't upped the price for years because it's at a threshold, 19.95. I tried to up it. I'm doomed. I have to keep that price, even though my costs have gone up, like, about five hundred dollars a week, costing me from the time I last raised it. I have to keep absorbing that.

**Interviewer:** And you're renting the space, right?

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** So is that something that's also gone up through the years?

- Respondent:** Yeah. [0:15:30] Absolutely. Yeah. And now I pay over – when I started Free Times, I had one-half, and I paid seven hundred dollars a month. Now I have two storefronts and I pay more than seven thousand dollars a month. But the margins have not gone up that much, so it's very hard. You have to be very busy to even break even in the restaurant business. This is why places come and go because you can't just be busy once in a blue moon. You have to be busy about half, you know? At least a third [0:16:00] of the time you have to be very, very busy.
- Interviewer:** Well I'm watching places close on Harbord for that reason, and on Bloor Street.
- Respondent:** Splendido just closed. Splendido is closing.
- Interviewer:** I didn't know that.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Which other place on Harbord?
- Interviewer:** Messis.
- Respondent:** No. They're closing?
- Interviewer:** It's closed. It closed about two weeks ago.
- Respondent:** Are you joking me?
- Interviewer:** Yeah. And Momo's just sold. It's closing in about two weeks. Yeah. Messis is gone.
- Respondent:** Messis?
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** Wow. That's surprising. I thought that that was a real popular – [0:16:30] I went there a little while ago. It was only so-so; it wasn't great.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** It wasn't that great.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. But it's gone.

**Respondent:** See, at that level, and then Momo's, eh?

**Interviewer:** And on Bloor Street too. Yeah. Momo's is closing in about two or three weeks.

**Respondent:** Yeah? But you said it sold.

**Interviewer:** Well he sold the building, but the person taking over is not going to make it into a restaurant.

**Respondent:** Yeah. So he bought the building. He was smart.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** But remember the old Kensington Kitchen that was on Harbord Street?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Respondent:** Well that was originally next door to me, so a few months after I opened [0:17:00] Free Times, Kensington Kitchen opened up next to me right on College Street and had similar foods, so right away I had this intense competition, which was also very difficult. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** Okay. So – and you're talking about 1980 when you bought. When did they move away?

**Respondent:** I think in 1990 maybe.

**Interviewer:** Oh, so you'd been there a decade.

**Respondent:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** Of competition right next door.

**Respondent:** Oh, I've been through a lot. I still go through a lot. Every week there's stuff. You know?

**Interviewer:** [0:17:30] What's it like for you being in the restaurant? Obviously you have your hand on every aspect of it.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** But in terms of the people who come to eat at your restaurant, what's your relationship with them?

**Respondent:** Well I don't have as much of a relationship as people think I do. I probably have a much stronger relationship with my staff, and that's the thing that actually – customers don't realize about [0:18:00] restaurants, is the owner is relating much more strongly with their staff than they are with their customers. I'm there for my customers, I like interacting with them, I like the variety. I'm always blown away by the variety of people that come to my place. It's just truly unbelievable. I could be talking to a university professor at lunch, and at night it's a young kid coming out drinking from the suburbs. It could be [0:18:30] any age group from a little child to a very old person, any ethnic background. It's so interesting. They all find my place so interesting. It's a new reality for a lot of people. It's completely different reality, and that was actually the intention. My core intention in doing the place, even though I kind of fell into it, was around finding a place where I felt comfortable because I didn't feel comfortable anywhere. [0:19:00] And I think that was a big issue and continues to be a big issue in Toronto for people because of the nature of the hospitality industry here. It's just gotten started in really the last ten years in Toronto.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel you make yours comfortable, the way you like to feel? And you make – you create that in your restaurant.

**Respondent:** Well it's layered, you know? It's a layered thing. It's [0:19:30] the kinds of seating where people can sit in corners and they can sit in booths, and they have intimacy, and they have different choices of seatings.

**Interviewer:** Yes, there is a nice variety.

**Respondent:** Right? Yeah. And then I have layered décor. I have my parents' old things, I have things I've collected, I have other artwork. I have pictures of musicians. I have lots of memory stuff there. Originally we had changing art shows, but I had at least a hundred art shows at Free Times, and I stopped [0:20:00] doing art shows probably about five years ago because I wanted to control the environment more, which I think from a business point of view was very successful. I don't recommend changing art shows for a restaurant. I think it kind of makes a confused atmosphere for your clients. Anyways, and I keep also putting money into my business to maintain it and to improve it.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** And it's not perfect. I work in the imperfection. I also weave in imperfection [0:20:30] into my business. Not everything is perfect, not everything has to be perfect. There's – you know? Actually, the bistro, when we built it, we actually wove in imperfection, we wove found objects, we wove in things to it and I can go over the room with you and explain exactly what we did. Recycled objects, and that's why it has a lot of soul and why people think it's a very old room, but in fact, it's only thirteen years old. Before that it was a computer store.

**Interviewer:** [0:21:00] Oh, so you want that atmosphere.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Warm and cozy atmosphere.

**Respondent:** So I invested in it in a way that doesn't show because I'm not an ostentatious type of person. So if you aren't ostentatious, people can enter into it, and plus I'm artistic, so understand what's involved in art.

**Interviewer:** So it's subtle.

**Respondent:** It's subtle. It's very subtle. And people respond to it, and they don't know why, but they do like it. And I [0:21:30] have many things

going on. I have music in the back, I have groups in there, da, da, da, da, da. You know? There's this and that. Sometimes I've got four or five different things going on in the restaurant other than just regular customers.

