

LEAH CHASE – DOOKY CHASE RESTAURANT NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Ok, Miss Leah, could you just state your name?

Yeah, I'm Leah Chase, I'm the chef here and owner of Dooky Chase's restaurant. And I've been here for about 71 years [laughing], long time. I've been in that kitchen since 1946. Yeah, it's a long time.

So let's talk about how you started. I know you were one of what, 14 children?

Yes. I'm the...well I had a sister older than me but she died and then I'm the oldest of all the rest of those children. My mother had 14 children, she raised eleven of us, yeah. And all eleven of us was living until maybe two, three years ago when I lost two sisters and a brother but...my mother had 14 children, 12 girls before she had a boy. So I came up, being able to take care of self, for one thing. When you come up through the Depression like I did, you learn to take care of self, particularly if you have all those coming behind you. You have to be able to move and move and move.

So you left your home and you came to New Orleans so that you could go to school, right?

Yeah, because there was no high school in Madisonville for blacks, there was none in Covington, there were high schools for white but none for black and my daddy was so Catholic, we had to go to Catholic school, so I had to come here and be taught under the same sisters that taught me in Madisonville, the Sisters of the Holy Family. And they were teaching nuns, so I came here and went to St. Mary's Academy. And would you believe, I was 12 years old.

You were in high school at 12 years old? Wow. You were smart.

I don't know my daddy pushed us hard. *Do this, do that...* he just pushed us hard because we were girls I guess. His brothers used to criticize him for having all those girls. *They were not going to do this and they were not going to do that because they were girls. So we had to prove ourselves and that's what we did.*

Talk about, before you left, the importance of the white table cloth. Because when you grew up in Madisonville I read that you always ate on a starched...

You know when I grew up in Madisonville, people, no matter how poor they were, and we were *poor*. You know, the Depression was in 1929, I was born in 1923, so I was six years old and from '29, we didn't get over that until '39, '40, '41 really, when the war started. Then we started seeing daylight. But, something about it, my mother taught us how to appreciate things even though you couldn't afford it, but you could appreciate what you saw other people have. You could appreciate that. You didn't necessarily have to have it. Now in the weekdays, we ate all together. And we had...it's plastic now, then it was oil cloth, a shiny thing with a canvas back. That was your table, but on Sundays you had a starched and ironed table cloth, but you know what the table cloth was made out of? Flour sacks. We got the flour living in the country. You don't have a corner grocery to run to, so when we got any kind of money, we bought food like flour by the 100 pound sacks and so we had to wash it all out and get it cleaned up, bleach it. My mother sewed them together, starch 'em

and iron 'em, embroidered the corners, crochet around it, so you would have a table cloth on Sundays. That was important. So I came up knowing things that I couldn't afford but learning to appreciate things that you can't afford. And I think people should do that. [It] matters little if you own it. I don't have to own it, I can appreciate you having it. Just looking at you having it and knowing that it is there. And if I want to strive to reach that goal, then I do so but I've got to appreciate the culture, how things are done. And that's what we did. We had plates that we got for coupons, you know, years ago they had soap with a coupon and milk with a coupon, you saved it and so many coupons got you a plate. You're too young to know that. So we would save the coupon to get a plate, until you got enough plates to serve everybody and that was your good stuff. You had that on Sundays.

So you see I came up appreciating things, appreciating how you do things. That's why I'm having the trouble with today.

You think people don't appreciate the...

They don't appreciate anything.

Everything has been so easy maybe...

Or everything is... "good enough." Or "I'm good enough." It's something you ought to do, you ought to appreciate that. Now my mother would kill us if we dared to put a glass on a piano on a piece of furniture? No we couldn't do that.

In my house, with my grandmother, we would never...

...the same way

...never, never...

That's the way they brought you up to appreciate things, even though you couldn't afford it, even though you were segregated against, but you knew how to appreciate everything.

It must have been so hard though, leaving your home at 12.

It was.

And then being in New Orleans must have been such a culture shock...

I hated it. I hated it [laughing]. I lived with my aunt who didn't have children so I had no family with me, no support there. I had to just wing it on my own.

