

MARISSA HOWARD: Thank you for talking to me. This is kind of a fun, serendipitous happening. So we've been doing some recording of just restaurants and some of the oldest restaurants in DeKalb County, which obviously led me to someone suggesting I should come here. And I think it's so funny, because I used to live right behind here in White Oak Hills [*background laughter*], and we came here a couple of years ago. But, you know, it's funny—in our neighborhood get-togethers, inevitably someone will be like, "Hey, what about [*inaudible*]?" Someone new to the neighborhood, they're like, "What's going on? What's crackin'?" And everyone's like, "Oh, my gosh!" Everyone's like—it's almost like a cult-like thing or some mysterious place—well, not mysterious, but just everyone, you know, it's sort of initiation. And it's funny, because I know exactly when someone is talking about it, and I think it's interesting. So, yeah, that's why I was happy to do this. And, you know, like I said, we are doing history. I don't know if you're familiar with us. We're in the Historic Courthouse in downtown Decatur. We have an archives collection, museum—

KEISHA ALLEN: Oh, yeah!

MH: Yeah, we've been collecting things since 1947—

KA: Oh, wow!

MH: We've been doing—yeah, so we're—yeah, and, you know, there's—we're also trying to understand that it's not just history—like older things—but it's newer restaurants or places that, like this one, that I think are really cool to capture for the future, when someone—who knows? So that's what sort of led me here. And—yeah, so I don't know. Can you start telling me—well, first of all, can you say your name and last name for the report for—

KA: My name is Keisha Allen, and in two thousand and—goodness, sixteen? Fifteen? My sister had this idea that actually started from my niece. My sister used to cook seafood just for the family all the time. And my niece was like, "You know, Auntie, you can sell this." She was like, "Nah, nah, nah, nah." So that was like maybe on a Wednesday. She took a picture and posted it on her social media page, and by that Friday, people were saying, "Where can I get this? Can I order this? Can I get this? Can I get that?" So we was like, "OK, well, let's see what we can do." So we just, you know, served a couple of people, and then it went from there. This person, this person—but we didn't have nowhere to [*rest of comment inaudible due to traffic*]

*noise*]. And then, we was like, OK, we'll see what we could do. So we made a route around the metro Atlanta area and just was taking orders. So we would pull up in the car and take it. So after we did that for a couple of months, maybe a year, we were able to get this.

MH: Wow, and 30,000 Instagram followers later—

KA, *laughing*: So after that, then we just picked up and gone from there. Social media.

MH: So, garlic crabs. Where does that come from. Is that your family, or—

KA: We used to live in South Georgia, so that comes from being there. And that's, you know, down that way, a lot of people eat the garlic crabs. They have the butter, and you know they dip it [inaudible], and so, we just took it from there.

MH: And the eggs, too? The garlic eggs?

KA: Well, see, down there it's actually called like a Low-Country Boil. So actually all of that, they would put all of that in the pot together and boil it. So maybe put eggs, sometimes people would put neckbones and oxtails and all kind of meat in there. So we just took the eggs from that, and we just boiled them and put them in there.

MH: Where in South Georgia?

KA: Brunswick, Georgia

MH: OK, that's—so it's by the coast.

KA: Yes, mm-hm. St. Simons Island, Jekyll Island, that area.

MH: Is that where your family has always been, or—

KA: No, actually we're originally from California.

MH: OK

KA: We're actually from California, and we had family that was in Brunswick, and years ago we moved to Brunswick and loved it. We stayed in that area until we moved up here. And we've been here since, like, maybe, 2014? No, 2002.

MH: I notice that the sign has a little bit of music. Is there any influence with—or—

KA: No, actually, that came with the building. [*Both laugh.*] Evan, my nephew, does music. So we just left it there to go with that.

MH: And I think the name is so unique, and it's sort of like—where did that idea—

KA: Well, I'm from California, South Central California, and there it's a saying, "What's cracking?" They wouldn't be talking about crabs, they'd just be saying, "Hey, how you doing?" So we was like, OK, Watts—from California—and then that saying also, and then that saying also, and then also the crab, cracked crab. So, cracking crabs open. "Wats crackin'?"

MH: It's certainly unique.

KA: Yeah, and when we answer the phone, we say, "Wats Crackin?" What's crackin'?

MH: So, business--I know—like I said, every time we would drive by, it's sort of like, you know, a forty-minute wait, or hearing about, you know, the wait and the lines—and I'm still amazed. I don't notice a website. Do you have a website or just like a Facebook—

KA: We have Facebook and we have Instagram.

MH: And that's what I find so interesting, too, how popular, and it's all word of mouth, it seems like.

KA: Mm-hm. We have T-shirts—our uniform. And we can be out to the stores and people will be like, "Hey, I know that place. I know that place. You work there?" So it is good to have that [inaudible].

MH: Yeah. And so has this past year been—two years, now, been for business?

KA: Oh, the last two years has been kind of—business has been great. But we did lose my sister, the founder.

MH: I'm sorry.

KA: We did lose her November last year from covid. And that was, you know, a big hit for us. And other than that, myself and my nephews make sure everything is going.

