

Molly Kopa

Where: Serbian Picnic Grounds

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Location: Weirton, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 1:21 + 3:45 + 11:33 + 4:48 = 21:27 total

Molly Kopa

Weirton native Molly Kopa, 26, works at the Wednesday Chicken Blasts at the Serbian Picnic Grounds in Weirton in the summer time. She started working there when she was 13, with her grandfather “Chicken George” (George Zatezalo).

See the short video and audio documentary about the Chicken Blasts, produced by the West Virginia Folklife Program and West Virginia Public Broadcasting: <https://wvfolklife.org/2020/01/27/weirtons-serbian-heritage-is-a-chicken-blast/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpGF-MFUlhY>

<https://soundcloud.com/wvpublicnews/weirtons-serbian-heritage-is-a-chicken-blast>

MK: Molly Kopa
EH: Emily Hilliard

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00:00

EH: Okay-- so why don't you introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where you're from.

MK: Hi, my name is Molly Kopa, I'm a resident here in Weirton, West Virginia, and I cook chickens on Wednesday at the Picnic Grounds.

EH: ... Right here

MK: (to customer) How are you?

Customer 1: I'm good. Are you adver...

EH: This is for the Humanities Council.

Customer 1: Okay.

EH: Doing stories of Serbian traditions in the area.

Customer 1: Yeah, best chicken around!

EH: Oh yeah, I had it last year at the picnic. It is...

Customer 1: Excellent.

EH: Incredible, yeah.

Customer 1: 2 and 3 right?

MK: Yes, correct. Thank you, and there you go. I was worried about you! You missed like the first...

Customer 1: Forgot a couple of 'em.

MK: Yeah! And I was like...

Customer 1: I was in real estate school up in Pittsburgh and by the time I got back in, with rush hour traffic and stuff, 6 or 7? I would never get it. Yeah.

MK: Right, right, and I think that I know...

Customer 1: My son Brandon?

MK: Yes. Yes. But I don't know if I've ever...

Customer 1: Cause you said "how's your mom, and I..."

MK: Right, right.

Customer 1: And he goes... do you know that girl? I go yeah, yeah. She works down at the picnic grounds. Yeah, Yeah.

MK: Cause I was like... I haven't seen her and then I left--I was gone for 2 weeks. I went to Germany.

Customer 1: Oh.

01:21

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EH: Why don't you tell me when you were born.

MK: I was born in 1992, so I'm 26 right now.

EH: And how did you get involved down here?

MK: My grandpa was actually known as Chicken George, so whenever I told people oh my grandpa was George, they were like (gasps) do you mean Chicken George? So one summer, I was about 13 and I think he finally decided I was mature enough, so he said why don't you come to the Picnic Grounds with me, you can help in the morning and stay for a little bit in the afternoon and see how you like it, and I said well, sure. And here we are half my life later-- I'm still sitting here. So it's a good time on Wednesdays.

EH: Why was he called Chicken George?

MK: I think that he was called Chicken George just because he was always in the same spot here on Wednesdays. He was always right by the fire, always watching the poles spin, making sure the chickens were okay. And down here, his last name is actually Zatezalo, which is not the easiest to say, so I think calling him just Chicken George was a lot easier for most people.

EH: So are you related to Ted or Mark (Zatezalo)

MK: I am related to Mark. Mark and my mom are cousins. Ted I am not related to that we know of, but because we have the same last name, because we've been at the picnic grounds together forever, we all know all each other's family, so... and I think that Ted and I would probably claim each other, so that's always good. He's my boss so that's probably a good thing.

EH: Yeah, I interviewed Mark last year after the picnic, the Annual Picnic. I actually ended up losing the interview because our equipment got stolen, but I'm trying to re-interview him sometime.

MK: He will actually probably be here today. I know his wife is out of town but I think--he'll come later in the evening but that's when most of the friends will come. I think that's when the beer tastes the best so...

EH: (laughs)

MK: (laughs) I think that's when the biggest crowds come.

EH: Like 5ish?

MK: 5ish, mmhm. So we have a rule that the chickens have to be picked up by 6 and a lot of people take that for every second that it's worth. It's 5:59 and there's a line of 20 people and they're like--it's okay, we were in line. And we're like yeah, uh-huh, sure, sure. Because after 6 o'clock we start selling the chickens? So yeah, people know. 6 o'clock is our time but they definitely milk it.

EH: So is--are both of your parents--are they Serbian?

