

## Interview with Karl Robertson

**Kathy Hersh:** We are interviewing Karl Robertson for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. Today is October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018. My name is Kathy Hersh, and we are at Joe's Stone Crab Takeout. When did you first come to Miami? Were you born here or did you...

**Karl Robertson:** No. I wasn't born here. I was born in southeast Georgia. I came here. My first time here was in the early '80s. As a matter of fact, it was shortly after the McDuffie riot. When I came there were still buildings smoldering.

**Interviewer:** Right after the McDuffie riots?

**Robertson:** Yes, right after. I think I came in May of that year.

**Interviewer:** In spite of the McDuffie riots, you came.

**Robertson:** Well, I didn't even know it was going on. I just wanted to get out of Georgia.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like you got here, you saw the aftermath.

**Robertson:** Yes, yes. Well, it was all pretty new to me because in southeast Georgia there was nothing but trees. It was new. It was exciting.

**Interviewer:** What brought you to Joe's? How did you get here? How did you get a job here?

**Robertson:** Well, I was living in a rooming house with some friends from the same place I'm from back in Georgia. They would come here, and they would come home every afternoon with a lot of cash and alcohol and all sorts of stuff. I was basically freeloading on them. Then one day one of them came back in the early afternoon and asked me if I wanted to work. Since I was freeloading, I couldn't very well say no, so I said yes. I came here and they started me. I started bussing trays that same day.

**Interviewer:** What year was that? Do you know?

**Robertson:** This was October '82.

**Interviewer:** You came over looking for a job, and the same day they put you to



work.

**Robertson:** I didn't come looking for a job. They came and got me.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

[Laughter]

**Interviewer:** You were bussing tables?

**Robertson:** Yes, carrying trays. I really didn't know anything about bussing. The only dining room experience I've had, restaurant experience that I've had prior to that was working at [Phonetic] [02:33] Meshoney's for a short time back in Georgia.

**Interviewer:** Did you go through a training period then?

**Robertson:** No. It was on-the-job training pretty much. They'd tell me what to do, and I did it.

**Interviewer:** You must have done it well enough that they asked you back.

**Robertson:** Yes, I think so. Here they had a certain style of carrying trays. I didn't know that, so I was carrying it with two hands. They were heavy trays too, but I did the best I could, so I guess it was good enough. I guess it was good enough.

**Interviewer:** It was a different world from southeast Georgia.

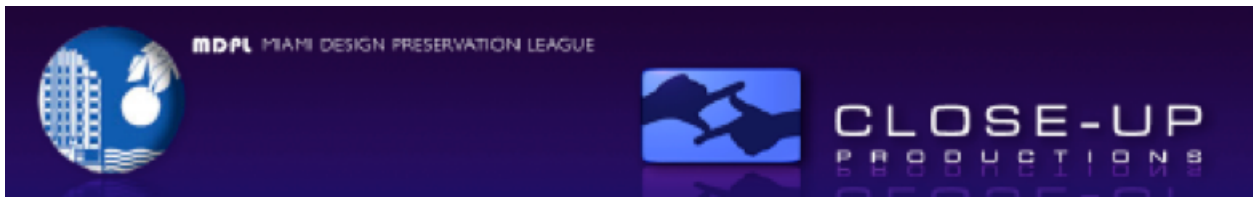
**Robertson:** Yes, very different, very different. Me being 18 years old at the time I came here, I was into drinking at that age. I was into drinking. In Georgia you couldn't drink. You couldn't buy alcohol after certain times, definitely not on Sunday. Here you could drink 24/7, seven days a week. That was a big draw for me back then in those days.

**Interviewer:** As a brash, young teenager?

**Robertson:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You started bussing, and you learned on the job the proper way to carry trays. Then how did things evolve? What's your position here now?

**Robertson:** I'm a senior dining room manager.



**Interviewer:** What does that entail?

**Robertson:** Pretty much everything under the sun. People ask me, “Well, what do you do?” My go-to response is “Everything that nobody else wants to do”.

**Interviewer:** You have to make sure that it’s presentable, that...

**Robertson:** Everything from top to bottom. I make sure the dining room’s clean, well, the restaurant’s clean, the employees are doing what they’re supposed to do, the guests are happy. Pretty much anything needs done, I try my best to get it done.

