

Interviewer: Nicole Morin-Scribner (NMS)

Interviewee: Donald Bisson (DB)

Date: Monday, May 13, 2024

Location: Bisson home, Biddeford Maine

Transcriber: Nicole Morin-Scribner (NMS)

NMS: Just to check the audio levels, I'm just going to ask you a question of what do you do on a beautiful sunny day like this?

DB: Well, what I do on a sunny day usually, I'm at work, mostly 6 days a week. Sunny or not, I'm at work, especially in the morning. I have other activities other than my job. I go to the gym and run 3 miles a day. If it's nice like this, I usually like to go in back of the hospital where there is a trail, a walking trail. I can't remember what they call it. The Eastern Trail, there we go. I usually walk 3 miles there on a beautiful day.

NMS: OK. So, my name is Nicole Morin-Scribner. I'm a volunteer with the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center. Today is Monday, May 13th, 2024. Today I have the honor of interviewing Donald Bisson. Is it ok if I call you Don?

DB: Yes. Don is good.

NMS: That's what most people, that's how you are best known?

DB: Oh yeah.

NMS: Very good. I usually like to start these interviews right at the beginning by asking you where and what year were you born?

DB: I was born in 1953, on March 1st. I'm from Biddeford originally. I went through the local schools: St. Andre's School then St. Louis High School and ending up at Biddeford High School. The third year, St. Louis closed, and we ended up at Biddeford High. From there I went to SMVTI for a 2-year degree, Associates Degree in Culinary Arts. From that I went for 2 years of school for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. I moved to Rhode Island for 3 years and then went to New York City in 1977 or 1978. I went to school there, the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Then I went to work for Verizon. It was called Bell Atlantic and so many other names. I went to 2 years of schooling at that place of business to learn the computerized system of what I did over there until I retired in 1998.

NMS: I definitely want to pursue getting a little more detail about some of that but let me turn the clock or the calendar back a little bit and ask you about how did your family end up in Biddeford in the first place?

DB: My grandfather was from Canada. He and my grandmother and his mother, my great-grandmother, moved here. I don't know what year they came here. They were very poor. They moved to Biddeford from Canada. My grandfather built his own house on Pike Street. He built it, a two-story house. He lived there. He had 11 kids. My father was the second oldest of the 11 kids. I was born there, on the second floor. I mean in the hospital. But I was born on Pike Street. Yeah. He built his own house with no education and worked all his life, menial jobs. That was the start of my being here.

NMS: Do you know where in Canada they were from?

DB: No, I don't. That is a good question. I should know that but I really don't. They were from Canada and never looked back. They were here and had so many kids. He had 2 or 3 jobs. My grandmother worked. Eleven kids...gee willikers.

NMS: Did she work outside the home?

DB: I don't think so. They were very young. She was a stay-at-home mom most of the time. Again, my grandparents had little education. It was up to the husband to take care of the family back then, more so than now. He had many jobs and everything.

NMS: Did you get to know them yourself?

DB: Yeah. I got to know them a little bit. Even though they lived downstairs and I lived upstairs until I was 8 years old. Then we moved to Vine Street which is right around the corner. I got to know them a little bit but not too much because I was very young. We just played in the yard.

I remember getting together for Christmases. We went to Reveillon, which was the celebration after Midnight Mass. My uncle, her brother, was a priest in Limerick. We would go to Limerick Maine for Midnight Mass. Then, we would go back to my grandparents for the Reveillon. If you can imagine. (laughter) I couldn't do that now. I go to bed at 8. I remember all of my uncles and aunts and kids all dressed up in suit and tie and formal wear. My grandmother would make pork pie and all French-Canadian, tourtiere, they called it. I didn't really get to know them in depth really. But we were close by. That was good.

NMS: Did you get together with other relatives? If they were 11, you had a handful of uncles, aunts and cousins?

DB: Yes. We had a lot of aunts and uncles. If you were the oldest of the children. First of all, everyone went to the grandparents on holidays. You got to see everybody there. As my grandparents went, my grandmother died first, what would happen was the younger uncles and aunts would always go to the children's house for Christmas. My father was second eldest so his younger siblings would stop by at Christmas and holidays. It was tradition that you would stop by.

At New Year's the elder had to give a blessing, the New Year blessing. I remember that. We as children had to kneel down for a blessing on New Years' (laughter) They don't do that today. But I remember that. It was good memories.

NMS: Did the relatives all pretty much live in the area? Were they spread out?

DB: Mostly they lived at the time and the older we got, my aunts went to Limerick and they sort of scattered all around.

NMS: Tell me about your dad.

