

Chris Williams (left) and family members with Dr. Jill Biden and President-Elect (then candidate) Joe Biden, June 2020.

grief and frustration, and he tried to offer comfort, Williams recalls.

Biden also spoke to Williams and his staff. Offering Williams a Challenge Coin—usually reserved for war heroes or people who’ve shown extreme acts of valor—Biden told him, “I believe in what you’re doing, keep doing it, this is for you,” Williams said of the meeting. Hosting Floyd’s family and meeting Biden was one of the highlights of Williams’ career, he says. It reminded him of the ongoing legacy of Black restaurants serving as community spaces.

“I’ve never aimed to be or considered my space to be a place for activism, but it’s just in our DNA to act, and to be active

in addressing the challenges our communities face.” Reflecting on the role of Dooky Chase during the Civil Rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and COVID-19 have spurred an increased sense of responsibility at Lucille’s, and Williams is eager to make Lucille’s an essential institution for progress in the Houston community.

For Williams, creating his own path and helping others on the way is simply the way of the family. His great-grandmother built a career on generosity, innovation, and service—but not servitude. For so many in Houston, the restaurant that carries her name does just that.

“If someone tells me that the food reminds them of some great experience back in the day from their mom’s cooking, or some time when the sun shone brighter and the air was great, I know that I’m doing the right thing.” 🐦

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Paul Morse



FIELDWORK, MINUS THE FIELD

Dispatches from an oral historian’s couch

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON

IN THE FIRST TWO MONTHS OF 2020, I drove back and forth from Oxford to Birmingham, Alabama. I traipsed in and out of restaurants with Michelle Little, a Birmingham-based oral historian who was collaborating with me on our multicounty Career Servers project. Maskless, we drove around in each other’s cars, ate lunch together at restaurants, and scouted interviews. As I traversed I-22, I listened as NPR’s Beijing correspondent Emily Feng reported on a virus devastating a nation halfway across the world. Birmingham felt beyond such sorrow. 2020 was shaping up to be the most productive year for oral history since I joined SFA as oral historian in 2018.

On the morning of March 4, I sat in the dining room of Milo’s Hamburgers in Jasper, Alabama. I was there to interview Ms. Brenda O’Neill, a longtime employee and manager at Milo’s. She talked about the joy of leading a team of

employees, teaching and conducting administrative work that allows the restaurant to operate smoothly. Ms. Brenda loved her customers, she told me, and she loved guiding and helping her employees to develop their skills.

After the interview, I sat in an alumni chair across from Ms. Brenda and plied her with questions about what it takes to manage a team effectively. I could tell that she was good at her work, and it was largely because she cared about the people around her. I wanted to soak up some of her knowledge.

I, too, manage people. It’s a big part of my responsibilities at SFA. I make sure oral history projects are finished, processed, and publicly accessible in a timely manner. When a collaborator has a problem or a need, I’m the one responsible for resolving it. When I got in my car to head back to Oxford, I didn’t know that Ms. Brenda’s interview would be the

last in-person oral history that I would conduct in 2020.

Two weeks later, we were sheltered in place, stuck there for the foreseeable future. I resisted the urge to stockpile gallons of water and reminded myself that the power would not go out. I grew up in Florida. Hurricanes were the only major disasters I knew.

I hunkered down at home, processing oral histories and stitching together audio files and images. I had to scrap our summer fieldwork plans. Instead, I combed through our archives on the hard drive I had toted home from my office in Barnard Observatory. I sat at my kitchen table and listened to the voices of oral history narrators. Chinese American grocers remembered growing up in the Mississippi Delta. Crawfish brokers shared the intricacies of the trade in South Louisiana. Comfortably ensconced on my couch, I itched to get back on the road.

In late May, a group of five collaborators and I began documenting the experiences of people whose labor intersects with foodways in the midst of COVID-19. How do you document personal tragedy wrought by a pandemic? How do you help others do this work when collaborators are scattered across the region? I needed Ms. Brenda's example more than ever.

By June, our collaborators began interviewing narrators on Zoom. We learned new technology and new ways of connecting with people. We've interviewed thirty people about the ways in which the coronavirus has impacted their lives. Narrators' work and lives have been turned upside down. Restaurant workers have lost their jobs. Restaurant owners have closed and reopened their restaurants with the ebb and flow of local infection rates. Farmers think about the best way to socially distance while tending

their land. Mutual-aid groups feed restaurant workers and community members facing unemployment in the wake of a pandemic, during a summer of protests calling for a more equitable nation.

A virus has stripped away our ability to connect in person. My job is contingent upon spending time with people, looking them in the face and listening to what they have to say. I feel lost connecting over a screen. I mourn the missed opportunity of sitting at a table with an oral history collaborator to talk over coffee. I grieve my inability to offer a tissue or wrap a person in a hug after they've shared a difficult story. I long for the day when I will be able to shake someone's hand without the looming possibility of infection.

This is gentle work. I often tell people who are interested in oral history that this work is fundamentally inefficient. There is no personal authority or workflow or magic chant to convince someone to open up to you about her life. There are no boxes to check off a list. You've just got to care about people and listen to them. I've made reservations to sit at a specific waiter's table in order to convince him to be interviewed. I've eaten coffee cake with retired food writers in their homes. I've woken at the crack of dawn to spend hours watching sorghum farmers make syrup. To get the interview, you have to put in the time. Oral history narrators teach me patience and compassion every time I do fieldwork.

One day, I will get in my orange Volkswagen and drive east on I-22. I will get off on exit 56 and take Highway 78 into Jasper. I will turn right into the Milo's parking lot, but it will not be for the usual excuse of hot crinkle fries and a large sweet tea. I hope, this time, I will be able to see Ms. Brenda again. 🍷

Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian.

Brenda O'Neill, photographed at Milo's in Jasper, Alabama, November 2020



Lynsey Weatherspoon