

Speaker 1: Talk a little bit about the recipes that you choose to feature.

Speaker 2: I chose red beans and rice, I chose fried catfish and homemade potato salad. I chose bread pudding ... and the fourth one was ... oh the homemade potato salad, so that was the fourth one. Now do you need a reason why I choose them?

Speaker 1: Well I was going to say, just anything around ... are those your specialties? Why did you pick those?

Speaker 2: Oh that's easy, I picked those because I spent most of my time growing up as being a help in the kitchen for my mom when I was old enough to remember doing those things. I would go in the kitchen and she would be preparing these meal or dessert or something so I would prep it too. Watching her prepare and then participating in as much as she let me do. For instance potato salad. She would have eggs boiled the potatoes boil and I would have to mash the potatoes and she would tell me how much to mash them or I would have to add a little mayonnaise or mix the mayonnaise and stuff so in essence I was learning while watching and being in the kitchen. That happened a lot of times.

When she was making things that I really liked and loved to smell. I would definitely participate more, like when she was making the sweet potato pie, so you know the reward of helping a person when you're doing that is you get to sort of take your finger and clean the rest of the pie. So you know I was there for that being a big kid so I was there for that and that was the joy of being in the kitchen. Being able to help mom, you gonna get a little reward and later on you get to eat it again. That was your pay.

So I grew up smelling home cooked food, working with my mom in the kitchen, so some of that rubbed off on me later in years. I didn't have to cook as much when I got married, but now that I am single again, I can cook a lot of things that I remember and it comes back to me, those same things that we were in the kitchen doing. I was telling the ladies in there "I said, you know its not hard once you remember what you have to do and start fixing the way you like". So its fun.

And the lady just gave me these recipes ... why'd she do that? I love French toast, so I'm up there. They say eight slices of bread, I say "wait I need about six". They say two eggs, I say "no I use one". There's things that you do in accordance to what you like, and she gave me sweet potato casserole. Look I don't know how to make that, but guess what, Mike is gonna try that. Peanut butter cookie, it's amazing. I went to a store and bought a peanut butter cookie mix, now if I don't have to buy peanut butter mix and I have peanut butter, one egg, see what I'm saying. I didn't know that.

And here's a ... oh I love pecan pie, so look I can make my own and I have a little bitty containers and stuff from previous ones, I can do that myself. There's only the

ingredients that I like and if I don't like it this way I can change some of the ingredients and make it the way I want to. Not as sweet, or add more pecans or stuff, I make it good stuff like that.

Speaker 1: Well tell me about pecan pie, because I've never been a fan, but I wanna be converted. You know, I want to understand why some people love it.

Speaker 2: Well first of all, do not try these, like some people think. Pecan pie is sorta like the reverse of sweet potatoes and whatever, because it has that sort of syrupy taste, it has lots of pecans up in it and if you make it right, you're gonna love it. Just try it, that's all I can say, try it. you're gonna love the pecans up in it and your gonna like the sweet taste and it has the pie crust. That's the beauty of it, you know, when you bite into all those ingredients together, you just, you know, your mouth just goes crazy. That's the best I can describe it, if its done right.

Speaker 1: It always seems like gooey and overly sweet to me.

Speaker 2: It is, but you have to develop ... its an acquired taste, I guess. You have to develop a love for it and not have too big of a piece, because if you go to far, you're not gonna like it. If you take a small piece and you eat it and its done right your gonna love it.

Speaker 1: So it sounds like you do a lot of improvising, you don't necessary work from a recipe, you just try to put it together.

Speaker 2: I try based on memory and then like my son said one day, he said "dad go to the Google and you can make a pancake recipe from the stuff that you have". So I do use ingredients sometimes, but then I modify it and find out what I like, like potato salad I know what I love in mine, so I make that all American by myself. And like my mom that many time, so I know what I want. Basically, potatoes in it, basically mayonnaise, basically egg, basically parsley, garlic, onion, see you know, those things, and when I get it to the taste that I want and the consistency I want I'm happy.

I think, I thought I saw, or just heard something about milk, I say "oh no, no milk" or radish, she said celery that was it, celery, no I don't like celery, you know, it doesn't agree with me.

Speaker 1: Well my mom sometimes puts dill in her potato salad.

Speaker 2: I'll take that, I'll take that. But some of that, oh mustard, some people put mustard in there. See that's a specialty thing that I do, but mostly I'm experimenting and fixing it to my taste cause I'm alone, but I've given it to some people, "you know you make a mean potato salad" it's like okay. And I've started baking cakes and stuff. The cakes come out good so I'm putting it on my phone and I say "should I make that?" I said but "here's the problem is I'm gonna sit up here and try to eat the whole thing" but I'm not into eating the whole thing, I'm gonna give it away.

Speaker 1: Right, well it's fun to cook for other people.

