

Back of House: Kitchen Workers in Central Ohio
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2017
Occupational Folklife Project || American Folklife Center

Interviewee: Juan Carlos ‘Armanii’ Soriano [Worker, La Poblanita Food Truck]

Interviewer: Jess Lamar Reece Holler

Date of Interview: Thursday, June 14th, 2018

**Location: La Poblanita Food Truck’s Picnic Table -- Along Indianola Avenue; Clintonville
// Columbus, Ohio**

SOUND QUALITY NOTE: *The interview takes place, by the interviewee’s request, after close immediately at the picnic table (for customers) outside the stable location of La Poblanita Food Truck, right along busy Indianola Avenue in the Clintonville neighborhood on the North side of Columbus, Ohio. As such, we pick up quite a bit of traffic noise from Indianola (which is maybe five feet behind Armanii); and also noise from a nearby train track. Several trains go by during the course of the interview.*

INTERVIEW NOTE: *This interview is also abbreviated; Armanii originally had less than an hour to talk, but he generously agreed to continue speaking to finish out his story. But, because the interview is shorter than others, significant swathes of his and his family’s stories, and discussion of occupational and material culture on the truck, are more condensed than they might be in more luxurious encounters.*

Interview Index

00:00:00 -- Introductory Slate // Interview Lede

00:01:00 -- Early Life & Childhood: Growing Up in Chicago; Leaving Chicago to Avoid Gang Violence

- Armanii describes growing up in a Mexican-Italian family in Chicago; and growing up on the South Side of Chicago, near the epicenter of what Armanii describes as lots of gang violence
- 00:04:00 -- Armanii describes his parents’ experience being held-up and robbed at gun-point
- Family “moved around alot ... made a lot of friends; lost alot of friends along the way ... you get that feeling that everything is temporary; and you’re just along for the ride.” Family lived in Virginia (younger brother Leo born there); Providence, Rhode Island (where Armanii’s dad’s family lives)
- 00:06:00 -- Armanii shares about connecting with Newport, Rhode Island, where his dad started off washing dishes when he came to the U.S.
- 00:07:03 -- Armanii discusses his parents’ journeys to the U.S.; and following his dad’s cousin, eventually, to Columbus
- Renting out a single room as a whole family; Armanii shares that his family didn’t get their first apartment until around five years after they’d arrived in Columbus

00:08:22 -- Life in Columbus & Family Work Cultures // Family Food Cultures & Mom’s Cooking

- Armanii discusses his family's cultural belief that, traditionally, only the man should work out of the home, and should come home to a housewife; so, for a long time, only his dad worked
- Armanii discusses the language barrier his dad faced to finding work; and eventually worked in construction, and then launched his own business as an independent contractor after a couple of years in the U.S.; as a result of this, his family was able to buy their own house (Armanii was in elementary school; "I remember, we were so broke at the time, we didn't even get to celebrate my birthday; because we had just bought the house, so all our money went into the house. So, we have very humble beginnings ...")
- 00:10:14 -- Armanii discusses his mom's journey into the U.S.; working at a family-owned business called Los Comales, which has now become one of the biggest taco franchises in Chicago; "it's like the go-to spot"; when his mom worked there (at seventeen), it was a two-story, twenty-four-hour business; "She was a waitress there ... that's where she learned *everything* ... when it comes to Mexican food, the whole cuisine, how to prep salsas, the meats ... that's where she learned a lot of recipes; just: the whole taste, of everything. It all originates from Los Comales." Armanii describes his mom's connection with the owner, purchasing her own car. "This all wouldn't have been possible without her working there, because that's where she got a good eye ... a good taste ... of her signature style."
- 00:12:00 -- Armanii describes his mom's gift for cooking and knowing, from an early age, that she'd someday do something in the restaurant industry; watching television shows and preparing dishes; "I already knew -- she had gold in her fingertips. It's crazy."
- 00:13:40 -- Armanii shares that his mom is a three-time breast-cancer survivor, and describes his fear and pain watching her battle cancer throughout his childhood; "That's one of the main things that terrified me, growing up -- just, losing her. But, she made it, Thank God."
- 00:14:00 -- Armanii describes his parents' divorce and the difficulty of that experience, especially as a first-generation family; and his own difficulties growing up without the benefit of parents or family members who had been in the U.S. for a long period of time, "I had no mentors, I had no guidance, I had no one to help me with homework ... it was tough."
- 00:15:40 -- Armanii discusses how hard his parents work; and his parents' efforts to help others in the community; discussion of his parents' dedication and passion

