

Interview with
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Location of Interview: Loyola University New Orleans
6363 St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70118
Interviewed by: Tyler Sanchez
Interview length: 00:26:08

Abstract: Mary Sonnier has worked in the restaurant industry for 35 years. Mary has worked at numerous restaurants including K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen and has since run her own catering business and restaurants. With her husband Greg, Mary serves Louisiana food with a modern twist at Gabrielle Restaurant.

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[00:00:08.28] Tyler: Thank you, Ms. Mary for allowing us to interview today. And I want to start off by asking you, How many years have you worked in the restaurant industry.

[00:00:16.26] Mary Sonnier: Ohh...umm... a little over 35 years

[00:00:22.09] Tyler: Oh okay and umm in those 35 years, Would you say that you experienced any forms of discrimination based on your sex or any other nature?

[00:00:30.19] Mary Sonnier: (chuckles)

[00:00:32.06] Mary Sonnier: Ummm I don't know about discrimination. Mainly because my first job I think I got because I was a female.

[00:00:45.11] Mary Sonnier: Umm or not because I was a female. It didn't hinder my getting a job, my first job in the restaurant business. So I can't say I was discriminated, you know against and I stayed there for a long time and then I left because I was umm I have gotten married, then I was pregnant with my oldest daughter, it was 1989 and I just didn't feel like I could work at that restaurant anymore and you know I wanted to do something on my own. So I left there and developed my own small catering business. So pretty much since that time I have been in business for myself so no not really. Not discrimination no.

[00:01:27.24] Tyler: And where did you started in the restaurant industry. What was that first job?

[00:01:32.08] Mary Sonnier: Ummm my first job was with Paul Prudhomme at K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen in the French Quarter, New Orleans.

[00:01:39.17] Tyler: And what was it like working there with Paul?

[00:01:42.03] Mary Sonnier: Well back then that was 1983 umm, it was difficult, it was hard, it was challenging but it was a lot of fun and umm I really enjoyed the work and umm I don't know I really liked it, I really liked the chall- even the challenges abroad I enjoyed that, yea.

[00:02:13.16] Tyler: Okay umm... so would you say it was hard for you to get your catering business off the ground or since you have been in the industry for little awhile you kind had a clientele list.

[00:02:24.11] Mary Sonnier: Well...I didn't uh here's uh...an opportunity presented itself there was the Napoleon house a couple doors down from K-Paul's and they had a room on their third floor that they had small parties and weddings and things like that and so they approached me and asked me if I would like to do their catering for that room because it was it was like a step above what they did at the Napoleon house most of their food was muffulettas and sandwiches and things like that but I could offer umm food that was a grade above that so I'd I'd that's how I did my own catering business so they I didn't work there but I did their catering for that floor so yea I didn't really have to shop for customers because they just called me when they had you know a special event I could do there

[00:03:27.29] Tyler: And at this time when you started working with the Napoleon company, you were already married and just gotten...

[00:03:34.19] Mary Sonnier: Noo, I was married, I was pregnant with my first daughter and I was busy and at the Napoleon house; they didn't have an elevator, om my gosh I was carrying everything up those three flights of stairs. You know it was an old building in the French Quarter. So yeah that was challenging on it's own, because catering was a lot of schlepping in catering, so yeah it was difficult, but yeah, again, I enjoyed the challenge of you know starting my own small business and umm, it was successful, they enjoyed having me there and I enjoyed you know working there.

[00:04:11.20] Tyler: We've had to deal with our own amounts of schlepping this equipment back and forth.

[00:04:15.00] Mary Sonnier: *Laughs* well you know catering is like that; you schlep equipment, food, uhh alot of laborist work just like cooking is

[00:04:27.22] Tyler: True, that's True umm and do you remember when you met your husband, Greg?

[00:04:37.13] Mary Sonnier: Oh yeah sure, I was working for Paul Prudhomme at K-Pauls, and it was, like, 198- I've been working there for about a year and I was the person who made all the meat, pate, sausages I was a butcher of sorts so I did all that in the back of the house I made stocks they were giving me a promotion, and they were putting me in the kitchen on the line at night, like, during service so they hired my husband Greg, I didnt know him at the time, to take my place doing what I did and so I could go into the kitchen and uhh, so my first encounter with him was teaching him my job. They hired him as an a apprentice, just like I was. What that means is you come to work for the chef, for Chef Paul, somebody like him and you don't make a whole lot of money, but you take on the job so you can learn from him, yea; and, you know, you give up, when I agreed to work for him I agreed to take my apprenticeship for a three year term at little wages, but you know the knowledge that I got was something that was invaluable. So he did the same thing he was at school at Delgado culinary program, and he had to have an internship, and this is where he did, so that's where we met originally, you know first, and we were just friends for like the first year, and then i think it was Jazzfest the following year, they were asking for-- 1985, they were asking for people to go taste at the Jazzfest for, like, quality taster, and they had come to Paul Prudhomme to see if any other cooks wanted to do this, and you got free Jazz Fest tickets; they let you go around and taste the food, you just wrote up little reviews, and they paid you to do this, well, they paid for all your food, anyway- so I raised my hand "Yes I want to do that" and right after I did, he did too, and uhh, then he asked me if I wanted to go with him, then that's when we started dating.