How did you meet Edgar "Dooky"?

[Laughing] Well I was older then, when I met Dooky. I wasn't married, naturally and Dooky was a musician, the funny part is that I hated musicians [laughing]. I thought they were a waste of time and that they were crazy, this, that, and the other. I liked people with emotional and physical strength. I liked boxers, I liked people with some kind of strength. And musicians...

You were a bookie for boxers. Tell me about that, how did that happen?

On the way in life, like I was I had to make my own way, because my mother had the other children behind me. So I had to feel my own way out. So you try this. *Oh, I like boxing, maybe I can manage one.*

How many women were doing that at that time?

I don't know.

Not many, I can't imagine.

None.

How did you fall into...did you know someone who helped you out, or...

...I just got around, I had to get around for myself and feel my way around the people. Of course, sometimes it wasn't the right way to go.

But you learn and you course correct, right?

I had to learn it on my own. And I learned, *no, this is not going to work for you, Leab. This is not going to get you where you're going. It's not going to get you anything.* I worked on a racehorse board. I learned to walk the horses, the bookie, and all that. *No Leab, that's not going to work.* [laughing] *Not going to work.* And then I went to work as a waiter in the French Quarter. Didn't know one thing about, not a thing...I was as green as grass.

How old were you?

18 years old. The lady took me in and this is the way you answer, you looked in the paper for a job. The ad that I went to and applied from this ad, the ad said, "Light-skinned colored girl." That's the way the ad read in the paper. That's what they were looking for. You looked in the paper and you saw, you looked where they were needing people to wait tables, to cook, do this, that and the other. That's the way they described it. I want a dark-skinned man, strength...blah, blah, blah, blah. In my case, they were looking for a light-skinned colored girl. Well, I didn't fit the description. I wasn't light-skinned, but I said I'll take a chance. And that's how I got to work for this woman who really taught me how to wait tables, taught me everything about the restaurant business....

[We have to move the camera because customers just sat in the table in the background]

[11:40]

You know, and being poor they had black people, a few black people who were doctors, or they had some kind of education, I couldn't get anymore than high school because I had to go to work so the next one behind me could get as far or as further than I did. By the time we got to the end of that [inaudible] you got college but I was the one that didn't get it, so I had to fend for myself. My mother taught me everything...my mother was strict on us speaking correctly...everything, but we

didn't have anything. We were so...in those days people didn't look at you if you were poor. They kind of ignored you if you were poor. You know today I laugh all the time. I said, "You know what? I think maybe the worst thing they did was dignify poverty. If you were poor when I came up. You were nothing. So I had to fight poverty more than segregation. I didn't have any money to go and buy anything so I was never refused anything because I couldn't be there. I didn't have the money. So I had to fight poverty. Get out of this poverty cycle. My daddy used to tell us, "Just get a job. Go to work. Go to work. So you can get up and get out of [poverty]." So that what I had to do.

So when you worked at the restaurant in the French Quarter, what was the name of it?

The first restaurant...this lady owned. It was called the "Colonial Restaurant." It was on Chartres and St. Peter, around that, Chartres and something around there. I went to work there and didn't know anything about anything and never been in the inside of a restaurant in my life. So she had to teach me everything. But I liked it. I liked what I was doing. Now my family, like my uncles, they all worked and my aunts they worked in sewing factories. Creoles of color, particularly were great artists. They sewed, they cooked, they did all those things. But they didn't even appreciate what they were doing themselves. It was earning a living. It wasn't a master thing. They didn't realize, how important, what they were doing, you know to uplift themselves.

There are people in the restaurant world...it's in your bones.

Uh huh, it's in your bones. And then black people did not eat out. They cooked at home. See they had no restaurants, nice restaurants. Dooky Chase's restaurant, in this city, one of the first restaurants where people felt comfortable particularly the so called "Creoles of Color". It was owned by my mother-in-law and my father-in-law and they kept a tight ship. My father-in-law, you couldn't talk too loud, you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that. So people felt comfortable coming here to sit down. And the thing is when they came out, they didn't particularly come to eat because they cooked at home. They came to have some drinks, entertain themselves and in the meantime, order a sandwich to accompany the drinks.