DB: My father, his name was Raymond. He worked at the Pepperell most of his life. He died at 55 years old of a heart attack. He worked very, very hard. Not educated. He went to high school, I think, the first or second year. Then, they had to go to work. He worked at the Pepperell. Overtime, overtime, which they paid you peanuts for the time. He really worked hard to get the overtime because he had 4 kids to support and a wife. My mother was sick a lot. He had his hands full. He did, with God's help, we got through all of that.

NMS: Did he ever talk much about what it was like to work at the Pepperell?

DB: Yeah. It wasn't pleasant. From what I can remember. There was the spool and the yarn that they used to work with. They were making blankets and so on. It was not a very healthy atmosphere. There was a lot of dust in the air. It was detrimental to someone for breathing. I remember at the end; he was transferred to another department because part of it closed. He was working with cow hides. It smelled. I remember going there and saying, "Oh. What is that smell?" It was the cow hides. They had to endure that the whole time including overtime, with all of that stuff. He really was a trooper. He didn't complain. He was tired when he came home from work, but he didn't complain. He did what everybody did to support your family. He couldn't just say, "Oh forget it. I'm going to stay home and watch TV." No. You had to pull your own weight and do your own supporting of your family. Which he did. Many, many others did the same thing.

NMS: Tell me about your mother.

DB: My mother worked at shoe shops here and there. My mother was a saint! Most of all, she was a stay-at-home mom. She was ill. She died at 48 years old. She was very young. She had a series of ailments that took her life. I always said that she was a saint. My mother didn't smoke. She didn't drink. She didn't curse. She had a big devotion to Mary. She said the rosary all of the time, which is where I got my love of God, from my parents. When we were very young, we'd say the rosary every day. I say it every day now. When we were young, we were in the kitchen. We'd kneel down and say the rosary. My brother was younger. He was fidgeting all over the place (laughter). That's what we did back then. What could be better than a family praying together and saying the rosary with an affinity to Mary and to Jesus, of course.

NMS: Any other memories that come to mind in terms of what it was like when you were growing up?

DB: Well, my parents were very, very big on Christmas. Our Christmases were like gigantic. We had all of these presents. The room was full of presents because Christmas was a really big deal back then. We didn't have much money. My father worked overtime to get another job to buy presents for Christmas because they were very big on presents. Wrapping, I remember the wrapping was so really beautiful and meticulous. It was very nice. We would open our presents around 2 in the morning after the Reveillon. My father had a camera and he'd take pictures of us. Those were good memories.

NMS: I can't remember, did you mention what your mother's name is?

DB: Marjorie. My mother's name was Marjorie.

NMS: Was she born in Biddeford? Is her family from the Biddeford area as well?

DB: Yes. She was a Bourgault. Her last name, her maiden name was Bourgault. Her mother, my grandmother, had 15 children. Yeah, I know! FIFTEEN. My mother was the baby. She was the last one (laughter). That was big. At Christmas again, we would go to my grandmother's house. Talk about Grand Central Station. I mean Gee willikers. (laughter) It was wall to wall people. You couldn't get by. It was so amazing (laughter). She lived to be 101, my grandmother Julia.

NMS: Wow. Had your mother's family been in the Biddeford area for many generations? Where were they from originally?

DB: My grandmother, Julia Bourgault, was from Massachusetts originally. She had moved here with her husband when they were newlyweds. That was many years ago. Again, she had 15 kids. They moved here because of the factory. The Pepperell was where my grandfather Bourgault was working. They moved here from Massachusetts. She wasn't from here but remained here the rest of her life.

NMS: Do you know how your parents met?

DB: I think they were set up on a semi blind date. I remember hearing about where someone told my father, "I'm going to set you up." He said, "No." They said, "We'll set you up. We know this girl." (I'm paraphrasing here) So he went on a date with my mother and the rest is history. He seemed to like her so that was good. They were very monogamous and very devoted to each other. My mother died early at 48.

NMS: How old were you when your mother died?

DB: I think I was 20. I was living in New York City. I had been there for a short time. I got a call that she died, and I came home. I think I must have been 27-28, somewhere around there.

NMS: You said that your father worked in the Pepperell. Was he there when the Pepperell kept closing?

DB: Yes. He was there and part of it closed. He then went up to Saco which is the same Pepperell but a different location. That's where I told you they worked with cow hides.

NMS: Is that the Tannery?

DB: The Tannery. There we go. He worked at the Tannery. I don't know if that was associated with the Pepperell? OK. Well then, he worked at the Tannery. I thought it was associated with the Pepperell.

NMS: I happen to know as my father worked at the Pepperell and then he worked at the Tannery.