**Interviewer:** Can you give me an example of what you're referring to? Other things going on?

**Respondent:** Yeah. I might have a computer – java users groups in the last Thursday of the month would be meeting in the clubroom. Then I might have another meet-up group in the bistro as well as regular customers, and then [0:22:00] when they're finished, I have music after their group. They move into the bistro and then I have, you know, maybe a group of friends in the front. So it's, like, different things.

**Interviewer:** I think you have a Yiddish-speaking group.

**Respondent:** Yeah. The first Thursday of every month, and they would be in the back, and then we have a buffet, and then I might have – you know, I have customers in the bistro or other groups. It's all interwoven. And that's how I keep the place going because I'm willing to take those risks because sometimes it's not perfect.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** That's why [0:22:30] I get upset when people are not considerate and respectful to my position and have their own personal interests, selfish interests, and you know, they get when – things – you know, certain people, when things do not go perfectly in them, they don't know how to negotiate. They just get angry. And not very many people, but it's very troublesome when that happens and there's no need for it, and those kind of people really should learn to be more [0:23:00] considerate for what they are getting.

**Interviewer:** And you're saying...

**Respondent:** You know, one of the reasons why places go under is because people don't appreciate those places and what goes into them, you know? They cannot. You know, for instance, young people are so

very strange around money, okay? They'll spend money in certain ways, and other ways they won't. If I raise my price twenty-five cents on a pint of beer, they'll go somewhere else, but they'll give a waiter a hundred percent tip [0:23:30] on that pint because they think that they're so poor and the owner's so rich. See what I mean?

**Interviewer:** Right. I do.

**Respondent:** [Laughs] So I have to work with that. I can't change that mindset. I have to work with it, and I make my staff work very hard for their money. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** [Laughs] You're dealing with the public.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** But at the same time you said that it's very important to you to treat your – to be very aware of what's happening with your staff and to have a good working relationship [0:24:00] with them.

**Respondent:** Yeah. And I have staff that come and go, you know? They might work for me for a year and then go away and do something and come back, and they're all very special people. They're all very smart. Most have university degrees. They're all very capable. They all are very humble people. Nobody has a big ego. They're all very individualized. A lot involved in the arts. And I choose those kind of people, special people, very hardworking mostly from small towns, [0:24:30] not from the city or from out of town. Very few people who work for me are born in Toronto.

**Interviewer:** Well...

**Respondent:** Isn't that interesting, eh?

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And my experience has been really very, very lovely service from these young people.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** You see, country – the young people have better social skills because they knew everybody in the town or whatever. They're more relaxed around people, you know? A little calmer, you know?

**Interviewer:** And that's another [0:25:00] hat that you're ...

**Respondent:** And they have to work. They're not at home. They have to support themselves.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** Eh? [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** But that's another hat that you're wearing, and that is hiring people and having to be the judge of who would work for your environment.

**Respondent:** Plus all my staff are friends with each other, so I have to consider who are they going to get along with type of person, and they'll tell me right away if they don't like somebody.

**Interviewer:** Let's come back to [0:25:30] College Street. When you first moved, you had this neighbour right away that you had competition with.

**Respondent:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Would you just spend a few minutes talking about College Street? What it has been like since 1980 as you've been there, and how it has changed.

**Respondent:** Okay. So in the 1980s, that area of College Street was very different because you had a variety of different kind of stores. Because remember, as I said, the rents were very low. Seven, eight-hundred dollars [0:26:00] a month. So we had, you know, a clothing designer there, we had a stained glassed window store.

**Interviewer:** I remember.

- Respondent:** We had the health foods store, Flying Monkey. We had a little variety store, we had the hardware store in the corner, we had Weinstein's Drugstore where the hotdog place is on that place, so you had more core practical type of businesses. Then what happened in the '90s is the Hong Kong Chinese came in and bought up all the properties, and the [0:26:30] only people who could pay their ridiculously high rents besides myself, who was already there, so I had to kind of settle in to higher rents, was computer stores, and that was when the computer stores – so all the whole place turned into computer stores and that was the ruination of the area of College Street. And now that the computer stores can't stay in business, now we have empty stores [0:27:00] that are in the process of being regenerated. But you know, rents are high and it's very, very hard for storefront businesses to survive because you can't survive just from people walking in the door. You can't. You have to have people who are coming to you as a destination, or are having a wholesale aspect to your business. You can't generate enough business from people walking in off the street. Parking is an issue, walking is an issue, everything is an issue.
- Interviewer:** So right now, you're [0:27:30] saying the – some of the computer stores are closing?
- Respondent:** Right now there's six empty storefronts in my block, one block. Half of the storefronts are empty right now, or in the process of being redone to reopen.
- Interviewer:** That's really a lot.
- Respondent:** Tell me about it. [Laughs]
- Interviewer:** What's the solution?
- Respondent:** Well, to me the solution is that the government has to get more [0:28:00] involved and they have to stop charging five times the rate of residential and taxes. The commercial tax rate is five times the residential rate.
- Interviewer:** Okay.