**Interviewer:** Have you ever had any incidents like any fights you’ve had to break up in the dining room or people getting snippy or whatever?

**Robertson:** People are going to get snippy regardless, but it’s how you handle them. When I first became a dining room manager and they called me to a table, I would cringe because it was never good news. Then after experiencing that a few times, I took the attitude I’m going to go to the table and try to change their attitude.

I go to the table in a happy mood whether they’re happy or not, “Hey, how are you doing?” Most of the time, I can turn the situation around, but sometimes there are those people, regardless of what you do, they’re still not going to be happy, so you’ll have to accept that.

**Interviewer:** What was the atmosphere like when you got here in ’82? It was right after the Mariel exodus from Cuba. There was high crime in the area. Did that affect things here?

**Robertson:** Well, when I came here I lived in Liberty City, so the high crime on the beach, I guess was, I don’t know, incomparable to where I was living. It was like the norm for me.

When I started working here, I basically just came to work and left the beach. I didn’t hang out on the beach, so I really was unaware of what was going on on the beach. Then probably in ’82 when I moved on the beach, like I said, the criminal element in Liberty City and the criminal element here on Miami Beach were all the same to me. It didn’t make a difference.

**Interviewer:** That’s an interesting point because I think that shows how white



privilege isolates people. When they do come across something that's violent, they think, "Oh my God. This is abnormal. This is something we have to do something about". You're saying that to you it was just like another day in Liberty City.

**Robertson:** It didn't matter whether the color of skin was dark or light. The same things were happening. You learn to deal with it, learn to avoid it basically.

**Interviewer:** What was the atmosphere in the kitchen like? What kind of crew? Was it a mixed group of people in the kitchen by then?

**Robertson:** Well, to my recollection, most of the people in the kitchen were black. There was a couple of Hispanics. There was just one white guy, a big white guy named Teddy. That's the only white person, non-black, non-Hispanic person that I can recall. He was a big guy.

**Interviewer:** Was there any tension?

**Robertson:** Not that I can tell. I'm going to have to put it right out front. Most of the '80s is a blur to me because there was a lot going on in my personal life. There was a lot of alcohol and other substances going on. The outside world didn't too much register with me. It's like I was in my own head most of the time.

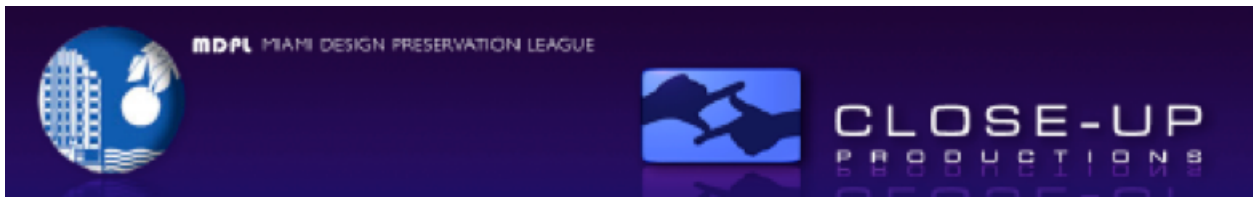
**Interviewer:** Was the restaurant, was the business supportive of you through that?

**Robertson:** Oh, very much, very much so.

**Interviewer:** Did they recognize what was going on?

**Robertson:** No. Calvin Keel, the guy that hired me, he once told me. He said he didn't know I had a drinking problem until I stopped. It came to a climax. I felt the walls closing in on me and just was a seven-month job at the time. Around the first of the year, well, it was like towards the end of the year, like November, December. I went and spoke to Jo Ann, who's the current owner. I told her that I had a problem.

She made me drink a large tumbler of black coffee. She said, "Could we talk about it later?" Then later on that afternoon, she called me upstairs in the office and had me to talk with another young lady that was up there. I told her what was going on with me. She asked me if I was willing to let somebody else sit in on the conversation.



I wasn't 100 percent sincere. I was looking at it as a way to buy myself until the end of the season then I could figure it out then. This other person, she was in recovery for five years at the time. She talked to me, and it worked. I sought help and never looked back. I'm eternally grateful because I didn't think I would live to see the age of 30.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like Jo Ann was the kind of person that people could go and talk to frankly, tell their troubles to.