DB: Oh, he did. Well, that's what my father did. I thought it was associated.

NMS: It's in that same complex of the mills.

DB: Yes. That's why I thought there was a connection.

NMS: Do you remember when the Pepperell closed were you still living at home at the time?

DB: I left here when I was 20. In 1973 I left Maine. I went to live in Rhode Island for 3 years until I was 23. Then I moved to New York City after that.

NMS: I was wondering when the Pepperell closed, where such a big part of your father's livelihood, if you recall what that was like for him when it closed.

DB: That was traumatic. They had no repercussions, not repercussions but they had no benefits. They had no pension. They had no money that they give you to go out, severance pay,

or anything like that. It was like a pink slip one day given and “Bye. Bye. See you later.” That’s how he ended up going to the Tannery. It was very, very bad but what could you do?

NMS: I think you said you went to school first at St. Andre’s?

DB: Yes.

NMS: Tell me about that.

DB: I went to school in the lower grades at St. Andre’s until the 8th grade. It was pretty standard procedure for a kid growing up. It was a good place to have an education. At first, we had the nuns. Then we had the brothers as we got older, 7th and 8th grade. It was good. I don’t recall too much of what happened (laughter).

NMS: What language were you speaking back then?

DB: We spoke English, but my initial language was French because my parents spoke French at home. I went to school and learned English there. I’d go home from school, and they’d speak French. I was very glad of my language. Although, a lot of people that I went to school with were embarrassed to speak French. They were actually embarrassed. Even my sisters sometimes would shy away from letting anyone know that they knew French. I was never like that. I was always very proud of my language. I didn’t see the need to hide my language. It’s better to know more languages, not less. But there was this thing around that people were prejudiced I guess if you spoke French for some reason. I never understood that. I always was proud of my French heritage. I always have been.

NMS: So, you went from St. Andre’s to ...

DB: I went from there to St. Louis High School for the first three years. I was in the band. I was in chorus. Then, it closed after my junior year.

NMS: Any special memories from when you were at St. Louis? What was that like?

DB: It was a good experience. I learned typing. I learned from the brothers that taught science and everything else. It was a good experience. I can’t complain about my childhood there. It was a standard high school.

NMS: Do you remember, I think you alluded to the fact that St. Louis closed would have been after your junior year?

DB: Junior year, yeah.

NMS: Do you remember what it was like when you found out that the school was closing?

DB: I was very unhappy because I wanted to finish my high school at the same place. When we went to Biddeford for the last year, it was a very different experience. I didn't know anybody. I couldn't warm up to what was going on. Everything was different. The teachers were different. The school had merged, which meant that we had almost 400 kids that graduated. You were in the middle of a pile of people, which was all new. So, I didn't really enjoy my senior year. But we went through it, and I survived.

NMS: Do you remember when you were growing up, especially your teenage years, what did you do for fun?

DB: I'd hang out with friends. We would go to play cards at my friends' house, Michael Tremblay and Mark Pelletier. We'd go to their house and play cards with their older relatives. Then we'd go to dances. I remember going to dances in Old Orchard Beach. I remember going to the Sandbar, which people don't know. It's not there anymore. We'd go to dances, and we'd drive and sort of be rowdy on a Saturday night. We'd then come back home. Every time we'd come back home, we'd end up at Alex Pizza. Before we went home to bed we'd go to Alex Pizza. We'd have a pizza then we'd go home. Alex Pizza, Pizza by Alex, looks the same as it was when I went there (laughter). Nothing's changed. Same paneling on the walls.

NMS: What did you do in terms of deciding what was going to happen after graduating from high school?

DB: I decided that I wanted to go to college because all of my friends were going to college. I said, "I'm not going to just go to work. I want college." I chose Culinary Arts because that was sort of an interest of mine. As I said, I have a degree in it. I enjoyed that very much. I graduated and left right after that to go to Rhode Island with a friend of mine.

NMS: What prompted you to go to Rhode Island?

DB: A friend of mine was moving to Rhode Island and I wanted first of all to get out of the house. I wanted to be an adult. I wanted to be on my own. My buddy was moving to Providence, Rhode Island and said, "Hey, I need a roommate. Do you want to?" I was like, "Yeah." Then my father was not very happy. He said, "If you move out of here, you can't come back." Not to visit but if you move out, you can't come back. He said, "Don't think I'm going to take care of you." That was a very good lesson for me. I was ready to move out. I wanted to move out and those words rang true. I said, "I'm not going to ask my father for a penny. I'm going to take care of myself. I'm going to be independent."