MK: Just my mom is Serbian. So just my grandpa Chicken George-- he was the only Serbian one. So then I got it from my mom and to tell you the truth, this is the only Serbian thing that I do. I don't know... I don't speak it, I don't attend the Serbian Church, I don't celebrate Serbian Christmas, I cook chickens and that is the extent of me being Serbian, which I'm not even sure how much that aligns to being Serbian, but here in Weirton, being Serbian, cooking chickens--they're all wrapped into one.

EH: Right, yeah, well it's a tradition here for sure. Yeah, I think someone last year--it was either Mark or Father Merrick--that there was... I think when they went back to the home country, they noticed that there was a lot of wood roasting of meats. So they said maybe it is a tradition. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. (laughs)

03:16

So why don't you walk me through what the day is here.

MK: Okay. My day here?

EH: Yeah!

MK: Okay, so, lucky me I get here at 6am every morning and we take chicken orders from 6am to 8:30am, so that's what I do for my first 2 and a half hours is I sit and answer the phone, talk to everybody, sometime get their life story, but you know.

EH: We can stop-- we can pause.

03:45

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EH: ...having fun though. Uh--where were we?

MK: My day here. I get here at 6am lucky me, and from 6am to 8:30am, I actually sit in the back room of the clubhouse, which is kind of nice-- I'm away from all the guys, so it's very peaceful. And I take phone orders. People call-- Hi I need 3 chickens and a loaf of bread, Hi I need this, Hi I need that. Normally I get their life story as well, "You know my sister's coming in" and this that and the other and blah blah blah, and you know, I've been on the phone with you for 7 seconds, or 7 minutes and there's like 6 calls coming in so I really need to go, but what I do is I keep everything on 1 pad of paper and then that's like my rough draft kind of and then once I have a moment, once the phone stops ringing, I'll take all of those names and transfer them into our main ledger book here and then I'll use the ledger book later in the day when people come to pick up their chickens, I'll scratch their name off. So I chill back there you know, get my strength ready to come deal with the old guys, and I do call them old guys affectionately, they know, it's all with love. So about 9 o'clock I'll come up to the chicken shack and I'll start cutting the foil to wrap the chickens and then I'll you know, eat my donut, say good morning, pick on the old guys a little bit and then once that first pole of chickens come off, the day just really starts going when the pole of

chickens come off, you know you have to untie the string, the strings there to keep the chickens on the pole, and then once they're ready to come off, you have to untie 'em, and then you wrap up the chickens in foil and then stack them in some white cooler boxes to kind of keep them heated in there and then once I do tell people that chickens aren't ready until about 11:30, 12 o'clock. And that's really just in case we get a late start you know, we're safe and then also that's when the kitchen people will get here. So I just really kind of want to promote their sales as well and it's just more fun if you can come and get a whole meal instead of just a chicken.

EH: Right.

MK: So then about 11:30 that's when my job kicks back in again. People will start coming you know, hi how are you, what's your last name? Let me check my ledger book. Oh you have 2 chickens. Some people tell me that I'm a little too nice because if people have more than 1 chicken I'll say, oh how do you want that bagged--do you want to do separate bags, can I put 'em together, you know. And I mean when it's 2 chickens, it's handable--you can handle it-- but then people have like 7 chickens and they're like ok I need 3 in here and 2 in here and 1 single and you're just like never mind, I'm not gonna ask anymore. But I really enjoy all the people that come here. A lot of the times and I promise I'm not sounding creepery or anything, but I watch their cars come down the road so when they're walking to me from the parking lot, I can get their chickens ready because I know what care they drive, I know who they are. So it's just for new customers I have to ask for their name and go through that process. And then again just counting my lucky stars here-- I get to stay until 6 in the evening when all those chickens leave. So I kind of like it that I know everything that's happened that day. There's no like discrepancies for me to fall into. Oh... well this person said this happened this morning... so I know what happened because I was here, I answered all the phone calls, I gave directions on how to get here, told people you know, oh yeah it's not raining down here but bring your umbrella-- all those kinds of things.

03:29

So in the end, yeah I mean when I go home I'm just ready for a shower and shorts and air conditioning but it's not really not that bad of a day.

EH: And is this a paid position or volunteer?

MK: For me it is a paid position because I am still a student but for most of the older gentleman it is just volunteer. However we're all lucky--every morning we have donuts that they bring us for breakfast.

EH: Where are those from?

MK: They're just from a local place here in Weirton, so I think Mr. Kosanovich who you talked to earlier-- I think he has a deal set up with them so they know, oh it's Wednesday morning, we have to get our donuts ready.