Because it was originally a PoBoy shop, right?

Uh huh.

And you married Dooky in 1946? And so how soon after did you start working in the restaurant?

In '46, well I had worked in the French Quarter since 1941. So I knew what went on in restaurants. There were black people who didn't even know what a shrimp cocktail was. And they had ketchup and hot sauce on the table. No. Get that off the table. No. We're not going to have ketchup and hot sauce on the table. Get it off.

I heard that...did you really slap Barack Obama's hand? [laughing]

Obama. Poor dog. He came and he said, "I'm going to have some chicken." [He was] always running, always in a rush. So he sat down. I said "I'm going to serve you gumbo, and you can take your chicken on plane." So here I come with a bowl of gumbo and here he is with the Tabasco sauce. I said, "You don't put hot stuff in my gumbo!" [laughing]...before I realized...I'm a hittin' kind of person. I will hit in a minute. That's why I have to be very careful today. You can't do that

[laughing]. You can't hit 'em today. But those old girls used to say, "Ms. Chase. Don't hit me. Please don't hit me." [laughing].

I think Barack Obama probably feels special that you hit him. He'll probably remember that the rest of his life.

[still laughing] I can't, I can't....so the whole neighborhood found out that, and across the street is the housing units and they said, "That's right Ms. Dooky. You told him right, don't mess up your gumbo!" [laughing] But he was such a smart man, such a kind man, and just so humble and so...he was an unbelievable man.

[18:10]

I had someone come and visit me from Dubai one time. And he said one thing, "This man should go down in history as one of your best Presidents your country has ever had." Because he was so even keeled, brilliant man, smart man, knew what to do and *appreciated* what he had done, appreciated *I'm in this White House*, which was a glorious thing to everybody. My God, I went into the White House, I thought I was in Heaven. Who would ever think that *I* would be in the White House. That was so important to everybody then. Now, nothing. Nothing.

But you have to appreciate things and appreciate people most of all. No matter who they are. They are worth something. Sometimes you have to keep talking to them, bring their worth out, do whatever you have to do. But you have to make them feel like they're worth something. That was always my problem, trying to uplift people. I served all the Freedom Riders gumbo and chicken and then they went out on their job [inaudible] those who could come back, came back, but that was my job.

[19:50]

I read Thurgood Marshall was here...

Thurgood Marshall, James Baldwin, Jim Forman, everybody, Martin Luther King, Big Daddy King.

I heard they would use this space to strategize the next part of the movement?

You know when you do things, you didn't have cameras like you have today. Phones with camera and cameras all over the place. You didn't have that. And when you do the thing, you don't have time to write down what you're doing. You do what you think you have to do. This is what Dooky and I had to do. These people were out there going to jail so they could make a difference with us. We had tried with Thurgood and the NAACP, wasn't going to work. The movement was too slow. But A. P. Tureaud, Thurgood Marshall, Daniel Byrd...Those people thought they could integrate that whole thing without offending the white people. Now you are not going to do that. And here come these young people. They don't care who they offend. They are just going over doors, ready or not ready, we're trying. Thank God they did. They made some mistakes and maybe people my age were not as supportive as we should have been. But we didn't know. And we were afraid to lose whatever little gain we had made. So we were afraid to with them. And the strange thing about this place and Rudy Lombard, before he died, always said that this place was a safe haven for all of them. Not one time, in any of those meetings that a police ever entered this door. Now isn't that strange. Not one time.

I remember reading, in the early days, maybe it was just when you served Po'boys, but you used to have a lot of the black laborers who worked on the Mississippi River, would come here and cash their checks?

They'd cash their checks.

How did that start happening? Because there were no banks [that would serve them], right?