That's what I did. I found jobs. I did what I had to do to maintain paying my rent and so on. It was an apartment in Providence Rhode Island where I lived. The apartment was \$38 a month. Even then, that was like... It was a little old lady who owned the building. She was probably

90-some-odd years old. She owned the building. I was on the third floor. She'd say, "Am I charging you too much?" (laughter) Are you charging me too much? (laughter) But I paid \$38 a month. Then of course, the building was sold so I got out of that after a while. But that's what I was paying back then. I was working at the YMCA, paying \$38 a month.

NMS: Did you find it a big transition, Providence Rhode Island from Biddeford Maine?

DB: Yes. I did. I was lonely. The guy who I moved to the apartment with moved out, so I was by myself. But \$38 a month. I got other roommates, but I was lonely. But you know what, it was a good lesson for me. It was a good lesson that you need to take care of yourself. I'd had friends so would say, "I'm moving back in with mom and dad. I lost my job (or whatever) and I'm moving back." I would never, ever do that. I said I'm going to take care of myself, which is what I did. It forced me to become an adult and be independent, which is really what I wanted to do, and I think everyone should go through that. I think after a while, the parents should push you out of the nest if you've been there too long. When are you going to go? You need to go. Some parents will let their kids stay forever. That's not good.

NMS: Did you find it a big change in terms of culturally or lifestyle?

DB: Yes. I did. Culturally, it was very different. At the time, it was Mayor Cianci, I don't know if you know who he is. He was sort of like in the papers every day. I think he even went to prison. There was a big kerfuffle about him. That was big back then. [Note: Vincent Albert "Buddy" Cianci, Jr was an American politician, attorney, radio talk show host, political commentator, and convicted felon who served as the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island from 1975 to 1984 and again from 1991 to 2002] It was a different culture and different people. I met some really good people and I worked with some people that I maintained as friends. Some of them have died now. It was good for me to get out of my comfort zone and not depend on my parents. It was good.

NMS: What happened after Rhode Island?

DB: Then I moved to New York City to become an actor. I went to this school, the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I moved to New York City and the culture was very different there too. Again, I was lonely because I lived in a studio apartment. I had moved in with this guy because he was going to the school I was going to. He was from down south. His father said, "We'll come and get you in Rhode Island and we'll bring you to New York." I said, "Ok." He came to get me in Rhode Island. It was a van. It was a two-seater van. The father drove the truck with the mother sitting in the seat. The two of us were in the back like corpses, laying down (laughter) through the whole trip. We were actually laying down. It was the only place for us to be. It was so strange.

He drove us to the apartment and the son said to his dad. "Don't leave. Don't leave." He said, "I'm leaving." (with the mother of course). They left and the kid, two hours later, called his father and said, "I can't take this. You have to come and get me." They turned around and came and got him. The kid left. There I was by myself (laughter) in New York City in my own apartment with this kid who couldn't take being away from his parents. But I survived. I lived there for years, twenty-some-odd years.

NMS: For twenty-some-odd years?

DB: I worked at the phone company where I retired from in 1998. That's what I did.

NMS: Did you ever pursue what you had studied in dramatic arts?

DB: I did but not very well. I had to work so most of my energy was spent working. That was a full-time job. It was a lot, but it was a good job.

I did do several things off Broadway. I did "Under the Gaslight", I think was the name of it. I did another one which I developed a really bad sore throat the night before opening night. (laughter). So, I had very little luck there. I did a few other things. I really liked the theater so I would go to the theater. For the most part, my acting was done at the phone company.

NMS: How did you land a job at the phone company?

DB: I was a waiter downtown by where the World Trade Center was. There was a restaurant there called Mr. G's. I was a waiter there. It was mostly all men that would come to the restaurant. At the beginning, I was thinking this is really sort of strange how all these men come to the restaurant. Some of the men were bossy, very bossy. They were dressed up in suits, a lot of the time, not all of the time. They were very bossy. One time I spilled something on someone and the whole group started to laugh and threatening me. It was awful. I found out from the other waitress who worked there with me, we became friends, that it was a Mafia restaurant. It catered to Mafia people. I was like, "Oh. That's why." I couldn't understand what the whole thing was about. I didn't stay there too long. They had openings for the phone company. You had to pass a test. I passed the test with flying colors, and they said, "Do you want to start?" I said, "Yes, definitely. I want to get out of that business." So, that's how I went to the phone company.

NMS: What did you do for the phone company?

DB: I worked with installation and repair. I was a tester. I worked with government businesses. I had all of the government things to do. Whenever President Clinton, at the time, and the

White House would come into New York, I had to install all of the phones necessary for that location. I had to disassemble after they left. That was White House Communication that I worked with.