Speaker 2: Well I try to find people to give it to cause I don't wanna, you know gain anymore weight, I wanna stay down a little bit. I love cooking and I don't like going out to restaurants, no not restaurants, fast food places. You know, I can't afford to go to restaurants all the time, but I love to cook by myself and it saves money and you have a lot. I can cook a pot of beans and have that in the freezer, like mom said for months. Eat off it at different times or whatever.

Speaker 1: So with the red beans, are you die hard, every Monday, gotta have them?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Monday, Tuesday [inaudible 00:07:45].

Here's another one, fish on a Friday or something. Like die hard things that, not fish, shrimp or some kind of seafood. I love lobster. Lobster tail, stuff like that. I love oysters, char grilled oysters, stuff like that. Now that's a once in a blue moon type thing, going out with somebody, "here, here's some oysters".

Speaker 1: Would you do those things cause you're Catholic or just because you grew up doing them?

Speaker 2: No I don't do them because I'm Catholic, that's a misconception with some people. Now in the month of lent, yes I'm going to follow the doctrine of being Catholic, by eating mostly seafood. But I don't necessarily do things in according to my religion. I try to follow it some, like a meatless Friday, yeah I'll do it. But not like written in stone or nothing.

I'm a catholic[inaudible 00:08:49] then I married a lady who was a Catholic and the first thing from my mom was "because you married a Catholic, you gotta do it" okay, no problem, as long as you believe in God. So that was a beautiful thing, because I now go to St. Joan of Arc, which is in the Graytown area, a little bit farther back, and I've been going to a Catholic Church, so I can do it, no problem. I love it.

Speaker 1: Well okay, so what's special about your bread pudding?

Speaker 2: Well what's special about my bread pudding is, I can do it with different sweet ingredients. Like some people may put fruit cocktail, some people may use peaches, some people may use raisins, each one of those alone. I might mix it up, I might have raisins with my peaches, I may have fruit cocktail instead of peaches, I may have peaches instead of raisins. It's how I feel at that moment or at that time.

I found out something, it don't necessarily have to be made with fresh bread, it can be made with old sliced bread, stale. It's just me, even something else I found out, wheat bread, oh that's a whole 'nother animal, see by me experimenting, whatever I have left or whatever I feel I want at the time, because I'm alone, if the taste buds

want something sweet and I have those things there, it's a simple egg batter, milk and you know, sugar, cinnamon, vanilla. See what I'm saying.

I know what to put in, soak the bread in it, let it sit there for a while, let it get to the right consistency. Then pop it in the oven. And it's done. You can smell it, I was telling a lady "my kitchen's not too far from the bedroom, so if I'm in the bedroom, it's coming down the hall and you can smell it cooking" and that's a pleasant smell. It makes you very happy to know that it's baking and it's almost ready.

You know time wise, I'm pretty close to guesstimating how long it takes for something to get done. But I still go back in and check it and make sure that it's browning and getting to the right cooking, desired, finish amount that I want it to be at, temperature. I want it to be baked, done, not raw. But it always comes out good and I surprise myself, it's like a natural talent because, I guess I acquired it from my mom by watching her.

I know we used to rather go out and buy stuff than to make it myself, but I'm finding that it comes so natural, like a second whatever. It makes you feel good.

Speaker 1: So were you the main one in the kitchen with your mom?

Speaker 2: Yes, yes, not even my younger sister. I was mostly the one in the kitchen because I was the oldest. When she remarried, before she had any other children, I was the baby. So I grew up being the oldest in the next group of kids, so I was the one who was always in the kitchen, helping her like I said. And you know doing things with her, so I naturally had that love for cooking, I don't even know why, but you know.

Speaker 1: Did you ever cook for your mom?

Speaker 2: No, but she still cooking for me and when I go there it's a bad habit she has of overloading the plate, I don't need that much on my plate. Tell people like it's the Last Supper. Like look, I gotta drive back, so imagine all that food in you and you're trying to get back and it's almost a two hour drive. No, no mom you can't do that. Can't tell her that.

Speaker 1: So for the most part are your kids here or are they elsewhere?

Speaker 2: One of my kids is in New Orleans East, the other kid is in Baker, Louisiana and my son is in a part of Texas, [inaudible 00:13:17] or whatever. He's in college. So that's how they range.

Speaker 1: Well what do y'all do for holidays?

Speaker 2: They come down to my ex wife's house and I'm invited, but I feel kinda funny about that, so I haven't been doing it. I guess this year if they do it, I'll do it. I feel like the fifth wheel, you know, it's kinda awkward.

Speaker 1: Yeah I can imagine, but holidays aren't holidays without family.

Speaker 2: Right, I feel separate and apart most of the year, so one day to me doesn't make up for all the days I'm separate and apart. But I'm getting better with it. I guess the older I get, the closer I get with accepting some things, and like you said doing some family things. And it's not all about me, it's about bringing family together. I'm really happy about them adjusting to their step mom and taking her as their, you know like a real mom. So I'm happy about that. But I just have to get over the fact that I'm not a part of that mix totally. Because I'm a family type person, and we were married for 19 years, so it's kinda hard to get over that too. It's kinda hard to be a bachelor again, I can tell you that. This is a whole 'nother animal.