[00:06:58.21] Tyler: Oh, well that's sweet, umm, so what gave you the inspiration to create your own restaurant?

[00:07:07.02] Mary Sonnier: Well, um, by the time we opened our own restaurant my daughter was two in a half, it was nineteen ninety... well , 1992; well it was 1991, when we started looking around, we have looked before that, but we got serious about looking, and my husband, Greg, was working at Brigtsen's for Frank Brigtsen, and, umm, a friend of ours came to us and said that there was this little restaurant on Esplanade and Mystery Street, it was called the Mystery Street Cafe, and that this lady their wanted to sell it and it wasn't very big, I think it was like forty-five seats, something like that, and he wanted us to go look at it, so we did, we went and looked at we thought "Oh well, this is really cute you know and it was something that maybe we could afford because she wanted so much money for it," and so we got, uhh, we went to Greg's father and we talked to him about it, and he got his attorney to look into it. Well the attorney found out that the woman who owned the restaurant was, she had like all these IRS liens on the business, see this is why you need an attorney when you're gonna buy a business, you don't want to buy a business with, uh, that owes money to the IRS especially. So he brokered a deal with her and the IRS that we will pay this much and the IRS will get their money, and she will get a little bit too, and that's how we purchased our first restaurant and we also went to the landlord and talked to him you know and signed a lease with him instead of getting the lease through her you know we went straight to him and he was really nice and, umm, we signed like, uh, I can't remember how long it was, a twenty year lease, and we went in that was November of '91 we formed our little corporation, and umm, by February or early March of '92 we were open, we went in by ourselves, painted the place, I remember I recovered the chairs and we got open we were open on that at that location, that was 30201 Esplanade, for thirteen and a half years until Hurricane Katrina hit.

[00:09:45.22] Tyler: The restaurant was named after your daughter, correct?

[00:09:48.14] Mary Sonnier: Gabrielle, yes

[00:09:50.02] Tyler: What type of food did you sell at your restaurant? Was it something that you have been doing at others or y'all put y'all's own flavor on it?

[00:09:55.27] Mary Sonnier: Well...

[00:09:58.18] Mary Sonnier: Greg was the chef, I was the baker, they call me the pastry chef; I don't really consider myself a pastry chef, I'm more of just a baker, I make desserts. We consider our food like modern Louisiana food, it was a bistro style restaurant, it wasn't cajun, it wasn't creole, but sorta a mix of the two. Umm, but with a modern twist on it, you know, the sauces weren't as heavy as you would see in the past and just our own little spin on it, so that's what I consider it modern Louisiana cuisine, still the restaurant now that we have I consider it the same.

[00:10:43.10] Tyler: And what the name of your current restaurant?

[00:10:45.10] Mary Sonnier: Gabrielle, yeah we opened a year ago last September.

[00:10:50.19] Tyler: How was it losing the restaurant in Hurricane Katrina?

[00:10:54.15] Mary Sonnier: Oh, It was devastating, yeah, I mean, umm, the- I think worst part about it was that we were paying all this insurance for all these years; I mean, we were insured for everything business interruption, by that time we had owned the building, we had purchased the building from the landlord years- like five years after we have gotten in there, so by this time we have already owned the building outright, we have paid it off and everything. And we had a fight with our insurance company and we ended up having to settle with them and, um, but before that could happen we had to just gut the building and the sale the building for what we could get for it and move on. We bought a building on Henry Clay avenue close to our home that was catering facility, but had all the permits to operate the restaurant, but some neighbors there didn't want us to, and they waged a big battle against us so we had to end up just operating it as a catering company until we sold it in 2013.

[00:12:22.10] Mary Sonnier: But it was devastating to lose our restaurant, because, umm, not only because it was a loss of our income, but a lost of our way of life, and just so many of our customers and our employees were like family, it was hard.

[00:12:40.23] Tyler: And all of the memories you made with them.

[00:12:42.04] Mary Sonnier: Right, exactly, yeah.

[00:12:44.22] Tyler: So, what was it like when you were able to reopen the restaurant? Did you feel a sense of that, oh, wonder before the storm or did you go in wanting to change it some type of way?