00:16:00 -- Origins of the Food Truck // Food Truck Culture // Being at the Beechwold Barber Shop

- Armanii discusses the early days of the food truck, and its installation at its previous location, outside a dry cleaner // laundromat (no bathroom, etc.)
- Discussion of La Poblanita's relationship with Beechwold Barber Shop
- 00:18:00 -- Armanii discusses his mom's search for income after his parents' divorce so that she could save the house for his little brothers; she reached out to project managers and began selling tamales at construction projects where Mexican and South American workers tended to be and started "making a killing"; then, people started complaining that she didn't have the proper licenses (00:21:24), and shut her down
- 00:22:30 -- His mother's purchase of a small trailer for her first food truck; doing all of this launch-work without being connected to the wider Columbus small food business incubator community; "she did everything on her own will ... I couldn't even tell you how she did half

the things she did, to get this thing up and running. There was so much behind it, that went into it.”

- 00:25:00 -- Early struggles, and Armanii’s experience working on the smaller truck as soon as it was up and running; difficulties of making good money, depending on the location
- 00:27:00 -- Narrative about encountering racist customers when the truck set up across from the family’s home, on the West Side, near Briggs High School // on Briggs Road -- “People play about racism; and I didn’t think it was still a thing; but it’s very much still alive. Especially now, with Trump being President ... it kind of reassured everyone: it’s still alive. It’s OK for it to still be alive. I don’t know. It was crazy ... that lady ... made us go thru hell, pretty much. All my brothers ... they would go to school worried about what my mom was going to encounter, if she was going to be safe. I would go to school worried, if my mom was going to be safe; and I would always rush off, to make sure that she was safe. And she would always tell me, ‘Today she did this; today she came over here and said all these nasty things, and she brought her husband, and her son, and they started saying nasty things ...’”

00:31:00 -- Moving to Clintonville: the Laundromat, and then Beechwold Barber Shop

- 00:31:00 -- Moving to Clintonville, near a dealership and a laundromat; “Spanish ladies” at a dealership recommended that the truck come in, because there’s only a Burger King for food along this entire strip of Indianola, but there’s a huge factory here (the Marzetti salad dressing factory)
- 00:33:50 -- Setting up contact with the owner of the barbershop; relationship with Susie, at Beechwold Barber Shop; “Susie, the owner, being a businesswoman -- she’s very smart. And she gave my mom an opportunity to set up at this location. And this has become our iconic location; we’ve basically become Clintonville itself; we’re known as the Clintonville food truck. The big yellow Clintonville food truck.”
- 00:35:00 -- Relationships with neighboring schools on this block of Indianola; exposing local students to authentic Mexican food

00:36:30 -- Material Culture: La Poblanita Food Truck Itself

- Armanii describes he and his mom’s purchase of and conversion of a horse trailer, which has become their current food truck
- 00:38:30 -- Setting up the interior of the food truck, to regulation; getting help in setting up the food truck
- 00:39:40 -- Origins of the name, “La Poblanita”; Armanii’s parents are from Puebla
- 00:40:30 -- Armanii describes the mural (his design) on the side of La Poblanita truck; representing his mom as the American dream, between “both of those worlds”; “...she made it, and she did it the right way. There are people who come here, and they turn into criminals, and they go on the wrong path ... but not everyone can just follow their dreams, and overcome every obstacle that comes with entering a new country, a new lifestyle ... no education, no nothing. I feel like I’ve seen her overcome so many things; and I feel like this woman: ... is unstoppable.” Discussion of his mom’s tradition dress in the truck’s mural, and in La Poblanita icon; his aunt made the outfit herself.

