

Fox Point Oral History Project
Interview With Deborah Norman (As Interviewed By Brent Fujioka)
Conducted at the Rue De L'Espoir, 99 Hope Street, Providence, RI 02906
Thursday, November 18, 2010

Brent Fujioka: This is Brent Fujioka talking to Deborah Norman at her restaurant, the Rue De L'Espoir. The date is November 18 and the time is approximately 9:15 a.m. Just to start, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your personal background: where you grew up, how long you've lived in Providence, your family, etc.

Deborah Norman: I've lived in Providence my entire life. I'm 59 years old. I was born in Providence. My family obviously has lived in Providence, and I went to school at the University of Rhode Island. I graduated in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a minor degree in Music.

Fujioka: How did you acquire the Rue De L'Espoir and how long have you owned and operated the restaurant?

Norman: I have owned the Rue De L'Espoir—I started the Rue De L'Espoir back in 19—actually, we started, I had a partner at the time, we started building the restaurant in 1973, 19—no, 1974, and in this current building on the far side and there was a fire in the building. There were two more stories, and there was a fire in the building and it delayed the project for a whole year. We originally—it was so we eventually opened in 1976, in May of 1976.

Fujioka: What attracted you to the idea of running a business in Providence?

Norman: Well, I graduated with a degree in Psychology. I went out on a job interview after I got my degree. I got a job in the behavioral facility in the state. I was very excited about it and they told me I was going to make \$90 a week. That was back in 1973 and I went home to my mom's house where I was staying and I got very depressed and I said, "well, how the heck am I going to make a living making \$90 a month—a week"? My brother was visiting at the time, and we said, "Hey, there's this really cool bar that just opened up downtown. They're very progressive. They sell Heineken." Now, back in 1973 Heineken was a pretty big deal. It was an imported beer and there wasn't anything like that around. So I said, so I went down, I applied for a job as a cocktail waitress. I got the job and I totally fell in love with the business. And that was the start of my career. The fellow who owned the bar at the time also owned a restaurant. He owned, actually Tortilla Flats at the time. I—From being a cocktail waitress I became manager of the cocktail waitresses, you know, I moved up the food line. I went over and learned the restaurant side of that business over there. I became management over there, and I finally decided that, you know, why should I be doing it, I'd rather be doing it for myself rather than anybody else. So myself and another woman that I knew who was also interested started the business.

Fujioka: What kind of clientele do you primarily service and has it changed over time? Is it primarily people around the neighborhood? Or student? Or—

Norman: It's a real mix. It depends on the day. When we originally started out it was—we drew very heavily from the Brown community. We still do, obviously. But as we added day part, we originally opened up only for dinner. When we added lunch, more business people started coming. When we started opening for breakfast back in 1990, even more business people started coming. So there's a real heterogeneous population that comes depending on the day part that they come. Lots of business people, lots of ladies who lunch, lots of Brown—from the Brown community, the Lifespan community, hospitals, I mean, we get a real cross section of customers.

Fujioka: Do you have any regular customers and—

Norman: Absolutely. How often do they come in? We have one fellow who comes in for breakfast five days a week.

Fujioka: Wow.

Norman: We have people who come in for brunch every week. Lunch, two or three times a week. We have lots of repeat customers. Those people are the backbone of the business.

Fujioka: How would you, I guess, categorize or describe your relationship with them? Is it like you consider them family or is it still a kind of, uh, friends, or is it kind of still a business operator-customer sort of relationship?

Norman: I try—it is a business-client relationship. I haven't—some of the people that I'm friendly with who come to my restaurant, I've been friendly with previously. I don't think that I have, I always manage, and it's been something that I prefer to do, is to keep the business end separate from the social end of it. I think it makes it—for me, my philosophy is that it just makes it kind of convoluted and potentially sticky. You know.

[4:56] Fujioka: What would you say is the most rewarding thing about your job?