**Robertson:** Was, is, and I think she'll always be.

**Interviewer:** That's kind of rare, isn't it?

**Robertson:** Yes, it is, it is. It would have been so much easier to her for me to push me out the door and get somebody else. It would be probably less problematic.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that part of your success here is that you know how to deal with people? You said that you have to go to tables and always be positive and sometimes sort things out with people who are being negative.

**Robertson:** Well, I don't know. I think that comes along with the territory. I think that you can pick up that as you go along, but I think the thing that really inspired me most is that when I first started here over 36 years ago, I started racing Jo Ann to tables, to clean the table before she could because she's the owner. Even today, we're still racing to clean tables.

She set something in my mind. I tried to follow that. She gave me a pattern. I was able to see a pattern in her because she's humble. With a person with the kind of power and authority that she wields, she is the most humble person that I know.

One of the things that I really picked up from her is when she needs something, instead of saying, "Go over and get me that such-and-such", she'll say, "Do me a favor. Could you do this for me?" It's just not sounding all the walls. How can you say no to that?

**Interviewer:** It sounds like she was a mentor.

**Robertson:** She is, she is. Last year I got to work lunch with her on a Wednesday. I was basically sitting back and watching how she operates so I can pick up those traits. She's a very—



**Interviewer:** She's still here?

**Robertson:** She's still here, still here, still being a power of example.

**Interviewer:** If you were to describe her as a boss, give us a description.

**Robertson:** I don't know. I don't think the word 'boss' does her justice. She's more of a friend. I don't know. She's like a mother. I don't know. It's hard to describe the way she is, but she's one of the most caring individuals that I know, especially when she doesn't have to be. You see people with money all the time. They throw their weight around, throw their power around. That's not her. That's not in her.

**Interviewer:** The other people we've interviewed have talked about the problems that they had since they came a lot earlier than you with transportation and the 11 o' clock curfew and all that. It's changed quite a bit since then, but have you seen any changes since you got here in the early '80s?

**Robertson:** Changes?

**Interviewer:** Changes in the whole milieu of the South Beach and how it affects the restaurant and the clientele.

**Robertson:** Well, I think when I started there weren't very many restaurants. I think we were the only one on this side of this street at the time. It's changed a lot as far as appearance because there were a lot of run-down buildings here, a lot of shady dealings going on. I was a part of some of them at that time.

**Interviewer:** Anything you can tell us about?

[Laughter]

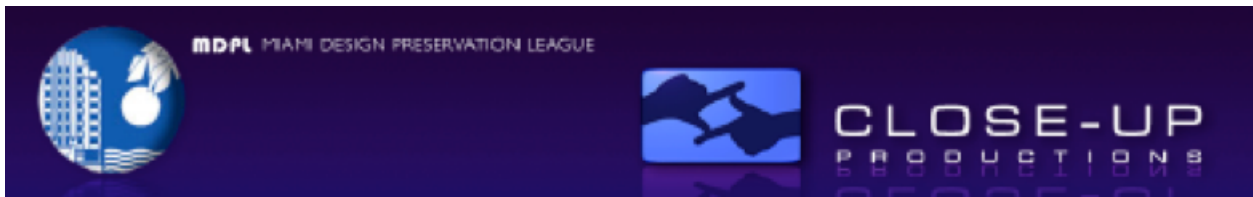
**Robertson:** I don't know. What's the statute of limitations?

**Interviewer:** I was just going to ask you.

**Robertson:** No, no. I didn't get into any serious trouble, but there was always the potential to get in trouble. I'm fortunate enough that I escaped that part.

**Interviewer:** Working at Joe's, was there a certain status with working here?





**Robertson:** Oh yes. Everybody seemed to know Joe's Stone Crab. Once you put Joe's Stone Crab on an application, it almost always went to review. It was prestigious. There was a status. There still is a status.

**Interviewer:** Do you work year-round now that the—

**Robertson:** I do. I do, yes.

**Interviewer:** That's a big change, right?

**Robertson:** Oh yes. Well, I think like 14 years in, I made head busser probably after seven years. The guy that was my boss, he left and I got promoted to head busser. I did that for like seven years. I think around the time I was turning 35, I just had a look back at my life and said, "Wow. I'm a 35-year-old busser. Is this all I can be?"

