

Diana Hamilton

Where: King Tut Drive-In

Date: July 9, 2019

Location: Beckley, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 11:48

Diana Hamilton

Diana Hamilton (b. October 1955), is a native of Cool Ridge, West Virginia. She has worked at King Tut Drive-In restaurant in Beckley for 40 years and has been the manager for 20 years.

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EH: Emily Hilliard

DH: Diana Hamilton

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EH: Okay. Could you introduce yourself and tell me your name, where you're from and when you were born?

DH: My name is Diana Hamilton. I'm from Cool Ridge, West Virginia, right out of Beckley and I was born in October 1955.

EH: Could you tell me a little bit about your family background?

DH: Well I was raised in a Christian home and always went to church and taught good values and good work ethic. And I think something that's highly lacking in today's society.

EH: And were your parents from West Virginia as well?

DH: Yes, they were, both of them. Yes.

EH: What about your family these days?

DH: Well like I said, the older generation, they were the ones who were steadfast and it seems like as generations go on, that they kind of fall by the wayside, but overall our family's doing well. Doing well.

EH: So when did you start working here?

DH: It was November 15 of 1979. So I'm coming up on my 40 year anniversary of working here.

EH: Congrats!

DH: (laughs)

EH: You remember the exact date!

DH: Yes, I do because at that time we got paid on the 1st and the 16th, how I remember it is I worked one day and got a pay day for 1 day, a day's wages. (laughs)

EH: So why did you take the job initially?

DH: Have 2 kids, you know, we just bought a new home and I said, I told my husband if he couldn't make ends meet, then I'd go to work so it wasn't happening, so I had to go to work and here I am today. (laughs)

EH: What did he do?

DH: He was a mechanic for Lewis Chevrolet.

EH: Oh, okay. And so what has been your role here at King Tut?

DH: Started out as cook and I cooked for 3-4 years and then I moved around into what we call the front, which means answering the phone and putting out orders. And then I'm not sure of the date. It's been about 20 years since I've been a manager.

EH: Okay.

DH: Yes.

EH: And when you were a cook, were there recipes that you had or did you bring in some of your own recipes?

DH: No, they were highly-guarded recipe (laughs) of the old Mr. McKay. Yes. I mean, he told you, he says, if you give out any of my recipes to family and friends you are automatically fired.

EH: Wow.

DH: Yeah. He guarded his recipes (laughs).

EH: So you didn't have much leeway.

DH: No. No, not on the cooking part. And we still stick to the old recipes today.

EH: Well they are really good.

DH: Well thank you. (laughs)

EH: And what kept you around at this job?

DH: It's a really, it's been a really good place to work. I only had one job experience before and it was completely different. There was always a set time that you worked. It wasn't like you had a different time shift every week, you know, like some do. It's always the same set time and the people have been really good to work for. Really good.

EH: And who are your coworkers and who have they been over the years?

DH: Oh my goodness. I always tell everybody that I could write a book about (laughs) I've had some very good people and some very crazy people. (laughs). Really I can't—the ones that come to mind now are the ones that's been here the longest. Which, my daughter works here now and she's the main cook that guards the recipes, okay? And then Debbie Duncan and Melanie Hinesman and Becky Bradley, Shorty Gomez, Amanda Mullins and Chrissie and they're the main group that works the main shift now. And...

EH: So how many people are you generally managing?

DH: About approximately 10.

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EH: Okay. That's—I think Dave says there's 23 employees so it's kind of split evenly?

DH: Right, yes.

EH: And then what about the customers. Who are they and do you have particular regulars?

DH: Oh we, yes, we have regulars all the time. I mean I can call 'em out by name. I work inside and the girls work outside, which I'm not familiar with their faces a lot of times, but the names, you say it and I know, I know who they are. Just talkin' to 'em on the phone. (laughs)

EH: Do you know their orders?

DH: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, recently when we had a curb girl that passed away and a woman that I had taken orders from for years and years and years. And when I finally met her in person it was just like wow, she looks nothing like I think she's sounds, you know, when you talk to someone you think they should look a certain way, you know.

EH: Like when you see what someone on the radio actually looks like.

DH: Right, right.

EH: Very different from your mental image.

DH: Exactly, yes. (laughs)

EH: So how has it changed over the years?

DH: Um...the food part has not changed. It's just the workers. And that has changed. We're basically kind of like we were when I first started. So I think that's what keeps us around. Because we haven't changed.