They would cash their check. And my mother-in-law would sit, this is the funniest thing, she would sit out there on the bar with a cigar box, those cigars that came in a wooden box. She might have six, seven thousand dollars in a wooden box, just sitting out there and they cashed their checks. She cashed their checks. So after they cashed their checks they would buy some drinks on the bar. They would bring a sandwich home to their family. All that kind of thing. But nobody ever touched her or ever did anything to her. But she was really kind to everybody. I don't know why but police never bothered her. But you know at that time, we didn't have black policemen, they were all white. And sometimes the policeman, would have whatever, this was their beef, she would call them in. Come on baby, I'm going to make you a little sandwich. Now today they would call that bribery. That's just the way she was. She [thought] here you're doing a job to help me, I'm going to treat you to a little sandwich. And a root beer or something. Maybe that's why they didn't [do anything to us], but they never bothered anybody. And once they got in this building, policemen never, ever bothered us.

But the restaurant...you were in a good place with the business, but was it ever integrated in the early days, because it was illegal, right?

In the early days it was illegal, but if you had to meet when got all registered and was able to vote, this was the only place you could meet. The whites had to come here to talk to the people they wanted to vote for them. So you see, they would come in here. If you were white and you were running for something this was a place you could talk to black people, to ask them to vote for you and you were able to vote. So we always had integration. Don't know how we did it, but we just did it. You had people like Jim Dombroski who was trained at the Highlander School in Tennessee. That was a school that was training people to be what we called passive people who just did things and made differences without causing any disturbances, without any riot. We didn't have all that. They just did what they had to do. And Jim Dombroski...Rosa Parks went to that school. She went to the Highlander School. She was trained to be that. Just to be a non-violent protester. And that's the way those people started. But when you do things like that honey...you don't...I do things today and I just do them. I don't think it's so glorious. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. My job on this earth is to uplift people. My job on this earth is to make everybody feel their worth. Don't care who you are or who you look like, or what you look like. You know as a Catholic, we were taught that man was made to the image and likeness of God. Look at some people and they don't look like God. *You don't look like God but let me look again [laughing]*. So if you look again at a person, you'll find something good in that person.

That's so beautiful.

Something good in that person...I have a picture drawn by my grandson of Tupac Shakur. I didn't know Tupac. I never fed him. I fed whoever this "Shug" is, I fed him and he was supposed to be big, tough, this...I never had a problem with him. "Sit down in my chair. I'm gonna feed you. Take

off your hat. Do what you gotta do.” I never had a problem to do that. But I kept Tupac...one day I went to an art show. And the professor told the students. Bring anything in your house that you think is art. A poem, a piece of furniture, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I looked on the wall. Somebody had brought a poem. The most beautiful thing I had ever read. I’m mad at myself for not getting a copy of that. And when I looked at the man who wrote it. Tupac Shakur. This man was brilliant. Where did we lose him? Because we just looked at his outer appearance. We didn’t try to look deeper into him. He was brilliant. He was a smart man. Just got off on the wrong foot.

[28:20]

Well you have an affinity for art.

Yes.

When was your decision to basically have an art gallery in your restaurant?

Well I had a friend named Solistine Cook [assumed spelling]. She on the museum board. She was the first African American to sit on that board. And she said, “Leah, look at this.” When she got off the board, she had to rotate off after three years. She said, “I’m going to put your name up.” Oh, I say “Solistine I don’t know that. I don’t know anything about art, Solistine Don’t put me there.” She said, “You will be there. I will put you there because you don’t know what this will do for your business.” She said, “Think about your business and what this will do for your business.” So I got on the board. And the funny thing about it, the Chairman of that board was an attorney, a prominent attorney in this city. That attorney...you know if you come tied with a name, then the Chairman has to vote. So my name came up tied with a very wealthy, knowledgeable Jewish man. So when he had to vote and break that tie, he voted for me. I thought that was gutsy. Here I am a black woman with nothing. No knowledge of the arts, no knowledge of nothing and he voted for me against this Jewish man who was brilliant, had the money and all the knowledge of art. But I was always proud of that man because he had a vision that I have to do something to move black people up and this is what I’m going to do.

He saw it in you. Disney saw something in you. They tailored their first African American princess after you. How did you learn about that?

It makes me wonder what did I do to deserve it? What did I do to deserve this? I’m just doing what I’ve been put on earth to do. Do my work. Uplift people. Maybe sometimes call them a stupid jack ass [laughing] but still trying to lift them up.

Talk about Michael Jackson. He liked your peach cobbler?