I worked for the Governor and the Mayor, who was Giuliani at the time. I even had a few run-ins with Donald Trump actually, at 200 Park Avenue which he owned. Leon Panetta was on then and I dealt with him. I had to put in phones for him. I had not big dealings with Donald Trump, but I had some dealings with him.

NMS: What was a highlight of living in New York City?

DB: The food. Anything you wanted as far as food; they had the very best. I even dream of some of the food that I used to have there that I don't have. Anything that you wanted. The cuisine, they have the best. It's the best thing you can eat.

The plays on Broadway were another thing that I really relished and enjoyed going to see. I'd have family come over and I'd always take them to a play.

The stores, Bonwit Teller, Macy's and all of these. Plus, when I lived in New York, you walked. I didn't have a car. You can't have a car unless you are really mucho rich and living in New York. Most of what I did was take the subway or I walked. I loved walking. You walk along Sixth Avenue, or you walk along and see Bonwit Teller or St. Patrick's Cathedral. On a Saturday, the city is hustling and bustling. Anything you want, you walk over there and see people. It's exciting. It's good in a way.

In other ways it's not so good. There's the noise, the dirt, the dump trucks every night, the sirens, the ambulances. There's a bad part too. Living in a studio is not really that great because it's so small. There are pros and cons. If you are young, it's better because you can navigate that much better than if you are elderly. You can't get around as well.

NMS: Any particular experiences that you had in New York City that always stick with you?

DB: Experiences like what?

NMS: What's something that you have access to there that you don't

DB: Like I said, the cuisines, the restaurants and the pizza. The best pizza I ever had is there. There are so many places to eat. I don't care where you go, the finest restaurants you might want to go to are there. Not necessarily the five star restaurants because I couldn't afford to go to five-star restaurants, but there are a lot of them over there. Just regular food, donut shops. There was the Village. I used to love to go to walk through the Village in New York. The restaurants there were some of my favorites

that I'd stop in. Even the Chinese restaurant, I don't know if it's still there on Sixth Avenue. Oh man, the food was so good. It was Chinese-Puerto Rican cuisine. It was unusual, very unusual, but SO good.

NMS: What prompted you to make a decision to leave New York?

DB: They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. The phone company back then was offering "six and six" which was six years added to my age and six years added to the number of years that I had been there. They offered me a retirement package. I was only 45 years old when I left there. I took it not because I didn't want to work anymore because I love to work. I'm not lazy. I took it because I thought it was my only chance to go live the life that I want, which is to get a house, to get a car, to get my own place. Also, living in New York is confining too. You never see the sun. You see buildings. Even if you are walking. When you are out of New York City and see the sky, you just go, "Oh Wow. That's the sky." You don't see that in New York when you live there. So, I took the six and six package because I wanted to do something that I want to do. I retired and had a pension. I came back and saw this house. I was retiring in a week and put a down payment. Low and behold, I was here a week later, and the rest is history.

NMS: When you were looking to get your own place and leave New York, did you think of places other than Biddeford?

DB: Yeah, but I didn't know where. I came to visit my family, saw this house and put in a down payment. My cousin was a real estate agent. Everything sort of worked out together. I didn't really think about living in other places. Although, I would have loved to. I love Maine. Maine is really nice. I didn't really have to live in Biddeford. It's where my siblings are but it wasn't that I needed to be right next to them. It wasn't that at all. But this was familiar territory and so I moved here. The opportunity to get the house was sort of happenstance. Everything sort of took place. That's the reason I did it. I came here. I'd like to live in places other than Biddeford, but my work is here. I work at the Food Pantry.

NMS: Tell me about once you got back here, how did things develop?

DB: I came back home. I needed to do something because I always have to be moving. I worked at LL Bean, seasonally for a long time. They wanted me to stay, and I did just seasonally. I wasn't fond of going to Washington Street in Portland, but I did it year after year.

Then I stumbled upon the Food Pantry. I went in one day. The sign said Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. It was Monday. I went back the next day. I said, "Hi. My name is Don." She said, "Hi. Go in the back there and we'll show you how to bag. I need a bagger." I went, "OK. I just wondered what you were doing here." So, I went in the back. She never asked me my name. Then, two days later I said to (I think it was Suzy. She is dead now) "Suzy. Do you mind if I could offer some suggestions on how to do some things differently? Would you mind?" "No, no, not at all." she said. So, I started to say, "I think we could implement and do things this way." She said, "Whatever you think." She didn't run the place that efficiently. Her mother had started it. She had Alzheimer's. Rita had Alzheimer's. [Note: Rita Riley (March 29, 1923 - May 30, 2016) is credited with starting the first food pantry in the City of Biddeford and the first in the State of Maine, from the basement of her home.]. So, I took over. I took over like that and the rest is history.