- Respondent:** And businesses have to pay half of those taxes, whatever is for their store. They have to pay, so it could be, you know, ten thousand dollars a year that the business is paying just in the property taxes. And there has to be – like right now, I would like to buy my building and they don't want to sell it to me. I have no [0:28:30] recourse. I can't buy the building. Well, I should – after being in one spot for over thirty years, by law, I should be able to buy the building.
- Interviewer:** And there's...
- Respondent:** There's no laws of protection for businesses. You know? And...
- Interviewer:** But right now that man has a lot of empty – does he own more than just yours?
- Respondent:** No, no. They're all owned by different people.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh.
- Respondent:** They're owned by different people, but they're all different Hong Kong Chinese people, or older Jewish people that never let go of the properties.
- Interviewer:** [0:29:00] So the children and grandchildren collect the rents.
- Respondent:** And you know, they just charge really, really high rents, and really only multinationals can last.
- Interviewer:** So it's big.
- Respondent:** And there isn't that much, you know – other places, Ossington, this and that are more hip and cool. Our area – it's overestimated what a great location it is because it's not a great location. People think it's a great location, but it's not a great location. The other side of College Street is a mess, you know? There's a lot of...
- Interviewer:** Are you talking about east or west?

- Respondent:** South.
- Interviewer:** [0:29:30] Oh, the south. Okay.
- Respondent:** College Street. Yeah. There's not a lot of commercial activity there. There's a lot of, you know, housing, and you know, churches, and schools, and medical centres, and all this kind of stuff. There's blocks and blocks, fire, you know, hall where there's no commercial activity. There's no reason for people to come.
- Interviewer:** Okay. So you're saying the more commercial activity, the better it is for everybody.
- Respondent:** Yeah. There's going to be a condo built across the way...
- Interviewer:** But it's being shortened as we speak.
- Respondent:** [0:30:00] Well that's fine. Oh, they've forced them to cut down?
- Interviewer:** Absolutely.
- Respondent:** Oh. How many...
- Interviewer:** You know what? I don't know what the numbers are.
- Respondent:** There were going to be sixteen storeys.
- Interviewer:** Oh, you know what?
- Respondent:** They forced it down?
- Interviewer:** I don't know what the numbers are. I know that they wanted it to be much taller and it's being shortened as we – yeah.
- Respondent:** At this point in time they have to shorten it...
- Interviewer:** I don't know.
- Respondent:** ...because I went, they had a model built of it a few months ago.

- Interviewer:** You know what? I don't know.
- Respondent:** Whatever.
- Interviewer:** Maybe sixteen is where it is.
- Respondent:** Okay. Whatever. That's fine. If they put it down to twelve, that's fine too. Put it down **[0:30:30]** to eight storeys, that's fine too.
- Interviewer:** Or maybe it started off much more and it's down to sixteen.
- Respondent:** But we need more people, middle-class people living in the area. It's a big problem. It's the lowest income area of the city and nobody knows that.
- Interviewer:** Around College Street there.
- Respondent:** Kensington, College Street areas. Lowest income area in the city.
- Interviewer:** Now the people who walk through your door and enjoy what Free Times has to offer, do you have any idea of the ratio of those who come from walking distance or those who drive to your restaurant?
- Respondent:** **[0:31:00]** You mean that just walk and those that come by TTC or drive?
- Interviewer:** Yes.
- Respondent:** I say I don't know exactly, but what I think...
- Interviewer:** A guess.
- Respondent:** ...it's probably eighty percent come from away, twenty percent might come from the area.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh. So people know your restaurant and they make a trip to come to you.
- Respondent:** Yes. And that's how I survive. They come for the music, they come for the brunch, they come at night. We do a lot of groups because

we have group seating. You know, those might come from the university [0:31:30] and different areas. I'd say, yeah, a lot come from away. It has to be. There's not enough economic activity in the area for a big place like mine to just fill up all the time, generate that much business.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So you've described a...

**Respondent:** And there's tons of competition in the area. Tons. In the last five years, I've probably had twenty restaurants open up between Bathurst and Spadina and College and Dundas.

**Interviewer:** And also in Kensington Market.

**Respondent:** [0:32:00] That's what I mean. Yeah. Tons. And they're good options. There's lots of good restaurants, so that money gets spread further and further and further, right? And I'm an old business, so I have to keep regenerating myself and giving people great deals, and giving them reasons to come back, right? [Laughs] So you know, that's the mistake that a lot of places make. They think, oh, they're going to open up a place and they're going to get all their business just from people on the street. You never get enough. Not these days. [0:32:30] You might for a month or two maybe in the summer with the patios, but in the winter, what are you going to do in the winter? That's where Kensington has a lot of problems because in the winter it dies.

**Interviewer:** I didn't know that. What about ethnicity and language? In all the years that you've been there, what have you seen?

**Respondent:** Of my customers?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Respondent:** Well certainly I've become more Jewish with my brunch, that's for sure. And I certainly get a lot of, like, Russians [0:33:00] that I would never have gotten before. Of course, I have a lot of Chinese customers because they're in that area, and I get a lot of just, you know, your mixed Canadians – East Indians. I get a huge cross-section of people, and then I get a lot of tourists. A lot of people

bring people who are visiting from other countries to my place to see it because it's unique.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Which it is. Yeah.

**Respondent:** So it's very much like a cross. If somebody said, [0:33:30] they said to me, "Free Times is Toronto." So I think I very much am one of the most important places in Toronto in terms of a reflection of what the city is.

**Interviewer:** I'm glad you know that, because a lot of us feel that way about your restaurant.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Good.

**Interviewer:** I love it.

**Respondent:** Good. I've come to realize that, you know? And that's one of the reasons why I feel happy about what I've done. You know? And I come from a very Toronto family. Don't forget my family was [0:34:00] Perly's Maps. My family was extremely – my family business made Toronto in a very quiet way.