At that point, at the end of the season, I resigned. I told them I was going, I was leaving. I went out and did auto mechanics because my girlfriend at the time, her father owned several motor shops. I went to work for them.

Then the season started in October. That early November, I got a call and asked if I wanted to come back as a manager, which was huge for me because at that point I was locked in a system. If I was able to save any money at all during the course of this season, I'd run through it during the summertime. I would start off either broke or in debt the upcoming season, so I wanted to get out of that cycle.

Becoming a manager meant full-time employment, year-round employment so I could balance my finances a little better. All these years later, it's not great, but it's better.

**Interviewer:** It's steady.

**Robertson:** Yes, yes. I can predict what's going to happen two weeks from now, three weeks from now. It was great. I came back as the kitchen manager. My job duties were to make sure we had what we need for the day's operation, make sure of the staffing and stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** As a kitchen manager, did you ever cook?

**Robertson:** Yes. I had to man stations from time to time. I even jumped in on the dish line and helped the dish crew because I always thought they were the hardest working people in the building but the least appreciated. As



a manager today, I try to remember as many names as I can because I think it makes a difference when you talk to somebody in a, I don't want to say low-rate, but entry-level job and you call them by name. I think they look at that from a manager's perspective as being pretty important.

**Interviewer:** You learned all this on the job?

**Robertson:** On the job, yes.

**Interviewer:** You never went to management school or anything?

**Robertson:** No. I never went to school. Well, my mom and dad, my dad was pretty strict. My mom, she was pretty strict too. She was probably stricter than he was, but they taught us to be respectful and treat people like you want to be treated. They gave us the basics. It just multiplied, morphed into this, whatever this is.

**Interviewer:** Carl, do you have any questions?

**Carl:** As a workplace, how do you [Inaudible] [19:57]?

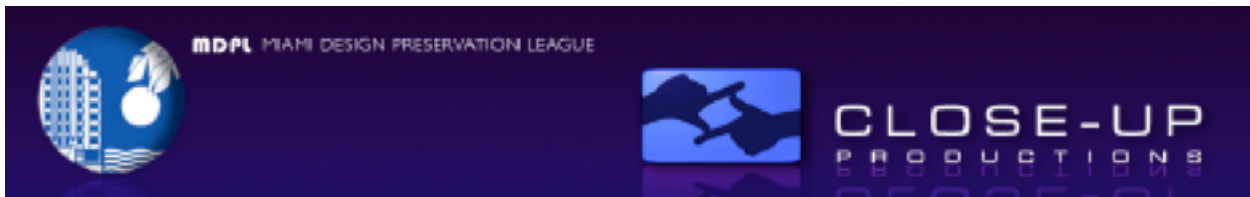
**Robertson:** Well, Joe's is a place. It's a huge machine with lots of moving parts and a lot of different nationalities and personalities. It's truly a melting pot. It's like building a recipe. Certain ingredients go with each other, and certain ingredients might displace each other.

Once you learn the parts, and this is my big thing, I learn personality. I try to learn personality. You have to deal with each of them differently. There's no cookie-cutter method. It's not one-size-fits-all. You have to deal with people on an individual basis. When you can see which parts go together, you can move it in the right direction. It doesn't always work but most of the time. It works most of the time.

Joe's is customer-oriented. I think it's customer first, employees second and then profit. They don't put profit above all else. The family here does a lot for the employees. Sometimes with this new workforce coming up, I don't think that gets appreciated. When I started here, people had a different mindset about working. It seems like today everybody wants to start at the top and work their way out the door. That's a different thing, but I think in training a lot of that can be corrected.

I made a joke once. A server asked me why did we have one guy that





not too long started train a new guy that just came in. As a joke, I said, “We find a new person, and we put him with the worst possible trainee. If they can manage not to get themselves fired, they must be a pretty good worker”. Sometimes that works because what will happen here is that we’ll just throw you into the fire and see what you’re made of, whether you’re going to sink or swim.

**Interviewer:** How many customers a day, on average, come through this place?

**Robertson:** That’s a good question. On average, we do like 350 lunches and about 1,200 dinners.

**Interviewer:** That is a machine. A chef that got involved in helping people in Puerto Rico after the Hurricane Maria said that chefs are very good at organizing chaos because that’s what a restaurant often is. You can’t predict how many people, who’s going to order what. It’s organized chaos.