He liked my sweet potato pie.

Oh sweet potato pie.

Michael, I fed him when he was a little boy. Last time I saw Michael he was about 14 years old and I didn’t see him anymore. I saw the brothers, Jermaine and Tito and all those people, but Michael, I never saw him anymore. When Michael died that really hit me hard because the bodyguard that he had when he came to New Orleans would go to visit him in California and I would send Michael

sweet potato pies. So I never sent Michael a sweet potato pie in a long time, and I got upset. I couldn't figure out where was your mother, Michael? When you needed somebody, of course you were different than your brothers, but you were there. *Where were they?* How we let you down like that? Just thought about you and the money. And I used to tell my daughter, "You see if I would have sent Michael his sweet potato pies..." And she said, "Mother, you couldn't do anything about the way Michael lived. This is what he was." Blah, blah, blah, blah. She said, "If you'd been on earth when Christ was crucified, he never would have been crucified [laughing]. I said, "You're right, because I would have been throwing bricks at people! [laughing]

But your food really does bring people to...

Together. Food brings people together. Food is so important. That's why I try to tell these young people. A person may come in here tired, weary, worried maybe. And he might be grouchy, but it's up to you— sit him down, give him a glass of lemonade. That's not going to kill you. Give him something uplifting. And feed him good and he's happy.

[33:20]

But that spirit of who you are I think is why you've reached so many people.

But I'm really a blessed person.

You're a James Beard award winner, right?

[33:35]

Yes, yes. That I couldn't believe. How did I get this James Beard award. Who am I? But you appreciate things that they give you and you wonder how you get them but you just do what you do. Just be yourself. Do the best you can do with what you have. I'm not worried about what you have and what you have. That's yours. You earned it. I'm happy to see you with it. I can look at it and enjoy it. I don't have to own it. So everybody just do their little part. And that's hard to get people to understand. Everybody has a part to play and it can be a simple thing.

I think it's important. And I know you don't know much about the Green Book, but if you could just say for the tape that you were listed in the Green Book.

I was so busy struggling myself. I didn't have any money for people to say, or for me to say, *look at this, I was here with my money and couldn't buy it.* I didn't have the money to begin with so it didn't fall on me, like I take my friend Sybil Morial [assumed spelling] for instance she's a wonderful woman. Her father was a doctor. So segregation was hard for her to overcome. She *had* the money. She *had* the means, couldn't use it, couldn't use it.

But you made a way for yourself. About how many employees do you have?

Not enough around here now. Maybe 25 or so but not enough. You never have enough employees in this business. You work them to death, because they have to do... try to do things right. Today's young person is hard to deal with because they don't appreciate things.

[35:40]

They don't appreciate other people. You know people will come in here. I say, *this is so and so, he's this, that, and the other*. I don't care if he's as black as these pants. Look at him! Give him the credit for doing what he's doing. Give him some kind of credit and appreciate what he's doing. People don't have that....

I think we're just missing each other. We're not connected.

We're not thinking about each other. But you got to think about people. And they may not look like you want them to look. But still they're human beings and that's what people fail to see. You're a human being, that is so important. But you keep trying. They'll learn one day.

I think we're [running out of time]. We have four minutes. Is there anything else you want to say about the restaurant or your life that you want recorded for the Library of Congress?

The only thing I can say is I appreciate...I've done things with people that other people didn't have the opportunity to do, so I appreciate the gift that was given to me. Now, how do you pay God back? I don't know. I pray and I try to do the right thing. Sometimes I do everything wrong [laughing]. I do wrong things and I say, *Oh God, I'm not going to do this anymore*. Get up the next morning and do the same dumb thing again wrong! [laughing]. But you just go on the hope that you will always...when my husband was living, he died about two years ago, we were married 71 years [laughing] that's a long time. And he used to say to me, "Honey, God's going to punish you! Because you do this wrong and you call people this, and you call people a stupid jack ass, that's not right." Ok, I said, "That's right. Honey just let God take care of it himself. He takes care of his own business. Then he'd come again and he'd say, "Now honey, what would you do without me?" And he was right. We were different, like night and day. But he took care of everything that was the business part of this business. And I would be cooking in the kitchen, doing this and that. And I said, "Look honey, don't worry. Just die and find out!" [laughing] So when Dooky died, I guess he's in heaven saying "Now smart aleck take care of yourself. Take care of your own self"

Oh my God, Miss Leah, how is it that you're still working?