NMS: I may have missed it but what prompted you to stop in there in the first place?

DB: I saw this place and saw the Rent-A-Center and thought, "What is this place?" It's set back from the street. I think God was leading me there. I needed to do something fulfilling, something that God...doing God's will. Because LL Bean was so-so. I didn't think it was fulfilling a need for me to give back to people. I stumbled on to this place. It was closing. It was going down the tubes.

I got a call from the IRS. They said, "Are you Don Bisson?" I said, "Yes. I am." They said, "Your for-profit business is..." I said, "No, no, no. It's non-profit. We are non-profit. He said, "For your for-profit." I said, "I told you we are non-profit." "No, Mr. Bisson." I said, "What do you mean, no? What are you talking about?" So, I called my boss and asked, "What are they smoking? They are saying we are for-profit." She had lost the tax-exempt status for not filing taxes for five years in a row. You lose your tax-exempt status. I thought, "Oh... I'm going in the next day and quitting. I'm done. That's it." I went in the next day and thought I'd tell them at 11 o'clock when we close because I'm all done.

Then, this young man, very handsome man came in. He knocked on the door. "Can I talk to you?" "Yes." He looked like a model. He said, "I lost my job and I need some food. Do you mind if I...?" "No, no, no. We'll show you what to do. It's very simple." He goes away. Ten minutes later, there's a knock on my door again. Here's this handsome man followed by this exquisitely beautiful woman, porcelain face, gorgeous. They looked like they stepped out of a model runway. He said, "This is my wife." I said, "Yes. Hi. How are you?" "I'm good. We are so grateful." "No problem. Anytime you want food. Don't worry about it. Here's my card." She said, "Look out the window. The car

door is open. There's two little children in the back seat. Those are our two children." I said, "Well, God bless you. I hope you find a job." I've never seen them before, and I never saw them since. To me, that was God saying, "You are not leaving. You are going to stay here and do my work." Nothing was said on their part but to me, that was a sign.

I took one year where I called the IRS every single day. One year to get my tax-exempt status back. I did get it back. Then, we were able to buy from Good Shepherd Food Bank again and so on. The rest is history. That's one of the miracles that happened.

NMS: Wow.

DB: Yeah. Then, we were paying \$800 a month and the landlord came in and said, "Next month, the rent is \$2200." I said, "You're kidding!" "No. Either pay it, get out or buy the building." I said, "Oh my God. What are we going to do? \$2200 a month? We don't have that. How much is the building?" " \$250,000." I said, "Oh my goodness." I needed \$50,000 for a down payment. I raised \$11,000. The closing was at the end of the week. I didn't have the money. I got up from my chair and went to take a walk. I was talking to God and said, "God, if you want me to close, I'll close. Just let me know. I'm tired of this." I'm hot under the collar, I'm red in the face and I'm angry. I'm walking and I'm talking, and I come back to my office. Five minutes later, there's a knock on my door. I said, "Yes." The person said, "What are you so upset about?" "I'll tell you why I'm upset. I need \$40,000 blah-blah-blah." He said, "I'll have the check tomorrow." I said, "Don't kid with me. I'm really not in the mood." "No. I'll have the check tomorrow on one condition." "What's the condition?" "That you never say who it's from." The next day, that person came with the \$40,000 check and I was able to make the down payment to buy the place. Now, if that isn't God...That is definitely God working His miracles. The gist too of that is when he knocked on the door, and asked "What are you so upset about?" That's what he said. But to me that was Jesus saying, "Why did you lose faith in me?" That's not what the guy said, but to me, it was the way he said it was like "Why did you lose faith in me?" That was an eye opener right there. That really happened. That's miracles (laughter)

NMS: How long ago was that?

DB: We bought the building in 2017, December 21st of 2017. That's how long that was. That's when the closing was.

NMS: How have things progressed since then?

DB: Oh.... It's progressed where our numbers are up 75% from last year. We have so many more asylum seekers. It's not like it was when I bought the building. We had COVID. We were open throughout all of COVID.

NMS: Talk to me about what it was like during COVID.

DB: It was very, very stressful. I didn't close. I think we closed only one day. The others all closed, and I said, "No. If the others are all closed, people have to eat. I want to open." We remained open ever since. The need was so much bigger, so much greater. Now, the asylum seekers are here. All the different people from Angola, Venezuela, Congo, Dominican Republic. We have people from Iraq. All different people that come to us for food. The numbers just keep coming. It's more people. It's been 6,500 a week for food. I used to spend \$3000 a month before COVID. I now spend that much per week! It's becoming increasingly more difficult. God in his mercy has been there. I've never told anyone, "We are completely out of food. You can't have any." I've never said that. We always have something. We run out of things but...