**Interviewer:** Well and when people think of maps they think of Perly's Maps.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Without Perly's Maps, Toronto wouldn't be the city it is today because it wouldn't have been mapped, right?

**Interviewer:** Well I certainly still have...

**Respondent:** I had that.

**Interviewer:** ...I still have a Perly's Map in my glove compartment.

**Respondent:** Good. [Laughter] But I had that from my parents, you know? They gave me that idea that it was important to do something. You know? Just like the Jewish [indiscernible 0:34:26], but also in business, important in business to, you know, do something that [0:34:30] was important, and to me business was never, never about making money. It was part of my problem. It's why I didn't

make money for a long time. But it was about contributing, and it's just a shame. Now young people are starting to get the idea of, you know, doing business as, you know, something where they can make a living and contribute, but it's taking a while, you know?

**Interviewer:** Well you do have a special atmosphere there.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. **[0:35:00]** I wasn't aware that you have so many different programs happening always. Yeah. So it takes some flexibility on your part, and some risk-taking.

**Respondent:** A lot. A lot.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** And you know, you're subject to the changes, let's say, social media, or people make reservations. Twenty people are coming and then six show up.

**Interviewer:** And all you can do is say, "Thank you very much," and give them a table.

**Respondent:** **[0:35:30]** Or you make decisions. We want to bring twenty people at nine o'clock on Friday night. Or thirty people. Well what do you do? I say okay, you have to give me a deposit because it's Friday night. It's busy. Then they don't come. Difficult. People are not respectful of our business. They take advantage of us terribly. Especially young people. They're not good to their word, you know? They make reservations, they don't show, or much less people – they don't care.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Respondent:** They're very **[0:36:00]** inconsiderate.

**Interviewer:** So you have to learn to protect yourself.

- Respondent:** Yeah. So I'm there, I get very good staff who can cover things. I interview people, I talk to them, I try to find out what's really going on when they want to make large group reservations, you know? And then with the brunch, we do have the reservations, and people are more respectful of that. But very often, they're not, and you know, they've reserved for eight and five show up. Well, [0:36:30] sorry, they didn't come. You know, what else is new? [Laughs]
- Interviewer:** So you're saying there's some inherent frustrations.
- Respondent:** A lot.
- Interviewer:** And there's not much recourse.
- Respondent:** No, there isn't because restaurants are taken advantage of. You go to a theatre, you pay up and that's it. You don't go, you lose. Well with us, and I provide entertainment and everything else, right? And for the smallest thing, people don't want to pay or they want compensation, or whatever.
- Interviewer:** [0:37:00] So they feel very entitled.
- Respondent:** Very entitled.
- Interviewer:** I'm the consumer.
- Respondent:** Way too entitled. Way too entitled.
- Interviewer:** Which means you're constantly dealing with the public and you have to be somewhat diplomatic at the same time.
- Respondent:** I have to protect my own interest. I know.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** And the interest of my staff too.
- Interviewer:** So you're kept on your toes, Judy.

- Respondent:** Holy. [Laughter] Which is good and bad. It's given me very good judgement. I have good judgement now, and given the, you know – made me a more spiritual [0:37:30] person, you know, because you've got to rise above all the mire of human pettiness and see the bigger picture, right?
- Interviewer:** And sometimes you have...
- Respondent:** And understand their suffering, you know? People are suffering, and part of the, you know, these things is because people are suffering and they maybe feel that life – they didn't get what they wanted or whatever, and it's sort of a theme, so you try to work with them and make them happy.
- Interviewer:** That's a generous interpretation. [Laughs] [0:38:00] Rather than they're entitled or they're nasty.
- Respondent:** Well it's all that – tied up. But the majority are not like that. The majority are wonderful, great. I would say younger generation have their issues around non-commitment, but at the same time, they have a sense of sharing that's better. Our generation our probably more reliable in terms of commitment, but they're more selfish.
- Interviewer:** Our generation you're saying.
- Respondent:** Yes. Yeah. And the younger generation are less selfish. They're [0:38:30] more willing to share with each other and support each other. Did you know that?
- Interviewer:** No, but I'm listening. You're a sociologist, you're a philosopher.
- Respondent:** Yeah, I would say that. Yeah. They're very kind to support each other. They really are, you know? At least the ones I know. I only know a certain segment, you know?
- Interviewer:** Mm-hm. So you have concerns about what's happening to College Street. The rents are very high, stores are having to [0:39:00] close.

- Respondent:** Just walk along College Street from Bathurst to Spadina, walk first on the north side, then walk on the south side, and look at it. Just look. Look at the cigarette butts on the – in front of the stores, look at the storefronts, look. Does this look like a thriving, wonderful place to be? It's not Queen Street and it's not Bloor Street. But the rents are almost as high – maybe not as high as Queen Street, but [0:39:30] you know what I mean?
- Interviewer:** So that's a concern for you.
- Respondent:** It is.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** It is. And part of that had to do with the construction on College Street. A lot of businesses went out during that time. It was a nightmare.
- Interviewer:** People just couldn't get there.
- Respondent:** We got no compensation.
- Interviewer:** And you said...
- Respondent:** And then the Harbord Street Village Association started with this fiasco around moving patios to the side of the road, and that was a fiasco. I don't know if you knew about that.
- Interviewer:** I don't know what you're talking about.
- Respondent:** Well that's a whole – I don't want to get into it on the tape recorder, but that was [0:40:00] ridiculous. So basically, I personally – I know there's, you know, there's no association of business on College Street, and that's part of the problem, but I'm not going to do it. There's nobody who wants to do it, and...
- Interviewer:** Well you're part of HVRA because you're on the north side. Harbord Village Residents' Association.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Residents, but not a business.