EH: Do you know the name of the place?

MK: I think it's Donut Connection.

EH: Okay.

MK: So it is very... and I'm not sure what their system is, but when you go in like if you don't see the donut you can tell them and they just go make it for you. So I'm not sure the back scenes of it, but they're

always pretty good. And then we always get lunch here. Normally it's just like lunchmeat cold cut sandwiches but I think it's kind of a routine now on Wednesday that that's what you have to eat. Some of the other students and I that work here, on occasion will splurge and order pizza and we usually have to wait a little bit longer because the pizza places are you know, not open at 10:30 in the morning when we're having lunch, so we have to wait a little longer. And then we each get one chicken for working here all day. So the old guys, myself included, and then of course we get free beverages all day long as well.

EH: Nice. Are most of the people who come down here-- do you think they're Serbian?

MK: I do think... the majority of them are Serbian. there are I think-- my personal opinion is that for some of the old guys this is really what keeps them going, you know if it wasn't for this and for chickens, they might be at home, they might still be sleeping just sitting in their chairs. I know that they're very tired at the end of the day when they leave, but I think it is good for them to be out and be surrounded by their friends again and they do have a really good time and I think what happens is you know, they might notice that their friend has recently retired and they say oh, come to chickens with me. So we have a couple non-Serbians that kind of get down here just by knowing somebody or just kind of show up one day and we just love them all the same. (laughs) Of course we tease them for not being Serbian. We can't have a Polish cooking the chickens! But it's all in good fun. (laughs)

EH: And what are the main guys who you work with who are cooking the chickens?

MK: So I consider Mr. Zatezalo, Teddy, to be my boss and I consider him to be like the owner of the picnic grounds just because for him the picnic grounds is not just the place that you go on Wednesday. He comes to the picnic grounds on Monday, comes on Tuesdays, comes on Thursdays, comes on Fridays, comes on Sundays, he's here all the time. So I really consider him to be the person-- oh you know he's the one who got a big thank you card today instead of just a little notecard. He's the one-- I always make sure I say hi, how are you doing. Like what's up today. And then Mr. Kosanovich would be next. I think he knows a lot of people and he is the treasurer of the Men's Club/secretary/18 other hats that he wears. So he's another person I kind of hold in high regard to kind of know what's going on. And then my last friend is Pete Zatezalo, and he is actually Ted's nephew. He's not an old guy--he's only like 50s, but I just clump him with the old guys because I mean it can't be like my young guy--he's not really young either! So I just clump him with my old guys. But he actually sits at the chicken shack with me until 6 o'clock and we sell all the chickens together. So those are the 3 main people that I would think of. But you know during chickens there's--we usually have the same crowd every week, so Mitch is here, George, John, Carl, Gary, Al, Nino, all those guys are here. And we are kind of just like a family. I'm not sure we would all claim each other, but we are, we are a family. Pete? I don't think he was here yet. He was having car trouble today, so he normally gets here about 8 o'clock. He's usually here from 8 o'clock to 10 o'clock in the morning and he gets the bar set up. So he deals with the beer delivery that comes, eats like 6 donuts every morning and he loves the donuts. And then he leaves and he always tells me that he's cutting grass or doing laundry, but in my heart I know that he's taking a nap but I just let him, you know, let him go.

08:34

And then he comes back about 3 o'clock usually and works from 3-6 with me. And then he also stays and closes the picnic grounds, so he sometimes has to kick people out when it's time to go. He cleans up, he locks the gate at the top of the hill, so he's another person that I would hold in high regard to kind of know everything. You know, when it gets dark, he's the one that always turns the lights on under the shelter. He knows where everything is all the time, so... He's a good guy to have around. (laughs)

EH: And is Ted the president of the Men's Club?

MK: Ted is the president of the Men's Club, yes. He has been to my knowledge for quite some time. I'm not always sure if he's particularly happy in that role or maybe they just had this open spot that needed filled and I think he just did it and has kind of run with it but he always makes great strides for the picnic grounds.

EH: So aside from the chicken, you didn't really inherit any other Serbian foods that you ate at home?

MK: I did not. There's a special Serbian bread, it's called pagocha. My mom has never made it but I know that Mr. Zatezalo's wife makes it all the time and a lot of my family members make it all the time. My mom has never made it. I don't really know what's so special about it. I mean for me bread is bread, it's not like a sweet bread, it's not like anything. it's not like a braided bread, it's not anything special, it's literally just a round flat loaf of bread. But that's a Serbian thing! I guess... no...I got nothing. Serbian Christmas is January 7th and it always snows on Serbian Christmas and that's about all I know! Yeah! So, I think it's always on my list to kind of explore more. I mean after all it's a part of who I am. I mean I am Methodist by faith, but I think it would be interesting just to know what they believe and you know, what are some of their other traditions.