00:45:00 -- Work Culture on the Food Truck; Working Alongside Family Members // “Working the Window” and Delivering a Good Customer Experience

- Armanii describes working on the food truck alongside his brothers, who have all worked on the truck “since day one,” since they were in high school; “it’s been amazing ... some of the best memories I’ll ever hold. I never thought I would create a business with my mom, my brothers ... and everyone who works with us is family.”
- 00:46:20 -- Roles/responsibilities on the truck
- 00:47:00 -- Armanii’s social attitudes and learning “front-of-house” customer service roles required for the truck; past experiences working in the corporate world and as a supervisor; “I do that every day, here ... it all helped me become such a good customer service rep, when it comes to working the window ... we like to give people an experience, a feeling ...” // Customer service and “window work”
- 00:48:50 -- Armanii discusses La Poblanita’s regulars and connections with diverse customers; reflections on the culture and community of Clintonville; and being surprised how many people are “well-rounded” and speak Spanish

00:51:00 -- La Poblanita’s Menu & Preparation On the Truck: The Back-of-House Line

- Discussion of the full menu, combo offerings, dinner platters, and specials; weekend tamales
- 00:53:30 -- Gluten-free and vegetarian offerings; specialty meats; “clean eating”
- 00:54:30 -- A La Poblanita order: from window-to-window; space, set-up and routine back-of-house in the truck; Armanii recommends the movie *The Founder*
- 00:56:00 -- Discussion of before-open prep (4-5 hours); “We open at 11; but our day starts at 7 in the morning ... so, we’re in their prepping, chopping up fresh veggies every day; marinating and seasoning stuff, pre-cooking stuff ... but she just likes to have it fresh. And I think that’s just what every restaurant likes to offer ... she definitely doesn’t try to take shortcuts at all.”
- 00:57:30 -- Description of the different stations on the truck : grill, toppings, bagging the orders; requires five staff members, “... but, we try to make it work, with three or four”
- 00:58:00 -- Discussion of family staff and non-family staff; “We’re like family ... blood couldn’t make us any more thick”; Armanii discusses being able to give non-family members and other kids in high-school, especially bilingual kids, the opportunity to work the window. Narrative about a bilingual employee who “killed it” at the window because of her fluency in both languages; hiring a neighbor, Nick; “... he’s that kid ... who calls my mom ‘mom,’ too.”

00:01:00 -- Handling Wages, as a Family Employee on the Truck; Finding Success

- [Recording cuts out due to a full card; recording resumes after an old recording is deleted.]
- [New lede // intro to Part 2 of the recording]
- Armanii describes watching the success of the truck, without marketing or promotion; “our whole traffic has just been word-of-mouth”
- Lessons from working with family and learning responsibility; “... at the end of the day, family is family; and you’re just happy to be with your family. To see my mom happy and active, after surviving cancer three times, is just a miracle and a blessing. It’s just been an

honor to watch her ... create her own legacy. Everyone will talk about this food truck ... forever. Everyone who had the chance to try it.”

- 00:04:30 – Connection with other food trucks in Columbus; being a stationary (-vs.- a mobile) food truck and commitment to consistency; “we’ve keep it exclusive, in that way.”
- 00:06:03 – Catering client weddings and deepening connections in the Columbus community; plans for using the original food trailer to become involved in festivals and the Ohio State Fair; “... we want to not have to shut down.”
- 00:07:00 -- Hiring decisions and managing a growing team
- 00:09:00 -- Reflections on the difficulty of Armanii’s childhood; his parents’ path to citizenship and discussion of fear of deportations for immigrant families; “... everyone comes here looking for a better future, a better life; but not everyone gets the chance. It’s one thing to get here; it’s another thing to be able to pursue that ... I just hope my mom’s story motivates people ... my parents come from nothing; they literally come from nothing ...”; reflections on the hard work ethic of Mexican and Hispanic immigrants

00:12:00 (Pt. 2) — Concluding Slate, Thanks & Goodbyes