[00:12:59.20] Mary Sonnier: Well, it was a little different, and the big difference was that my daughter, by this time, was old enough to come work with us, so that was awesome, and now she manages it- she is our general manager so in some ways, when we reopened last year's it was, you know, it was nice to have her there, and we had alot of our old customers come back, and the overwhelming show of support from so many people I don't know was just really nice, so yeah, we have been through something, but I always say if that's the worst thing I ever had to go through, I guess it's really not that bad, because people go through a lot of bad things in their life, you know that are way worse than what I went through.

[00:13:52.27] Tyler: And in the restaurant now, do you serve the same type of dishes with the modern twist?

[00:13:57.00] Mary Sonnier: We do. We have different dishes, but we have alot of our old dishes. And, uh, but it's the same heart of the cuisine is there, the same feeling to the food is there, yeah absolutely.

[00:14:15.01] Tyler: Were y'all ever worried that maybe the, um, customers- this is before the storm- that they wouldn't take a liking to the unique aspect you put on your dishes?

[00:14:29.14] Mary Sonnier: Uh, No, because we were always very popular before and the place is small, I mean it's not for everybody, probably, but it's small enough that, you know, there's an audience for that kind of food, it is Louisiana food, and I know a lot of people probably, I mean, there are a lot of people that want other things to eat other than Louisiana or New Orleans food, but there a lot of people that really seek that out when they come here, because we're a unique place we make a unique cuisine here, my husband and I both feel very strongly about carrying that torch, I mean we learned, he and I both learned to cook from one of the masters of that cuisine, so we felt like we want to keep on doing that; no, people want that, I never had any mix feelings about that, no.

[00:15:35.29] Tyler: Could you describe for me the creative process it took to create some of the new dishes that you brought to the restaurant?

[00:15:44.24] Mary Sonnier: Well I'm not the chef there, my husband is, so you would have to ask him about that. But, I know that when I'm cooking, or when I'm thinking of, like, a new dessert, it's usually just from reading cook books, or sometimes I go out to eat and I taste something, or sometimes I go to the farmers market and there's a new product there, or just something that I've had before that I go um, hmm, this taste good, maybe it will be good with this or that, or I really- or, you know, if you go eat dinner somewhere, "Hmm, I like the way this guy did this, maybe if i did this, but just change it around a little," or when you travel, you get ideas or inspiration from that.

[00:16:34.12] Tyler: So you would say that you like to dabble with every different aspect?

[00:16:38.17] Mary Sonnier: Oh sure, yeah, yeah.

[00:16:40.21] Tyler: Would you say that has been rewarding to the restaurant?

[00:16:44.19] Mary Sonnier: Oh yeah I'd say travel, reading cook books, and dining out are probably the three ways that I find inspiration in food.

[00:16:59.04] Tyler: Okay I wanna shift gears a little bit, Would you say that when y'all were reopening the restaurant, did the media hinder your success to reopening, or were they more on your side.

[00:17:12.02] Mary Sonnier: No, they were on our side I think, uhh you know they did want to know when we were doing this that, that- but I think they were really rooting for us to succeed, and I think they still- because everybody likes a comeback story, so it was nice.

[00:17:32.09] Tyler: Oh okay... Excuse me.

[00:17:36.02] Mary Sonnier: That's okay.

[00:17:37.21] Tyler: Would you say that the media was helpful in widening your customer base?

[00:17:45.18] Mary Sonnier: Oh yeah, I mean, any time you're in the spotlight, or in the media, that always helps, it use to be you wait 'till the newspaper come out and read it, but now it all over the worldwide web and social media, that's the one big thing I've found that's changed since 2005 is social media. It's a big a big game changer.

[00:18:00.22] Tyler: All over social media.

[00:18:15.01] Tyler: And do y'all have yall's own forms of social media to promote the restaurant?

[00:18:17.07] Mary Sonnier: Oh we...we do that; my daughter and I both do it.

[00:18:21.13] Tyler: Okay, so you would say that she is helping to teach the new lingo?

[00:18:27.06] Mary Sonnier: I think I might of taught her a few things (laughs).

[00:18:29.09] Tyler: Okay.

[00:18:31.09] Mary Sonnier: Right yeah.

[00:18:32.05] Tyler: And what kind of support system do y'all have in place at your restaurant to things like physical and mental health?

[00:18:43.00] Mary Sonnier: What do you mean?

[00:18:44.25] Tyler: Umm. Would you say that y'all are lenient with people when they say "Oh, like, I need a personal day, I have to do this or do this, get these things in order"?

[00:18:55.08] Mary Sonnier: Well, not many people come to, if somebody, like, if somebody is not feeling well or whatever, oh yeah, well, we're a family run restaurant and we only open for 5 days a week, everybody gets two days off, thats a big mental break right there, I mean you don't find that very often in the restaurant business, so, you know, we close down for two days so everybody can have a break.