**Interviewer:** Oh, the business.

**Respondent:** It's a business thing.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Respondent:** So businesses haven't had a lot of protection and what was I going to say? And I never, **[0:40:30]** ever have been treated really well by any level of government. And the government here is just terrible to small business. Right now I'm trying to enlarge the patio and it's been such a long and expensive process. It's ridiculous. You don't fast-track anything. Nobody talks to each other. One office doesn't know what the other's doing. It's really terrible, and everybody complains about it. Anybody who has anything to do with business says the government is really disrespectful to business people. Municipal **[0:41:00]** particularly.

**Interviewer:** And small businesses in particular.

**Respondent:** Yes, yes. The fact that they close down streets and don't compensate businesses is shameful. It's terrible. How about if your street was under construction and you couldn't get to work.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm.

**Respondent:** And you had no income. Don't you think you should be compensated? Do you think I should have worked for two years for free because the city was doing construction and all they have to tell me, "Oh, it's going to be better and you'll have more customers afterwards," and I didn't?

**Interviewer:** So you paid dearly for that.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** **[0:41:30]** Yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** You know?

**Interviewer:** But you're feisty, and you're still there.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And you're making it happen.

**Respondent:** Because you know what? You can always say, "They did me in," or whatever. You can always give up. It's easy to give up. It's hard to keep going. So what am I going to do? Nobody cares anyways. That's the other thing I realize. You can gripe, and complain, and everything else about anything, but nobody really cares. It's up to you to decide what you want to do. You want to stay? You want to leave? Right?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I agree.

**Respondent:** Isn't that the truth?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** That's the truth, so.

**Interviewer:** **[0:42:00]** What's your relationship with Kensington Market. I know more restaurants have opened up there, but how does Free Times Café...

**Respondent:** You know, Free Times Café – my personal relationship was that I used to go and do a lot of shopping there, so I felt like I was like the queen of Kensington. I used to buy a lot of stuff. I don't go anymore. My staff does. Free Times is unfortunately just outside of Kensington Market, right? So if you don't know about Free Times, you don't know it's there because it's not part of Kensington **[0:42:30]** Market. It's part of the thing – Free Times is kind of in an odd location. It's not part of Harbord Street, it's not part of Kensington Market. It's like outside of it. So – but at the same time, I really reflect a lot of the things that Kensington Market is about. You know, the old Jewish Market. I'm the one that's bringing – I'm the one that's bringing the older Jewish population back to the area more than Kensington Market is, and that was part of my **[0:43:00]** mandate, and it has worked, you know? And I'm the one that the

older people have their simchas with. They don't go to the restaurants in Kensington, right?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** So Kensington, you know, and also the art scene – so I'm kind of like standalone. You know?

**Interviewer:** But because you're not part of the market, and you're saying that's a negative, do you get some traffic because people are walking or driving along College? Is there some?

**Respondent:** Yeah, a little bit. But let's say, **[0:43:30]** okay, on pedestrian Sundays, let's say, from Kensington. I might get a little bit of overflow later in the afternoon from that, but I don't really get a lot. I can't rely on it. You know, it's a few hundred dollars.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And certainly your restaurant is very different from anything in the market.

**Respondent:** Yeah. But all those places are also unique, and what's happening in the market now is actually they're going retro. You have all these sort of retro-style places opening up, you know? Derivative **[0:44:00]** to the old days. Right? Which I really want to do myself, is do this little place called Bella's Kitchen, which I'd like to do next door to Free Times and sell take-out stuff and have retro food, and have cooking classes, but I'm not ready to invest in that yet.

**Interviewer:** So you'd have to rent another space?

**Respondent:** Yeah, and I'm not ready to do that yet.

**Interviewer:** That would add to your expenses.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Maybe in the future.

**Interviewer:** But I can see that your mind is always churning and working, and ready to modify.

- Respondent:** Yeah, you [0:44:30] have to. You have to because nobody cares. I had to go through the stop smoking thing where I lost forty percent of my business overnight. I had to reinvent myself.
- Interviewer:** Did they come back? Did somebody replace that forty percent?
- Respondent:** Yeah, I worked on the brunch, I worked on food. I mean that business never came back.
- Interviewer:** So that was shocking at that time.
- Respondent:** Yeah. And we got no support through that transition. That's again the government just changes laws and we become instantly the bad guys. [0:45:00] What did I do? [Laughs]
- Interviewer:** Before we say goodbye, I'm wondering if there are any stories, anecdotes, relating back to the early days to incidents that have happened, people coming in off the street, difficult, okay, colourful.
- Respondent:** Oh my god.
- Interviewer:** I'm just wondering if...
- Respondent:** So many things. Every day there are so many things that happen. You know, another thing that we are that people don't realize is that [0:45:30] so many people with emotional difficulties come to Free Times, you know? We take care of so many people because of CAMH and all that stuff. I used to make a joke, you know, the residents come in the afternoon and the staff come at lunchtime, you know? And we're a place where it's the only place for a lot of people where they feel at home, and I think that's very, very important, [0:46:00] you know, in terms – because it's really easy in a big city to get depressed and feel lonely.
- Interviewer:** Yes. Oh, lonely. I agree. About loneliness, for sure.
- Respondent:** And so many – in terms of music, so much of the music scene in the city is made at Free Times. So many people meet each other at Free Times. So many things happen out of the introductions that they make to different people, different aspects. I'm like a conduit of

putting people together and things together, and things happening. So many of my [0:46:30] staff make friends and do things together, and my cooks also have been working with me for – most of them between ten and seventeen years.