**Robertson:** Call it controlled chaos.

**Interviewer:** Controlled?

**Robertson:** Yes, controlled chaos.

**Interviewer:** Explain, if you could, briefly what the different roles are and how they function. You were saying it’s like a machine, and this has impressed me listening how many jobs there are involved in getting that plate of stone crab to the table.

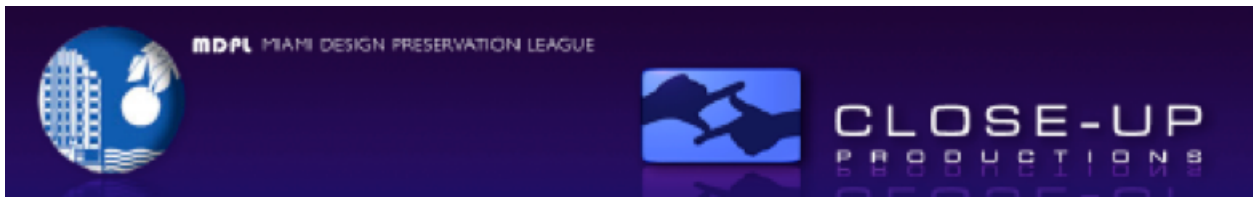
**Robertson:** Well, besides what goes on at the fishery when they catch it, when a customer comes in, first of all they check in with the maître d’. Then the captain will take them to their table. Then the server will come and bring them bread. The busser will come and bring butter and water. The server takes a drink order and takes their food order. Now you’ve got the bartenders and the kitchen help.

After they’ve finished their meal, and the bussers will be there the whole time throughout the meal clearing plates and pouring more free-filling water. Then when they’re ready to pay the check, the server will take the check from them, take it to the cashier and get it rung up and present it and then bring it back to them. It’s a multi-step process. Everybody’s got to do their part.

**Interviewer:** Then the dishes get cleared.



- Robertson:** Then the dishes get cleared. The bussers will take it back to the kitchen where you've got the dishwashers doing their thing.
- Interviewer:** There is a category of dishwasher too, isn't there? Somebody does the scraping. Somebody does the machinery part.
- Robertson:** Yes. They do have different signs. Somebody will do silverware, glassware. It's like...
- Interviewer:** Then there's the linen, the laundry.
- Robertson:** The laundry.
- Interviewer:** Someone has to look out for that.
- Robertson:** Well, the dishwashers will separate them. Then they'll take them. When the laundry comes in the following day, the laundry, but yes, there are a lot of steps, a lot of things that go on.
- Interviewer:** We haven't even talked about the cooking. Is there a supreme chef and then sous chefs or...?
- Robertson:** We have an executive chef, Andre Bienvenu. Then he has a sous chef. We have expeditors and supervisors and the line cooks, the crab crackers. It just goes on and on.
- Interviewer:** Then there's the buying of the food. Somebody has to...
- Robertson:** Yes. We have a purchasing department that takes care of all the buying, which is closely worked with the chef. I should say chefs because we've got them on each end.
- Interviewer:** Then they added this part, the takeout.
- Robertson:** Well, the takeout's been in this location since, say, '96/'97. Prior to that, it was on the other side where the private dining room is. Yes.
- Interviewer:** It's almost like a factory that produces a wonderful product that's edible.
- Robertson:** The takeout used to only be a third of the size it is now up until, let's say like seven years ago. Where we're sitting now used to be a garage, but it was five feet lower. They raised the floor and they closed



in the garage and made this. Now it's like a little 80-seat restaurant, 80-seat café with a private dining room.

**Interviewer:** Carl, anything else?

**Carl:** Joe's has been more than 100 years on Miami Beach.

**Robertson:** Yes. This is our 105<sup>th</sup> season.

**Carl:** A restaurant that can last two years usually is considered a success.

**Robertson:** Well, they said most restaurants go out of business in the first six months.

**Carl:** What are they doing right?

**Robertson:** Well, I believe that we deliver a great product, and our customer service is of a pretty high standard. It could get higher. Also, we have generations after generations of people that come and they bring their kids and their grandkids and just this continuation. Joe's has really bonded with the community. It seems to be a lifelong bond.

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