Norman: By far, the most rewarding thing is the creativity behind it and seeing the end product that people come to enjoy. I love feeding, you know I have an advertisement out and about right now that says, "I love feeding the village," and it really is true. I love seeing people come in. I've always had this very, kind of quirky relationship with food. It gives me a lot of great pleasure to know that I am at least partially responsible in some way for bringing a little bit of joy in everybody's life in that particular day.

Fujioka: What would you say is potentially the least rewarding thing about your job?

Norman: The least rewarding? There is nothing unrewarding about my job. There really isn't. There are challenges for sure, but I love coming to work every day, and there's nothing unrewarding about it.

Fujioka: How would you define the restaurant's relationship and your relationship to the neighborhood of Fox Point?

Norman: Well, I've been here an awful long time, for 35 years, and I've seen the neighborhood change a great deal with respect to population, with respect to growth, and I think pretty much I'm an anchor over here on this corner.

Fujioka: How would you categorize your relationship with residents in the area? I know that in one of the interviews conducted, for instance, David Craig, who's a resident around here, he mentioned that you were close friends, but I wonder if there was anyone else within the neighborhood who you're friendly with or, how have you established kind of a community in the area?

Norman: Well, I don't know what you consider, well, I'm not close friends with anybody. I used to have some friends who lived in the area, and they've since moved out. But on a personal level, I mean, I do know some people—I don't socialize with anybody in the neighborhood. I mean, David is a good friend because he's next door. [Portion of response removed at participant's request] But, I mean, we have that kind of a relationship, and we share some friends in the neighborhood. But a lot of the people directly in this neighborhood are students. They're students. There are some homeowners, that fellow on the corner who I've known for 35 years, Jack, actually he comes into the restaurant, but he's not a personal friend of mine. I think I have a great relationship with everybody around here. And I think what I've done for the homeowners is I've helped to create better property values. They have to like me for that.

Fujioka: How do you think the fact that the neighborhood is populated more by students affects the sense of community amongst residents? Because there's such a quick turnover among—

Norman: You know what? I don't expand quite anywhere beyond the one block area. I know that Fox Point has a very strong association. I know it's a very large community. But students have always been a part of it as far as I've been around. I mean, it's true that a lot of the Portuguese population has moved. But as far as I've been here for 35 years, there has always been somewhat of a student population, and that may have changed a little bit. But I don't know—I think that the sense of community around here has actually grown because there are new people coming in who really do care about the area. The Portuguese didn't care—I don't want to say they didn't care about the area—they grew up here. It was what they knew and

there wasn't any reason really—it was very homogenous. There wasn't any reason for them to create a community because it already existed in place intrinsically. Now, you know, there's a real heterogeneous population that exists here. I think the need for the association is important.

[9:25] Fujioka: You mentioned earlier that there have been major changes in the area since you first opened. Would you categorize those changes as good or bad or—

Norman: It depends on who you are. For instance, the general location of the area has pushed out the Portuguese people a lot. I mean, it's pushed them—it hasn't pushed them out—it's pushed them further east. Still lots of primary homeowners living on Gano and Ives and all that street, all that kind of stuff. But I think that it's a safer neighborhood than it used to be. I used to live right across the street on 87 John Street. The first night that I moved into the house someone threw a brick into the window. It happened to be the little punky kid who lived across the street from me. He has since grown up, he's an adult. Well, before—backing up, he wound up working for me as a high school kid, you know, washing dishes. In other words, we became friendly, but the neighborhood itself was kind of sketchy. Today, it's not. Not at all.

Fujioka: So to what would you attribute the longevity of your business?

Norman: To what do I—

Fujioka: To what do you attribute the longevity of your business?

Norman: I think I'm very good at what I do. Honestly, I mean, why is it here so long? Because we serve a consistent, affordable, wonderful, delicious product. We've been able to change with the—to evolve with the culinary tastes of the community and of the state, city and state at large, and we've been able to do that. I think that's made us very, very successful.

Fujioka: How would you define the cuisine you serve?

Norman: American bistro.

Fujioka: What is the most popular item on the menu and why do you think people like it so much?

Norman: That's—that's an unfair question. It's too narrow. We have lots of—we have lots of specials on the menu that people would die if we took them off. Too numerous to answer, really, but that's an unfair question. That's a silly question.