MH: So it's a family business.

KA: Family business.

MH: Are you the chef [inaudible]?

KA: [Inaudible] everything to make sure that everything keeps up. There's four of us, five—four of my nephews and myself. So, you know, we'll take turns on whatever we need to do to make sure that everything keeps going.

MH: So, crabs—I mean, that’s also, that’s South Georgia. Do you ever have—a lot of people may not know even how to open them? Do you have those people, who are like—

KA: Yes, because we have—

MH: Do you have to sort of give them little hints?

KA: We have two types of crabs that we serve. We have the snow crab, and then we also have blue crab.

MH: Those are my favorite.

KA: Blue crab we get from South Georgia, because down there, that’s all they mainly eat. But here in the Atlanta area a lot of people eat snow crabs. So we do get a lot of people coming here, “Well, what’s the blue crab?” And so we have to explain to them how to eat them and all of this. They try them and come back for them all the time.

MH: I grew up going to Baltimore for crabs, and I learned how to. But I had to teach my husband how to open them, mm-hm. So who’s coming here? Who’s the different audiences, or who’s—

KA: We have actually a lot of celebrities come through here. Rick Ross, he’s came through before. We have a lot of comedians that come through, a lot of TV personalities. The *Housewife* [sic] franchise? We have a lot of those, a lot of them. And actually some of those pictures are posted up on our page [inaudible].

MH: So I’m sure in this area you’ve seen changes in the demographics, even from when first opening. So have you noticed a shift in who—in, like, demographics, of who’s coming here?

KA: Well, we have a lot of every [inaudible]. The golf tournament was just here up the street, so we got a lot of people that came by from there. I’m pretty sure that they seen it from our social media pages. We get a lot of people from the health clinic that just opened right there, so we get a lot of people that comes there. And it’s like, “I didn’t know that this place was right here. We’ve been looking for it all the time.” But they go right there, and they see that it’s right here. So we get a— [*Voice trails off.*]

MH: How many pounds of butter do you go through a day? [*Laughs*]

KA: Oh, a lot.

MH: A lot.

KA: Yes, a lot. We get a lot. We go through a lot of butter.

MH: Have you been affected by food pricing, prices increasing?

KA: Yes, yes we have. And we had to make a lot of adjustment when covid first started because we used to let everyone come inside. But since we had to shift, we just, you know, locked the door up and just take the orders at the door. And then we'll call you when your order's ready. And we have gotten a whole lot better with making sure we don't have the long waits anymore or anything like that. So, of course, when we first started, it was something new for us, because we never—this would have been the last thing that would have been on our minds, to have this kind of restaurant. So it was a lot trying to get adjusted and everything, but we've been working it out, and it's getting a whole lot better. It's getting a whole lot better.

MH: Where do you see the future of Wats Crackin?

KA: I see more buildings, more restaurants. I can see—I see a lot of growth and [inaudible].

MH: And generations' future.

KA: Of course, we have some little ones that—[Laughs]

MH: Yeah, growing up

KA: --that's coming up that we are—we keep it going, with the family. That's our goal.

MH: Did you grow up in a large family or a small family?

KA: It's a very large family. My mother has—had eleven brothers and sisters.

MH: Oh, my. OK. So Low-Country Boil would be a great way to feed a lot of people.

KA: Yes, mm-hm. We [inaudible]. And then my mother had four of her own [rest of comment inaudible; mentions grandchildren].

MH: So I'm sure a lot of people are asking, you know, what's the secret?

KA: It's all in the butter.

MH: It's all in the butter.

KA: It's all—

MH: Probably a shocking amount of butter that no one really needs to know, but that's why it's so good, right?

KA: Right. And then we also make sure our food is cooked, seasoned [inaudible]. Make sure everyone loves it, to the taste.

MH: Do you have it so—like I said, so you were just coming from like—kind of like a home cook, and then it started from there. So did you ever get any sort of training, or was it just all learning on the spot?

KA: Most of it was learning on the spot. I did—I used to work in food service, so I had a lot of training from that. But most of it from [inaudible phrase] family and all, we'd take some business classes, [inaudible] whatever [inaudible].

MH: Because it's kind of tricky, that seafood. And especially, you know, dealing with so many orders that are coming in and like making sure it's hot and steaming, so is it all done, like, basically at—per order?

KA: Well, we cook up a lot, so that way we really don't have to keep cooking as much. But we do have ways to keep it warm and keep it hot, fresh, and everything. And we're always constantly cooking, constantly cooking, constantly cooking. Nothing stays here that long.

MH, *laughing*: Yeah, so you must have taken a lot of orders or just get a lot of shipments of crabs or—

KA: Mm-hm

MH: So you said the blue crabs come from South Georgia—

KA: Yes

MH: Where do the snow crabs come from?

KA: We—there's a place around.

MH: Yeah. So have you—has there been an increase in price with that, and have you had to raise your prices at all?