EH: Cool. So about 5 o'clock it'll get busy?

MK: Yeah.

EH: Under the pavilion too?

MK: Yes, so about 4:30, 5:00 o'clock, everybody starts rolling in with their picnic baskets, the parking lot will fill up there's usually almost very close to a wreck every Wednesday because everybody wants the first spot up here.

(to customer): How are you today?

Customer 2: Good, 2 for Faulkner, and then one for...

MK: They did, yes... but you're still here.

Customer 2: It'd be okay if they gained a pound or 2. (laughs)

MK: I know, but you know what happened is where we get them from, they...and we thought, our plan was that we could save you until the end of the season and just start next year, but...

Customer 2: We don't care. It's just so you can get you all good...

MK: Okay, 16 dollars...

Customer 2: Keep...

11:33

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EH: Um, yeah well how much longer do you think you'll continue to do this?

MK: I think that I will continue for as long as it continues. So because my grandpa was here, even when I was growing up, before I was even allowed to work at the picnic grounds, that's what we had for dinner, was we had chickens. We used to eat here all the times. This used to be the place where the big slide was and the fun swings. So the picnic grounds has always been a part of my life, and I think for as long as there are old guys here to do the meat of the work, no pun intended, meat of the work, but I think that as long as they're here and we're selling chickens on Wednesday, i will be here.

EH: And you think that will continue--the cooking?

MK: I think everyone wants it to and everyone wishes that it would. Just as a fact of life, our members are getting older. A lot of you know, young people are not staying in this area, they're going where better opportunities are and I can't blame them for that. I was just lucky enough that my opportunity happened to be right here in my hometown. And it's never been on my list to leave Weirton. I thought, you know, I grew up here, I should stay and give something back. And I know that some people don't always think that way, or Oh, I want to get outta here. And they do and they leave and they never come back... except for the annual picnic of course. And I think that it's not our job to judge but to just wish them the best along the way. there are several people... of the old guys here that have grandchildren and I think that... of suitable working age, and I think that most definitely they should be here. They should be here helping, this is what their grandpas do, this is what their family has always done, but I think at the same time, you know, getting a real job where you're making like a solid 8 dollars an hour instead of just here's your chicken, thanks for all your hard work. So I can't really blame them, but I do wish that more people would come and give some time here.

EH: Are there younger people that would know how to do it?

MK: They probably would not know how to do it, but I think that all of the old guys here are very willing to pass on what they know. It might be rough around the edges like you're probably gonna get yelled at when you do it wrong, but you just suck it up and try again the next time. And I think that the old guys kind of come from a generation where you have to prove yourself. So you know, they want to make sure that you're serious about learning this and cooking chickens and you're not just coming for the free beer. So we've had those kinds of workers before. They were all muscle, they were great, but if you couldn't find them, that's because they were at the bar. On you know, cup 27 at 9:30 in the morning. So a couple rough patches here and there, but I think that the old guys would definitely teach people if they were willing.

EH: So yeah, we can talk about this more not in the interview, but we actually have an apprenticeship program where a master artist and in this case it was be one of the old guys who cooks chicken, and a young apprentice-- I mean it doesn't have to be young-- but someone who's learning the trade-- can apply and get a...up to a \$3,000 stipend to do a year long apprenticeship. So if there was a young person like you or someone else who was interested, that's definitely something that they could qualify for.

MK: My only thought there is because we only do chickens in the summer...

EH: That would be okay.

MK: But I know that you know, just because the chickens ends doesn't mean you just don't visit the picnic grounds. You know, when it's wintertime you have to come and make sure the building's not flooded, when it rains a lot you have to come make sure it's not flooded. You know, the grass always needs cut.

EH: And there's the turkeys...

MK: Mmhm--there's the turkeys at Thanksgiving, pigs, the closing party, the opening party. There's always something going on here. This is a pretty good place for rentals as well, so a lot of people have graduation parties, weddings, all kinds of things like that here. And I think that's a big chunk of our income is the rentals, probably even more so than the chickens.

EH: Yeah, I bet. Is there anything you'd like to add?

MK: Um...not right now. I'll probably think of something, but not right now!

EH: Awesome, thank you.

MK: Thank you.

04:48

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END OF INTERVIEW