**Interviewer:** Oh, good for you.

**Respondent:** They're all immigrants from wealthy families, they're all from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, and that. I've had different sets of cooks, I've had boat people from Vietnam. I had gay women, I had Palestinian cooks at one time. They've all gone on to be very successful.

**Interviewer:** But you train them all. [0:47:00] For sure.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** Yeah. And I also – you know, I'm demanding because it's a real thing, you know? And I find that a lot of times young people – that's been, I think, one of the weaknesses of the parenting of our generation is that the parents weren't demanding enough on their children and they let them make too many of their own bad decisions and didn't give them feedback on it.

**Interviewer:** And you're not making that mistake with your staff.

**Respondent:** I can't [0:47:30] afford to.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** Because it's a business.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** So – but I try to be kind to people about it, but you know, they can't be wishy-washy, and they can't be mediocre. They have to...

**Interviewer:** So you have high standards. You hire good people.

**Respondent:** I have to because my customers have high standards, right?

**Interviewer:** For sure. Yeah.

**Respondent:** And then I hire people, like now I'm working with an assistant who's helping me again to get better standards of service with my staff, and also, you know, I'm working with three different assistants right now [0:48:00] to organize all my databases, to organize all my social media, to get more catering and parties, and this and that, so I'm always hiring people and working to improve and stay in the forefront.

**Interviewer:** And you have to be learning at the same time.

**Respondent:** And I'm learning. Right now, I've got an iPad. I'm learning iPhone, and an iPad, and this and that.

**Interviewer:** It's fun, but it's also difficult.

**Respondent:** Yeah, it's challenging. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** Yeah. But you know what? The day – I had problems [0:48:30] myself with this business for many years because I actually hated it probably for ten years. Drove me nuts. Just hated it. It was so difficult, and I was living on Eglinton, and it was just really, really frustrating when I expanded into the bistro and I lost my customers from the smoking, and it was really, really hard. So I devoted myself to the brunch because that's what was very successful, and then over time, I got a more positive attitude and I realized that I had to devote myself. [0:49:00] If I didn't devote myself, I'd always be in conflict and I'd always be frustrated and angry. So I devoted myself and things got better. So I still devote myself, and I'm there almost every single day, and I like it. [Laughter] I like it. People think, "Go home." I say, "No, this is my home. I like it." You know?

**Interviewer:** Do you have any spot where you can have some quiet in private?

**Respondent:** Yeah. My little booth, my little booth across from the kitchen. It's like my upstairs office.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh.

**Respondent:** And then I have an office downstairs. There's a whole subterranean world below. **[0:49:30]** I'll take you and show you. We have a prep kitchen, we have a staff room, and musicians' room.

**Interviewer:** But if you ever need some solitude or silence, you can have it?

**Respondent:** Well not always. [Laughter] I try in my office, but people are coming and going and bothering me. It's trying at times.

**Interviewer:** Well that's why I wanted to interview you at home. [Laughter] Because I figured you'd have too many distractions.

**Respondent:** And I find as I get older, you get – don't you find that you get irritated by noise? I get **[0:50:00]** quite sensitive to noise.

**Interviewer:** Oh, you're speaking to somebody who's very, very sensitive to sound. Yeah. Yeah.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Drives me nuts. I mean just – I had somebody in my office making some copies on the copy machine yesterday and I was trying to do something and I was just – I don't like this noise. This noise is driving me nuts. [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah. Well. I'm...

**Respondent:** Oy, oy, oy, oy, oy, oy, oy. But my last words is that I've always been a rebel. [Laughter] I've never believed in the status quo. I've always **[0:50:30]** believed that the things that are told to us that if you do A, B, and C, everything's going to be fine and everything's going to be great. I always felt like it was a line, and not to go that way because I never believed in that governments would put you in the right way, or to rely on them solely, or the mainstream society will put you in that right way. I always felt that you've got to think for yourself and make your own decisions because if you don't, you're going to be the end of being the one who gets – **[0:51:00]** and it's true. And a

lot of people have, you know? So in a way, I created Free Times as this special place that's a bit outside of a lot of the norms of society. It's a little more free, you could say, and I bear that burden for a lot of people. I take that responsibility, and that was the other thing of the devotion. I take the responsibility for my staff. I hold the responsibility for them so they can rely on me. I'm not an [0:51:30] absent owner. You know?

**Interviewer:** Well, and your presence in the restaurant is meaningful too. People love to see you, and you say hello to them.

**Respondent:** Yeah, I try.

**Interviewer:** It means a lot.

**Respondent:** My hardest thing is remembering people's names, and I'm sure you have the same problem. This is the hardest thing.

**Interviewer:** You can be sure of that.

**Respondent:** Especially when they come in and they say, "Hi, don't you remember me?" I say, "When was the last time you were here? Oh, twenty years ago," right? [Laughter] Oh yeah, I've been waiting for you, right? [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** [0:52:00] Well, you do have a wonderful restaurant.