Fujioka: What do you make of, what do you feel makes the Rue De L'Espoir stand out to other restaurants in the area?

Norman: Well, we are the only white tablecloth restaurant that serves three meals a day. We serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We set our tables at night with white linen. That sets us apart. We have created a little—I think that there are lots of restaurants that claim to do the same thing, and from menu to menu there's a group of us that really, for the most part, we all serve the same type of cuisine. What sets us apart? It's the longevity of the restaurant. It's the staff, of course. I've got people working for me who have been with me for 20 years. It's that feeling that it really, really is a neighborhood restaurant, that it has a fabulous reputation for serving consistently delicious food at very affordable prices. And it's fun to be here. There's nothing stuffy about it, and a lot of that has to do with the staff. You know, they make it that way.

Fujioka: Given that the restaurant has been here for so long and you have this kind of established reputation within the neighborhood, how do you approach the prospect of marketing the restaurant? Do you still have to, kind of, do that? Or does it, kind of, market itself?

Norman: You always—well, of course it does market itself a bit. Word of mouth is the best advertising, but I have to be in front of the community, in front of my customers on a daily basis. It used to be primarily in print only and radio, now of course, it's on the web and we do some social media advertising, so on and so forth.

Fujioka: So given that, how do you feel the restaurant attracts new customers? Is it primarily through word of mouth or some other method?

Norman: I think, honestly, through word of mouth always. That is the best advertising that any business can have, and it's where I spend--concentrate the most of my advertising dollars on customers who I currently have.

[13:53] Fujioka: How has the advent of new technologies impacted your business? Specifically, things like online reviews where people can just go online and write anything about the restaurant whether it conforms to reality or not. Has that impacted the way that you approach things in any way?

Norman: I honestly will say that, you know, you're talking about Yelp or one of those places, they can be your best friend and they can be your worst enemy, because it is just anybody—average Joe—writing your review, and you don't really know what their motivation is. There's some people who just go on those sites and have a bone to pick or whatnot, and may never have eaten here. It used to bother me a lot when I got reviews that were uncomplimentary, but what it challenged me to do was to take a look at the criticisms and to see if they were valid or not. You can usually tell. So, in some freaky kind of way, it was a tool that I used to help better the place. I had to look at something that I hadn't addressed in a while and I saw it in print, then I would address it. But I don't go on it anymore. I mostly do ignore all of those sites. I'm not interested in what they have to say.

Fujioka: What is your opinion on the rising trend of organic food and why did you decide to become a green business?

Norman: Well, I decided to become a green business because I read an article about four or five years ago about how the restaurant industry has one of the largest carbon footprints in the country, and I decided that there were some simple things that were listed that I could do to change that, and I decided to just take a step forth. I'm not the greenest person on the planet, but I did want to feel like I was making a contribution going in a green kind of way. I'm very proud of that accomplishment, actually, and getting the staff onboard was lots of fun and we're proud about what we do.

Fujioka: Do you feel that Providence as a whole is conducive to green attitudes and has going green changed your business in any way?

Norman: Going green has not changed my business on a day-to-day basis. It's actually saved me a little bit of money, which is a cool thing. That's a bonus. And, you know, has it changed my business? I don't know, honestly, people come in because it's a green restaurant or not. If I'm dining, it's not a defining decision maker for me, you know. But some people feel that way and that's fine if that's something that's going to, you know, help them to make a decision about where they want to eat. But I honestly, I think it's just, it's not the kind of thing I did to feel good outside. It's the kind of thing I did to feel good inside, and I feel very good about the effort that we're making.

Fujioka: Do you feel that businesses and restaurants going green is like a rising trend, so you're at the head end of something that will happen to all restaurants eventually, and that you—

Norman: I don't know whether there will be legislation about—for it. I think that's probably not going to happen and I don't think it should happen, but I was one of the first restaurants that I'm aware of in Rhode Island that took a very aggressive stand on trying to be green.