EH: So you have sort of a reputation and a clientele.

DH: Right, right, exactly. Yeah, the same people. Yeah.

EH: What are the most popular items?

DH: I would say BBQs and hot dogs and right now the pan fried chicken livers. That is a hot item. People love 'em. (laughs)

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EH: I'm not too big on liver, but when I saw that on the sign I thought, oh this place is legit.

DH: Yeah. (laughs) Yeah, and that's one of the old Mr. McKay's recipes. You know, he does it a certain way—which I try to copy at home and it doesn't, it doesn't taste the same. I have no idea why not, but it doesn't.

EH: What does a good day look like for you and what's a bad day on the job?

DH: In respect to money-wise or just work-wise?

EH: Yeah, just work-wise.

DH: Work-wise is when some orders come in steady instead of you know, just a constant flow of orders. That's a good day. When you have a day when like everybody comes at one time, then everybody leaves

and everybody comes at one time and everybody leaves—that's a bad day. Or just too much business that overwhelms you that you know, you're just like ugh. What do I do next?

EH: Yeah. Does it get hectic in there?

DH: Oh yes. Oh yes.

EH: Small building.

DH: It is. It's a small compact building and we're bumping into each other. When you first start out, you're saying excuse me all the time and then it's just like, you just don't say it anymore 'cause you know, (coughs)

EH: What do you think the importance of this is for Beckley?

DH: The importance of this...

EH: Yeah, what does it mean to the community.

DH: Well like I said, I think it's just nostalgia. You know, the bringing, just being able to come in your car and sit and eat just like the old days, you know, and we have a lot of old vehicles that come in and you know, if they have the car shows and stuff. And it's just a different atmosphere from the restaurants.

EH: Were the curb girls ever on roller skates?

DH: Not that I know of! (laughs)

EH: It seems like a hazard.

DH: I know! (laughs) No, we were never that brave to do that, I don't think.

EH: What might be—do you have any interesting stories of unusual customers or something that happened at work?

DH: Unusual customers. Like I said, I could write a book. (laughs). Ah, goodness. Nah, I'm not gonna say anything about the customers. No, I wouldn't do that. (laughs)

EH: Okay.

DH: Okay. But as far as for the workers now, like I said, I've had some, you know, kind of out there people that, you know drug abuse is highly known everywhere and you get these people who would come in and they'll be talking to the refrigerators you know, acting like they're people. You know, just different stuff like that, but you just deal with it and go on.

EH: Is it hard to find good work?

DH: It is, it is. I have a really good crew right now. You know, but it takes years in the making to get a good crew. And the ones that I've had have been with me for a long time. I have like one new girl, she's been here a month, and one that's been here like a year, but the rest of 'em have been here multiple years.

EH: Wow.

DH: You know. Like from 20, 15, a lot of years.

EH: So are you close with your coworkers?

DH: I like to think that I am. They call me Mama Dukes.

EH: Aw. (laughs)

DH: Why Dukes I don't know. (laughs)

EH: When did that start?

DH: I don't know. It's just one of the girls started calling me that Mamadukes, so I've had many nicknames through my life. (laughs)

EH: So you kind of have a motherly role in the...

DH: I think so, yes, yes. Yeah, yeah.

EH: Well is there anything else you would like to add?

DH: Um, just the you know, I get emotional.

EH: Oh, it's okay Dave [McKay, the owner] did too. (laughs)

DH: (laughs, sniffles) Phew! I'm just getting ready to retire in like a year and a half so I just like to think that I made a difference.

EH: Yeah, I'm sure you did.

DH: Yeah.

EH: Yeah, it's hard to leave something like that but also...

DH: Right. I mean it's time.

EH: You don't have to work!

DH: Right! I'd like to enjoy a little bit while I still feel good. Don't want to wait 'til I have to, 'cause a lot of people do that and they get sick and down and have to and then—I want to leave while I can still feel like doing something. (laughs)

EH: You can always come back and have lunch, hang out with everybody.

DH: Yeah, I'll pester 'em, how's it going?

EH: Yeah, right. Make sure they're keeping their standards up. (laughs) But yeah, I'm sure it's hard and you know, it sounds like you'll be able to maintain those relationships.

DH: Yeah, yeah. Well I'm sure I will. Yeah.

EH: Thank you so much!

DH: Well, thank you! The cry baby!

11:48

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END OF INTERVIEW