KA: Yeah, we had to, because first, you know, it was actually kind of hard for us to find them, when the pandemic first started, you know, it's been hard for us to find them. But it didn't take long for us to find some. A lot of businesses had closed, so, you know, we were, like, the only ones that was really open. Because most of the places were dine-in [inaudible], so we wasn't, so we just had the little minor adjustment and then—so we never really had to close down.

MH: And one of the other things I think is wonderful and partly why we want to share this story is that this is such a successful Black-owned business. And it's such a great thing for the community and here, and could you speak a little bit about being a Black owner and your business and its—also this past year and being, I guess, so

proud of being a business owner and selling a product that you started in your home kitchen?

KA: Yes, that is a lot of the amazing story for us. You know, for us to just start—and actually we still have the car in the back.

MH: Oh, the pickup truck?

KA: No, not the pickup. It's a little green car in the back. That's the car we started in, driving around. And then it actually still has—well, it's kind of faded now, because it's been sitting so long, but it had a decal sticker on the car to where—actually I remember one time we were riding in—some people on the side of us seen the decal, and they were saying, “Hey, I know that place! I know that place!” And so—

MH: [Inaudible] grab a photo of that.

KA: [Inaudible] just to put it together, not knowing, you know, what we could do, or we could have made it this long. That's amazing.

MH: Yeah, it is. And for future generations, too.

KA: Yes. And then, you know, because at the time that we had started this, there really wasn't a lot of people doing seafood, you know, or, you know, some places will say that they have free crab legs or something like that, but that'll be once a week or, you know, anything like that. And it still would not have the garlic butter [*laughs*].

MH: And that's it. Unique.

KA: Mm-hm. And now we see other places, you know, trying to puff up a little of the same thing, but it's not the same.

MH: It's not as good. Do you feel a little competition with others who are doing that, or--

KA: No, because I'm confident in ours [*laughs*].

MH: Yeah

KA: I'm confident in ours.

MH: Yeah. Do you see expanding the menu at all?

KA: Yes, we actually have some more things that we would like to put on there, but that's going to come when we get our next [inaudible].

MH: And do you find yourself still eating the crabs every day, or once every—or are you kind of like—

KA: You know, I still have a problem with the eggs [*laughs*]. The eggs and the potato are my big problem. I can't stop [inaudible]. I eat the eggs at least every day or every other day.

MH: Well, it kind of balances out, right? Because they say the eggs are good for cholesterol, the butter maybe not so much. So you mix it together, and it's like—it evens out, right?

KA: Yeah, and then, the potatoes [inaudible]. I can't stop eating those. But I learned to stop taking some seafood home because I take some home, and it'll sit there and sit there and sit there, because my family [*laughs*], they're like, "Don't bring any more home today. Don't bring any more seafood home this week."

MH: Is there anything else you want to share about—I know that's always such an open-ended—I just love the fact that this is such a—I mean, I guess cult favorite or like, place, is the best way I can describe it. You know, I think those are often the best places where it's a little hard to find, a little hard—you know, it's a little off the, you know, and yet everyone knows about it, and I think this is such a unique, interesting, you know--

KA: Because I actually—I do the Facebook page and the Instagram page also, so I'll be going through, and I'll be looking at the messages, and they'll be on there talking to each other like, "Hey, did you go to this place today?" Or you know, then somebody'll be like, "Well, I couldn't find it." And then they'll be like, "Well, it's the little house here—it's off the street," and I'll be looking like, "Wow." They answer the questions for me. I don't even have to do anything too much. But that's great also.

MH: Do you sell out pretty—daily, or close to--

KA: We try not to sell out. We try to make sure that we have enough inventory to where we don't run out. But sometimes we can get overwhelming, especially if the city is doing--having events or anything, and we get a lot of people that come in from out of town, especially now with football season and, you know, everything like that. So we try to make sure that we have enough inventory.

MH: It's funny, talking to Wyatt's Barbecue, he was like, "Every day we sell out by seven. Every day." And it was almost a proud thing, like, no, we sell out at seven.

KA: Yeah, well, when we first started out, we did have that problem, because actually it seemed like we went viral like overnight. Like, I think we had opened in, like—January was our official open day, in January. And then by April we had gone



viral, but we didn't know, you know. We wasn't expecting, and we came in to work one day, and the line was from the front door all the way around the corner, down the street, around the corner. And we were like, "Where did all these people come from?" So that was amazing.

MH, *laughing*. A little exciting, a little nervous, yeah.

KA: Yeah, all in one.

MH: So, just for the record, can you describe what garlic crab are, exactly, in detail, so that future generations can get a little hungry thinking about them?

KA: OK, garlic crabs are your snow crabs or blue crabs covered with our special seasoned garlic and—what else to describe it?

MH: Made with love

KA: --and delicious butter sauce [*laughs*]. It's all in the butter sauce.

MH: It's all in the butter. That should be another T-shirt. "It's all in the butter."

KA: We actually, like I mentioned—my nephew does—they do music, so they made a song for us, so we have our own song. Of course, we have our logo. So . . .

MH: Well, thank you so much. And I also will be taking orders.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed October 7, 2021 by Claudia Stucke