Fujioka: I actually have a question about ingredients as well. And you know, where do you procure the ingredients that you use in the food. Is it primarily locally grown or, I mean, do you get it from local farmers and fishermen, or is it more brought in from other parts of the country?

Norman: It depends on the product. I try to buy as local as possible, as affordable as well. And so much of it is seasonal, so a lot of my produce is local, really, local-local, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, during the summer. I also consider local almost New England, because that's pretty local, and so I try to buy local as often as I can where it makes sense. There are some things that I can't do. It's just too expensive for me in some instances to do that—to be able to maintain my price points. But wherever

possible, I try to do that. If it's not local-local, then it's humanely raised somewhere else.

Fujioka: Does the fact that some of these ingredients are seasonal affect what's on the menu? I mean, does it change depending on what ingredients you can procure?

Norman: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Fujioka: I was also wondering if you could talk a little bit about your views on your employees, like how do you approach the practice of managing the people who work for you?

Norman: Well, let me see. I try to train them in such a way so that they're always placed in the position to succeed. I try to illustrate good citizenship. I really, really feel that they take the lead of the behavior and the comportment of the person on the top, so I'm always trying to set a good example. I'm always trying to make decisions—business decisions—that are reasonable, that make sense, that are sensible, and to treat them with great respect because they have a very hard job.

[20:10] Fujioka: Are your employees residents of the area?

Norman: You mean, Fox Point? Some are, some aren't.

Fujioka: Was that a conscious effort on your part in terms of hiring?

Norman: No.

Fujioka: What are your views on delivery services and have you ever considered it as a way to increase your business?

Norman: Delivery? You mean, like take, like—no. I have another restaurant down in the Jewelry District and we do a lot of delivery down there. Cause there's more offices and things like this, but we don't deliver. People can come in and pick up though.

Fujioka: Are there tourists that visit the restaurant?

Norman: Sure.

Fujioka: And do you find that it's a popular location for most tourists because it has that established reputation?

Norman: Absolutely not. I have no idea why tourists come. You know, I know that we've advertised in some airlines stuff over the years, but if they come it's because of a referral. It's because they're coming with someone they know who lives here. It's because they may have heard it's fun to be at, or they've read a review online. I

man, most people come—it's not like Hope Street down in Fox Point is a Mecca for tourism, so, and with the advent of the internet, it's easy to get reviews. You know, probably that's why. We don't do any advertising to try to draw them in, really.

Fujioka: Has your business been affected in any way by the current economic crisis?

Norman: Oh, yeah. We're coming out of it now. I had a little bit of a downturn, no actually, I didn't. I never had a downturn. I just had less of an increase for the last three years, but now, we seem to be coming out of it. It's reflected in my business and I can see it.

Fujioka: Based on what you've seen as a business owner in the area, has it affected the community in any visible way?

Norman: Well, only in the sense that they go out to eat less. Sure.

Fujioka: Are you or your business involved with any community outreach activities?

Norman: No. We used to do some cooking for Tockwotton House. Once a month we'd bring a meal over there, and we liked doing that very, very much. We did it for about five or six years. Then the personnel changed and for some reason it was something that they didn't want to continue. Never really understood why, but, so that happened and we haven't done anything else. Let me think. No, I don't think so.

Fujioka: What is your relationship like with Brown University? Just kind of the institution more than the students and is it a positive or negative influence? Or is it kind of just neutral where there's—

Norman: No, we are one of the accredited, not accredited but, we are one of the caterer spots that, one of the restaurants, that Brown University approves, so that when they need to send conference people or whatever, people of that ilk, they need to send somebody to a restaurant and they're paying the bill, then we are one of those. I think we're on a list—a very short list of five or ten restaurants. We're one of those people on the list. My other restaurant also is on the list as well. So we do have a very nice relationship with them for that reason, plus we draw from the area all the time.

Fujioka: Do you find that a lot of not just students, but maybe faculty and administrators also—

Norman: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Fujioka: On a personal note, where do you like to spend your free time in Providence? Or within the area?