**Respondent:** It is.

**Interviewer:** With all the different faces that it has, with all the different hats that you wear, and the food is delicious, the ambiance is terrific.

**Respondent:** Thank you. Thank you.

**Interviewer:** And I want to say thank you very, very much for giving me your time.

**Respondent:** Oh, thank you so much. It was great. I hope we went over enough things.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** I want to talk about the things that have enabled me to keep going, because remember, I've probably been working seven days a week for most of the time I've had Free [0:52:30] Times, although I did take three months off twice in '86 and '94, okay? But doing yoga the last twenty-two years, anywhere from one to three classes a week, steady, and various retreats, plus swimming at least once a week for the last thirty-six years, and riding a bicycle. Those are the key elements that allowed me to keep going, especially yoga. If I hadn't started yoga, I would never have kept the restaurant because I was just in so much pain, [0:53:00] so much physical pain, and I was so stressed, and you know? It allowed me to release the pain and to rebuild my body.

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh. And to kind of regroup and chill out.

**Respondent:** Yeah. It still does.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** And it still does. You know? So that was very, very key. And the fact that I didn't have my own children allowed me to have that kind of a mothering feeling for other people and other people's children, and I'm very much a mentor for my staff and for many of the [0:53:30] young people that come in who need mothering.

**Interviewer:** So you...

**Respondent:** Right? And fathering too. I can be a father too. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So you're saying that you give a lot to your staff, to your customers, but you get a lot from what you're doing, what you're giving.

**Respondent:** Yeah. It's a give and take, you know? And people need to – there's – I've found so many people are so scared, you know? They're so scared to give – they leave [0:54:00] such meagre lives.

**Interviewer:** And you know the pleasure of giving.

- Respondent:** Yeah. And they shouldn't be so scared to give, you know? Right?
- Interviewer:** So it's more than a restaurant. I mean, you talked about all these...
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. It's a whole community centre.
- Interviewer:** ...people who come in off the street. You talk about people's mental health problems, and they have a place to come and feel enveloped and accepted.
- Respondent:** Somewhat, you know? We have our boundaries.
- Interviewer:** Well they have to pay, I assume.
- Respondent:** There's one guy, he comes in, he knows. He's a street guy, he's a druggie. He used to bring [0:54:30] us stolen goods. I said, "Look, don't steal. Every time you come here I'll give you some money, but I don't want any stolen goods." So he knows. I give him a toonie or a loonie. Done. No questions asked. And I know he's a crack addict and da, da, da, da, but he's still a human being, you know?
- Interviewer:** So you have a little piece of you is running a social service agency.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah. [Laughter]
- Interviewer:** That's just another hat.
- Respondent:** And then, you know, David Goldbloom, the head doctor, he's having a smoked meat sandwich at lunch, and then the guy – [0:55:00] you know, it's a riot.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. I saw you having a conversation a couple of months ago with Paul Garfinkel.
- Respondent:** That's right.
- Interviewer:** You were standing outside. Yeah.

- Respondent:** I was talking about a friend of mine in dire need at the time with him. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** So you consult with people, they consult with you, yeah. There's a lot going on.
- Respondent:** And when I need to, I don't burden them.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** But if I need to, I know if I'm in a crunch situation I will ask.
- Interviewer:** They'll walk through your door.
- Respondent:** Yeah, yeah. [Laughter] And you know what? I joke and I say, Eleanor, I say, "You know, as long as I have ten thousand people at my funeral, I'm going to be happy." [0:55:30] [Laughter] You know? I'm lining up names, right? [Laughter] Because I'm planning a hundred and two, and I'm going to drop dead right at my table there. Boom. A hundred and two. But I don't know if Free Times will last that long, unless I can buy the building because I only have twelve more years left on my lease, so, you know?
- Interviewer:** Well twelve years is a lot of years. You will see where you go with that twelve years and if you want to be running it.
- Respondent:** We'll see. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** But in the meantime, we eat well and we have a wonderful time there.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Yeah, it's good. You know?
- Interviewer:** So turn it off? Done?
- Respondent:** Done.
- Interviewer:** Thank you very much.
- Respondent:** Enough.

[00:56:01]

[ At this time the recorder was turned off,  
then turned on again a few minutes later for a few final remarks. ]

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**Interviewer:** Okay, Judy. Go ahead.

**Respondent:** So I was a very secular Jew. I didn't belong to a synagogue, I didn't belong to the B'nai Brith when I was a teenager. I wasn't brought up in an observant home, but by inventing this brunch and reinventing these kind of family gatherings that were typical in the '40s and '50s, and the kind of Bubby food and Bubby love, and the bit of chaos that went on, this other kind of lifestyle that people could relate to – and it brings people back [0:00:30] to the area, which was a thriving Jewish area, and nobody would know it today. And people come with tears in their eyes and tell stories of these amazing times that they had. You know? And it's a shame that that has so much been lost.

**Interviewer:** Well and the market was called the Jews' Market, and there's certainly big waves of immigration.

**Respondent:** The Jewish people just left, and I always said when the Jewish people left this area, and they went up north, they lost a lot of the soul of their culture because the suburbs [0:01:00] did not incorporate that kind of city soul into it, and people were isolated in apartment buildings, in condos, and went to plazas, and it died. And a lot of older people acknowledge and understand that.

**Interviewer:** Well, and you're giving us a little taste of it.

**Respondent:** Yeah. Yeah, and I'm happy to do it, you know? And then people come and they're so happy, and they can bring their parents and da, da, da.