38:50

I like what I do. I like to be around people. People give you that lift you need. If I stayed in my own house, I'd look at four walls. I'd read, maybe do this, that, and the other...but when you meet people, all kinds of people, they lift you up.

About how many days a week do you work, how many hours?

Not enough. I come here 7:30 in the morning, now today, I might be here until about 4 or 5 o'clock. On Fridays, I stay until about 9:00pm. But that's what I like to do. That's my life. That's what I like to do. You're meeting people all the time, all the time.

Do you just watch over the cooks or are you cooking...

Sometimes, well you have to tell them every step to take...this, that, the other one. You take every step and you show them that way. But I have some people now that are learning pretty good and they will be able to take...but I want them to appreciate what they're doing. No matter what you do, do it well. And try to think about everything else. My last week, I had what we call Creole wieners on the menu. Well, one time I had that before and people didn't say anything about it, but I guess because it was that Christmas party, when it says Creole, well what is that? They didn't explain to the people. When I first went to work in the Quarters and Ms. Savora [assumed spelling] When we got out of the big restaurant that served the dinners she scaled down to what is now the coffee pot, and we served sandwiches, hamburgers and breakfasts and sandwiches. So we said to her, there were three girls, the oldest one was 19, I was 18 and the next one was 16. We ran that restaurant, three girls. So we said, Ms. Savora, that's the lady who owned it, "Let us put one hot lunch on the menu. People want something hot." She said, "Ok, if you think it will work. Ok." Now, ok, none of us knew what to do. We didn't know what we were going to put on the menu, because we didn't know anything [laughing]. So we said, let's put some wieners, Creole wieners. Creoles used to make wieners in a good tomato gravy, serve it over spaghetti, so here we go. We put Creole wieners in spaghetti [laughing], that was our first thing. So, it's a funny story and the people would try it if you [inaudible].

I've said, I'm upset with women who can't talk. Women should be able to talk their way in and out of hell if they have to. Women have got to talk. Open your mouth. Say what you don't want...say things that you don't like. Say them! But some women can't do that. So the last time I've served Creole wieners here before, the old girls knew how to say, "This was what Ms. Chase first taught was Creole wieners and spaghetti [laughing]." But it moved and it went, so you learn. As integration came we learned that we could go to other places so they knew what to do before that we couldn't go to other places so didn't know anything about Lobster Thermidor And Shrimp Newburg. That's what the white people ate. That's not what we ate. But that's what I was serving and I thought that would work, so I had to back up and serve what my people liked and I do that still today. So everybody comes to eat what we eat, everyday. It's fun.

It's amazing. You are...my heart is so full...

43:30

And when I meet women you and you (Sophie Pegrum, my camerawoman), I appreciate that. Did I ever think I would ever see women get to the place that they're in now? No. Did I ever think that I would meet a black president? Did I ever think I'd see a black man outdo a white woman. No. So you've got to appreciate all those things. And if they get there, you have to help them.

That's another thing that people have to understand. Everybody can't be a leader. I for one, can't be a leader. I don't know how to lead. But I can follow. So if you have a leader and you follow that leader and help them up, you're going up with them. You're going to ride right up with them. But people don't understand that. You don't have to be a leader. There's place on earth for everybody. So you do what you have to do. But it's fun. Here comes the boss to put you out.

I know, but thank you so much.

I'm proud of you. I'm really proud of the work you do, because you spread it around and that's knowledge for people to learn and you do that. You don't know how many people you teach things

too and how much information you give them to learn about things. And be proud of you! Be proud of you! I tell all young women this. Men are men and they do men things, but you look in the mirror every day and you say to yourself “I am the prize.” That man has to come to you. *You* are the prize. So, women forget their power. They forget who they are.

[To Stella]– She’s made me cry twice!

Thank you so much.

Thank you so much. Thank you.

[END]

45:50