Norman: What do I do? I row on the river. I'm a member of the Narragansett Boat Club I row down there. My free time, a lot of my free time is really just spent—I don't have a lot of free time, number one. But a lot of it is spent at home with my wife and my kids, so that's important to me to spend time there.

[24:44] Fujioka: And lastly, just kind of looking into the future, what do you think things will be like ten years from now, both for your business and for the community at large?

Norman: Oh, I hope I'm retired, frankly. Gosh, if I could look into my crystal ball and know the answer to that question, I would be a very rich woman, I think. I think it's only—you know, I think we've gone through some dark days right now. I think you can't predict what's going to happen over the next ten years, but I can confidently say that over the next five years, the economy is going to get better, business will get better, there's always the growth of the city will increase. We have a wonderful mayor coming in and we're hoping he does some great things. I have a very positive outlook in Providence about what's going to happen, and Fox Point in general, we kind of plod along. We plod along. Little by little, you'll see that Ives Street used to be a real—every other building on Ives Street used to be boarded up. Now there's a business area down there that's being built and thriving, and it's so wonderful to see it. If you give it enough time, I guess everything starts to come back again. New people are coming in, young people are coming in who want to do stuff like that, who want to enliven and regenerate the community, and I think that's where all of that happens, with the young people. I'm not considered a young person anymore. I'm 59, but I was here when I was 22.

Fujioka: Do you find that that's kind of the historical pattern, you know, where young people constantly, you know, flow into areas like this?

Norman: Absolutely. And the reason that it is, is number one, they get a lot more for their dollar. They have the energy. They have the ambition. And I think that's exactly why.

Fujioka: So that's basically all I have for the interview. Do you have any final thoughts or comments that you'd like to share?

Norman: No. I don't, but I do want to know what kind of project this is that you're doing. More specifically.

Fujioka: This is just an oral history project for, well, Brown University is managing through Anne Valk, this oral history project about Fox Point, and just trying to preserve accounts about the neighborhood, and trying to document, sort of, histories of people within the neighborhood, and community members, and just longtime residents, and established businesses as well and institutions within the neighborhood, and all of these accounts will be held in an archive that will be kept

by Brown University for future research that people might want to do in the area. And you know—

Norman: I mean, just on my little block, I just want to say because we didn't even talk about this, and maybe I should have but just on my block alone, when I first opened, there wasn't a Cumberland Farms over there. I don't really remember what there was there. There was a Portuguese family-run laundry that was over there, right across the street. And the school, the French American school wasn't there. That was just a boarded up building. Nothing existed in that space that I can remember. The church has always been there, of course. It's been a landmark. But, you know, 35 years later you see—and it's happened gradually—but, now, you know there's businesses across the street and there's this business here, and a little bit further down there's another few businesses, and there were never anything like that. So, I have actually firsthand seen a lot of, well, I've seen firsthand a lot of changes going on anyway, because 35 years is a long time. It really, really, really is. And, you know, like I said earlier, when I came here, the neighborhood was kind of sketchy, and it didn't always feel safe, especially the further down you went to the river. Nobody really—I never really wanted to be down there. It didn't feel safe to me. But, you know, like I said, 35 years is a long time and it's—this particular neighborhood is really starting to grow up again.

Fujioka: Would you say that businesses and the proliferation of businesses in the area has helped contribute to the rejuvenation of the community?

Norman: It's hard to know what comes first. It's hard to know if the businesses draw the people to the area, or if the people coming into the area draw the businesses. It's a real chicken and egg type of thing. I don't know. I don't know. I know that—I'd like to think that I'm one of the—I don't think I bring people into the area per se to live. I certainly bring people into the area to eat and to visit, but what I may have created is a sense of, if I can survive here, then why can't someone down the street survive and do a business as well. I think maybe that's, if anything, if I've contributed in any way, that may be one of the ways.

Fujioka: Well, so that's the end of the interview. Thank you—

Norman: You're welcome.

Fujioka: You know for coming in and—

Norman: I'm here.

[Laughter]

Fujioka: Well, for taking some time off to talk to me, and I appreciate it very much.

Norman: All right.