**Interviewer:** Well, and they have the music and the latkes.

**Respondent:** And don't forget, I'm also the only place in the [0:01:30] world that does weekly concerts of Klezmer and Yiddish music, and real latkes, real blintzes, not bullshit. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to have the food because I'd go to these restaurants who were supposed to have good Jewish food, and it wasn't real, real food, right?

**Interviewer:** And how about your brisket? [Laughs]

**Respondent:** I don't know about the brisket. That's another story. Bringing in the brisket.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So that'll be our last story. But what's the...

**Respondent:** [Laughs] Well the first time, originally my staff didn't know how to [0:02:00] make other food other than the brunch food, so I wanted to bring in night food, and we were doing – starting the concept of night buffets, and I was living at Bathurst and Eglinton, so I was cooking all the food at home. Brisket, chicken matzo ball soup.

**Interviewer:** Oh my god.

**Respondent:** All this stuff. And I get a call from the restaurant that the cook hasn't showed up. So I took all the food that I was cooking on my stove at home and wrapped it all up in blankets and towels, and put it in my car, and brought it down to the restaurant when I was over fifty years old. [0:02:30] And then I opened up the kitchen and I cooked brunch, and then I continued to cook this food and I was in tears the whole time. It was a nightmare. Could you imagine?

**Interviewer:** Because it was so hard.

**Respondent:** Yeah. It was so difficult. And I was getting no help. That's the only thing that I find. People thank me for what I've done, but few have ever, ever offered to help me.

**Interviewer:** I'm not sure what you mean when you say offer to help you. You mean roll up their sleeves and get into the kitchen with you? Or financially back you?

- Respondent:** Anything. Anything. [0:03:00] Any kind of help. Financial help, nobody's ever given me a penny. You know? Even when the place is packed and busy, you know, customers that appreciate the place, they never get up and say, "Can I help you with anything? Can I hang up some coats for you?" when they see us in dire, dire need, you know? So it's a real disconnect between the customer and business, which is unfortunate. And I don't blame individuals. It's the society that disconnects [0:03:30] people actually from business. They appreciate things, they don't know in what way that they can help. You know?
- Interviewer:** You know what, you're speaking to somebody – it's never crossed my mind when I'm in a restaurant to offer to help.
- Respondent:** Well on a normal basis it wouldn't be necessary, but I'm talking about in extreme circumstances, right? I remember...
- Interviewer:** Well you're educating me.
- Respondent:** Yeah.
- Interviewer:** You're informing me at this moment.
- Respondent:** Yeah. I remember Mitch Smolkin's father, Bob, actually offered to help [0:04:00] put up some coats, hang up some coats one time when it was extremely busy, and he was the only person who has ever offered to help me ever. You see what I mean?
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** Like as if I can do everything. That's the other thing. The customers see the owners and the people working in a restaurant as being more than superhuman, and yet they want everything and it's – you know, "I'm paying for this, and I have to get everything the way it is." Well, you know, hey, they don't thank me so much for everything afterwards. Do you see what I mean? It's hard [0:04:30] to have a – you know, I've been in the kitchen doing dishes because it was so busy, and musicians are there laughing and whatever. They never say, "Can I help you?" and I'm in my fifties, and I'm doing dishes because it's so busy. But yet they'll say, "Oh,

Judy, we appreciate so much of what you do," and blah, blah, blah, but part of that has to do with how much do people help their mothers. Or just take them for granted. How much do people take women's work for granted? Because we do. We take [0:05:00] cooking for granted, cleaning for granted, all these magical...

**Interviewer:** Yeah, they happen.

**Respondent:** ...they happen by magic, right?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** Huh? We're much more inclined to help with men's work if there's a situation, you know? If the house needs to be repaired, people will jump in and help and it's – do you see what I mean? I don't know. It's a very subtle thing, and I don't want to blame anyone or make anyone feel bad about it, but it's just kind of human nature not understanding how things could be.

**Interviewer:** We do have that [0:05:30] disconnect when we're consumers in a restaurant. You're right.

**Respondent:** Not just in restaurant, in any, any place, you know? So you have this disconnect between a non-profit, everybody volunteering and nobody gets paid, and then a place where people are getting paid, right? Which I disagree with. I think volunteers should get paid. I mean they should be able to deduct their time as a tax benefit.

**Interviewer:** Okay. We're moving off. [Laughs]

**Respondent:** But that's another thing.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Respondent:** Just saying. So we have this disconnect between volunteerism and paid work.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Yes.

**Respondent:** [0:06:00] Which is unfortunate because work is work, whether you're paid for it or you're not paid for it. It's still work, right? Is it not?

**Interviewer:** Maybe you need to hire some volunteers and they get Sunday brunch free. [Laughs]

**Respondent:** I can't. But you know what?

**Interviewer:** I'm kidding.

**Respondent:** The government won't let me do that legally. I'm not allowed not to pay people.

**Interviewer:** Well you're...

**Respondent:** Right?

**Interviewer:** ...running a business.

**Respondent:** Yes. Exactly. So I'm just saying that, you know, it's a fine line between everything. It truly is, you know?

**Interviewer:** Well...

**Respondent:** That's why I try to hire people...

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Respondent:** [0:06:30] ...that work hard, you know?

**Interviewer:** And we eat hard. [Laughs]

**Respondent:** That's it. [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** Thank you, Judy.

**Respondent:** Keep the food rolling.

**Interviewer:** [Laughs] I love it.

[00:06:37]

[End of recording]