[00:19:29.15] Tyler: How would you describe your growth from apprentice to now owner of your own restaurant?

[00:19:39.08] Mary Sonnier: Well okay as an apprentice, I was mentored; now I feel like I kinda mentor people, so that's how I've come along...

[00:19:52.00] Tyler: So it's like, you gained this knowledge from someone, now it's your turn to be able to pass it on to and continue the tradition.

[00:19:55.19] Mary Sonnier: Yes, Yes, Yes. I'm almost, like, um, even though we have people that are even older than me that work for me, I'm still sorta, like, a mentor to them even, or even like a mother to them, because when you- I always felt like, and Ella Brennan, said this once women make good restaurants, because they nourish people, they like to nourish people so you know you want to nourish your staff, your customers, so yeah, I felt like that's what I do to I feel like I try to do that.

[00:20:32.55] Tyler: And would you say, there's a good balance between men and women in the restaurant industry, and have you seen a more feminine presence on the industry since you've first started?

[00:20:45.04] Mary Sonnier: You know, okay, when I was a cook in the kitchen back in the 80's, I was sometimes maybe 1 or 2 or 3 women, or sometimes the only one in the kitchen, all the server staffs were females, but in the kitchen, no, but now that's changed, I mean there's a lot of females in the kitchen, so I don't see where there's discrimination, I think it's whether or not you can cut it, you know, whether or not you can do the work, you know?

[00:21:20.16] Tyler: Yeah, and what are some of the most notable things you have seen change about the industry?

[00:21:31.01] Mary Sonnier: Hmm, are you talking about gender related or just...

[00:21:35.15] Tyler: Anything.

[00:21:36.06] Mary Sonnier: Anything, oh wow, well the prices have really sky rocketed, just the prices of, just doing business, have just, you know insurance, the credit card fees, just everything has gotten

just so expensive, that to me is just, everything so to just run a restaurant now is pricey, and that reflects on what people have to pay just to eat out, so that, yeah, it's been, rent, everything, that has been a big change.

[00:22:17.09] Tyler: And I would assume that prices when you first started are different when you re-opened?

[00:22:17.09] Mary Sonnier: Oh yeah, absolutely, everything's inflated.

[00:22:44.20] Tyler: I'm not sure what else to ask you.

[00:22:46.26] Mary Sonnier: Oh, come on. You must have something else to ask me!

[00:22:55.04] Tyler: Did y'all ever consider not reopening?

[00:23:00.12] Mary Sonnier: Okay, I did because I was kinda tired, tired of the whole thing. But my husband, he never gave up, he really didn't- we've been through so much, not just the catering hall and having to sell that, but then we found another place on the West Bank, and we were gonna buy that, and we had signed an agreement to buy it with the seller, and then we went to act to sale, and the seller did not show for up for the act of sale, so now we're suing this guy right now, we're in a lawsuit with them to get our, well, he gave us our deposit back, but we lost six months of our life with that place you know. So umm, just the frustrations of what people will do to you when you're getting into a business deal with them, and they fall through on you, so yeah I was over it, but he never really gave up, he wanted his own restaurant, he didn't wanna work for anyone else, he had been the chef at the Windsor court, dickey brennans, he was all these places, but he didn't like working for anyone else, he wanted to do his own food, not somebody else's.

[00:24:18.16] Tyler: And then also, I would assume allowing you to mold the restaurant into what it could be.

[00:24:23.23] Mary Sonnier: Well yeah because we have our own way of doing business, he didn't like the way some of these other people did business.

[00:24:33.19] Tyler: Could you describe that for me?

[00:24:35.07] Mary Sonnier: Well, I can't speak for him, you'd have to ask him, I didn't work anywhere else. You know, not everybody works the way we do, we don't like to be open seven days a week, and make everybody work all these hours. So you know we like operating a small family run restaurant, where everyone works five nights a week, we open for lunch one day, and everybody's not working 14 hours a day, or 16 hours, you know you're working 8 to 10 hours a day and then you go home two days a week and have your days off and so everybody's okay, you know.

[00:25:26.27] Tyler: Yeah.

[00:25:26.28] Mary Sonnier: That's how we like to operate, so we wanted our own place where we could do that, and cook our own food, and have our own customers and do what we wanted to do.

[00:25:48.02] Tyler: Well I- wa-

[00:25:48.22] Mary Sonnier: Is that it?

[00:25:50.10] Tyler: Yeah, I wanted to thank you, for allowing me to interview you today, so yeah, it's good.

[00:25:55.28] Mary Sonnier: Okay, is that okay?

[00:26:00.27] Tyler: How long was the run time? 26 minutes.