NMS: What is a particularly memorable day at the Food Pantry. Is there one that stands out?

DB: Well, there are the few that I just told you. The miracles stand out rather bluntly. We've been through a lot in the 20 years I've been doing it. So many people have come and gone. So many changes. So many people we have fed. We've had some good days and we've had some bad days. For the most part, people are happy that they are getting food at no cost to them. We try to provide that with all of my volunteers. We do the best we can.

NMS: You have quite a few volunteers?

DB: Yeah. I have over 40. 48 I think we counted. They are not all there at once.

NMS: Is there something that comes to mind that you wish people in the community realized "X" about the Food Pantry?

DB: What I would like to convey is that for the people who are really not knowing too much about what we do is that we do get food from Hannaford and Target. But for the most part, we have to pay for our food. Good Shepherd Food Bank, a lot of people feel that's the big behemoth, so it's all free. No, it's not. We have to purchase it, at a discounted price of course, but we still have to buy it. In my opinion, if you are going to give food or money, do it locally. Give it to your local food pantry. This way, they don't have to buy it. It's also good. They do a good job at Good Shepherd Food Bank, and we do buy from them. They are a big organization but if you want to give locally give so

that we don't have to buy the food. Give the money or cans of food locally so we don't have to purchase that.

NMS: Is there anything about the people who come to get help at the Food Pantry that you wish that the community had a better understanding of?

DB: We get people from all over. We don't discriminate. There are certain food pantries that say, "Unless you live in my town, you can't come and get food." We don't do that. We accept anybody. So, people from Saco come for food from us all of the time. We give them what we have. We do provide a lot of food for them. We want them to be secure that if they are in need of food, they are allowed to come once a week. They can be assured that we will provide what we have to give them. We are supposed to be in addition to their food stamps or their SNAP or any other, but oftentimes, we are the sole provision for those people. We are not supposed to be the sole where you just get your food from us. But, oftentimes, this is the place that they come to.

NMS: You have seen some changes in Biddeford. What is your perspective on what you've seen transpire in Biddeford over the years?

DB: Do you mean from the Food Pantry?

NMS: The community as a whole.

DB: Well, we have a new mayor, and he is wonderful. He is absolutely wonderful. Martin Grohman is really a testament to being a good mayor. He has provided funds for us from the City so that we can continue doing what we do. He is very attuned to the unhoused and people down on Water Street with the encampment there. I know they have to be out of there by August. He's trying to provide some way to either get them housed or get them in a different place. He's got his hands full with that. I like the new mayor. I'll do anything to work with him if he wants anything. He's helped us a lot.

There's changes in Biddeford, all over. The Pepperell has been transformed into a hotel. I still haven't been there, but I'd like to. It's up and coming. I think those changes are good and positive for the city.

NMS: You've been involved in addition to the work that you do at the Food Pantry, you've got some other organizations that you're a member of ...

DB: I'm a cantor at my church. I'm a member of Good Shepherd Parish. I sing at St. Joseph's Church. I sing at Most Holy Trinity Church. I sang this weekend at St. Martha's, it's not part of our parish here. It's the Holy Spirit Parish but I sing at St. Martha's in Kennebunk. I used to sing at St. Margaret in Old Orchard for 8 years. I just

stopped doing that. St. Philips on occasion. I'm involved on the weekends with the singing. I enjoy that.

NMS: Did I see that you are in the Knights of Columbus?

DB: Yes. I'm a member of the Knights of Columbus.

NMS: Tell me a little bit more about the Knights of Columbus and what they do.

DB: It's a very good organization. Of course, I don't participate too often because I'm so busy doing my thing. The Knights provide such wonderful community-based things that they help. They help individuals and groups of people. They do fundraisers to help people with cancer. They provide spaghetti suppers for different reasons for different people who need help. The Knights of Columbus is a very, very good organization. It's a healthy organization. I'm very proud to be a part of it although I don't attend too many meetings on Sunday, but I have, because of my work schedule. I always love to see them when they are in church and marching for different funerals, at which I sing. It's wonderful to see their presence in church. They do a wonderful, wonderful community-based help for everyone around.

NMS: Now speaking about the church, were you living in the community when St. Andre's Church closed?

DB: Yes. I went to St. Andre's. I was living here I think when it closed the church itself. No. I was away. I wasn't here when they closed. But I grew up in that church. I was an altar boy at St. Andre's. I'm sorry. I was not here when it closed but I was sorry to hear it closed.

NMS: That's what I was going to ask. What was that like when you heard about it closing?

DB: Anything that you grew up with and familiar with and closes, it's sad. You don't want to see that happening. Things are the way they are. The building was sold. The parish sold it.

NMS: I believe that through the years you have received some recognition and some awards? Talk to me about that.

DB: I used to deal with government offices and White House Communications whenever President Clinton was in office. I dealt with the Secret Service and White House Communication to set up their phones. I got some awards from them. They invited me to the White House too. That was great.

I remember the pope coming to New York back in 1970. I had to do the lines there. I went to mass in Central Park. I think I got up at 3:30 in the morning to try to go to Central Park and there were so many people. It was a whole ocean of people. But it was fun because he was right there. It was far away but I attended mass there. That was fun.

UN 50 it's called. When UN50 happened, I think I have a certificate for that also.

Of course, recently the Franco-American Hall of Fame honored me with their recognition. I was very surprised and very honored by this. They gave me a certificate. I have a picture with Governor Mills and I. I also got a letter from Senator Susan Collins which I was very happy about.

NMS: How did you find out that you were getting that award?

DB: I found out I was getting that award through Marc Malon. [Note: Marc Malon represents Biddeford in the Maine House of Representatives.]. Marc Malon was supposed to be there on the day that I went to meet with the Governor and the other honorees. He couldn't make it that day. He had a family situation. He wasn't there but we communicated on email and text. That's how I found out. I was like, "Are you sure you have the right person? (laughter) Don't you mean somebody else?" He said, "No, no, it's you." I said, "Are you trying to fill seat or something? Am I a seat filler? Is that what is going on? (laughter). He goes "No, no. You are not a seat filler." I go, "Ok." So, I went to the State House which was a fun day.

NMS: What has it meant to you to be Franco-American. What does your heritage mean to you?

DB: Again, I'm proud of speaking French. I'm proud of being French-Canadian. A lot of people, when I grew up, were embarrassed to tell anyone that they were French-Canadian, or they spoke French. I was never like that. I think it's a feather in your cap if you know more than English for crying out loud. I wish I'd know other languages, but I don't. I speak French fluently. It was an honor to be recognized and not being embarrassed of my heritage, of being French Canadian with my grandparents coming from Canada and establishing themselves in these good United States of America.

There's no other better country in the world except this country. We are very fortunate to be here. You know that this is true because all the countries are trying to get here. They are trying to get here across the border. We are having a heck of a time trying to control that. It seems like the floodgates are open. You can't blame them. They want a

better life. Women with children and fathers too and small children with barely the clothes on their backs trying to get to a better life. It's sad. It's terrible that other governments around the world and other regimes are so broken. Consequently, they have dictators, and we don't want a dictator in our country either. This is not good to have a dictatorship. It's sad all around.

NMS: Is there anything that you might have thought of that you had thought to make sure to share and maybe it didn't come up because I didn't ask the right question?

DB: No. I think we've covered mostly everything. I think everything is pretty much there.

NMS: Is there anything in particular that you would want people to take away from hearing your story?

DB: Yes. There is one very important thing and I tell this to everyone. Be community focused. God asked us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love God first, that's easy, loving God. Loving your neighbor is not always that easy. But that's what we are told to do. God wants us to love our neighbor. If you love your neighbor, means you are community focused. It means that you whenever you give of yourself expecting nothing in return, that's when God fills you with His grace. That is what feels good. It feels good because you are doing something for somebody else. Helping a little lady cross the street. You didn't get anything from it but you feel good. You helped somebody cross the street. That's the beauty of it. It's giving of yourself. When you give of yourself, you empty yourself and God fills you with His grace. If you don't empty yourself, He can't fill you with His grace. If you are full of yourself and it's just me...me...me...me...me, its all about me. You can't have that experience. Its only if you lose your life you save it. If you save your life, you lose it. We all have to empty ourselves, we all have to give ourselves away to other people. That's what Jesus did. He emptied Himself and He gave Himself away. That's what we have to do also is to be community-focused. Love your neighbor. Do good to others. Participate. Go and attend a cancer 5K Run. Go to those who are more needy. Check on your neighbor, the elderly especially and say, "Do you need anything? Can I get something for you? How can I help you?" All of that is I think what I would want to leave people with because God sees what we do. He knows everything and sees what you do. When you give of yourself and empty yourself, that is when you love your neighbor, in my opinion.

NMS: Powerful words. I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story. On behalf of the community and the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center, I want to thank you for all of your contributions and the Franco-Americans too for representing us.

DB: Thank you for coming here and spending the time. I appreciate it.