Speaker 1: Well let's see, we didn't say much about frying catfish, what's your technique there?

Speaker 2: Oh, that's another one there. There are several ways you can do it. You can make an egg batter, you can just do it the way I do it, first I make sure the fish is not frozen from sitting in the freezer, I rinse it off. Then I put a light amount of salt on it, I don't use black pepper. I use onion powder and sprinkle it from the jars. Then I take what is called fish fry and they have different kinds, Zatarain's, I can use cornmeal, I even know how to do that. I dip the fish that's still sorta wet into the cornmeal, shake it up in a plastic bag. I even have cornmeal and flour sometimes, it makes this like little batter on it. I can do it with egg too, that's another type of batter, egg batter.

But you also have to put salt and pepper in the things I described. Make sure the grease is nice and hot, I use Canola Oil or Vegetable Oil, I make sure it's nice and hot. That's the only thing I eat that's greasy, because I'm not supposed to have that too. You know so I make sure the cooking oil is very hot, so another way of doing that, take a little water on your fingers and tap it into it, and if you hear it popping, the cooking oil is ready. You gently put the fish in there without burning yourself. I'm scared of that.

Let it cook for a while, when it gets to your desired brownness, you flip it over and you take it out. And I put mine on top of a rack with paper towels on it, so it'll absorb some of that grease, before I serve it. Then, well I've already done the potato salad, sometimes I have oven baked fries. I don't do two things greasy, I let the fries sit in the oven to brown and cook and stuff. But that's my meal. Along with maybe a lettuce and tomato salad or something.

Speaker 1: So do you fish at all?

Speaker 2: Used too. I'm in an apartment up on the 4th floor, I rarely have those kind of things that I can do now, so that's a whole nother thing. You're the second person to ask me that in the last few days. I used to.

Speaker 1: I was just wondering, you know, I grew up with my grandfather who fished all the time and it seems less like something people do as a past time in New Orleans, I'm finding it more with people who are from places like Slidell.

Speaker 2: We grew up in [inaudible 00:17:51] we used to go to the lakefront, where now you can't swim. We used to go out there with poles and stuff, and my step dad, we used to fish off of it and catch a little, crazy, doctor fish, they call them, and stuff like that. Then they had like little fish you could eat.

Well we used to go back on old Jeff Kelly Rd and catch crawfish. People don't know that they have big fat crawfish back there, even today, back there were all the junkyards they have and all the old industrial areas. Go back there with a crab net, put a little bait up in it and go back there and get crawfish. Fat, big crawfish.

I'll tell somebody another thing up there behind Audubon Park, you go back there and you catch catfish this big. I have literally seen people ... I'm driving out of there after I went there for a while, and I say "man whatcha caught", he said "I caught a catfish this big", he showed me and I was like you can catch some big catfish back here.

Speaker 1: Well what do you use for crawfish bait?

Speaker 2: You can use chicken, like the wings or something. Just put a little piece of raw chicken up there and tie it down very good into the bottom of the crab, whatever they call it, you know the crawfish thing in the squares with four lines on it and you just throw it in there and it sits there in the water. And after a few minutes, crawfish crawl up into it and they try to get the bait that you have in the middle of it. And once they get up in there some of them can't get away. So when you lift it up and out, they're stuck in it. So you just throw them into your ice cooler. At the time we were doing it, it was called a foot tub. I don't know if you remember that, or maybe your grandparents, it was an old metal iron type little bucket that you throw them into and they can't crawl out.

But I remember those things and I miss it, and I grew up with stuff like that too, you know. Some of my brothers still fish, but they live in houses. I live in an apartment, when I have an urge to do anything I gotta go out and all that, my younger brothers do it.

Speaker 1: Alright.

Speaker 1: Make sure our volume is up too. Yeah, I wanted to use-

Michael: Speak louder or what?

Speaker 1: No, actually, speak at your natural, normal volume. I wanted to use this room because we've had a couple of different locations, right? We used the classroom, which had a lot of ... I don't know if it was the air conditioner or what, the background noise. And then, the last person I talked to was Josie and we used the sunroom and that was just terrible for street noise and stuff like that.

Michael: Oh, yeah. This here's pretty good.

Speaker 1: So, I start with questions about your background, and you can talk to me a little bit about say, where your parents came from, how they met. If you know how or why you were given the name you were given.

Michael: Not that I can answer that directly, so indirectly, it started back when my parents met. I really don't know that much information about how they met. I just know from the area that they were in around that Gonzales, Prairie View, Prairieville area ... Laplace ... those areas. She was sort of a country girl, and why I'm given my name, I really don't know why she gave me Michael.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And any of my brothers and sisters, but that was the name that I received. I was the last one in the first group of kids that was born, and I was the baby. So she brought me to New Orleans as a ... I was nearly born in New Orleans, so they say.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And I was the first one of the next group of kids. She married after that, and the gentleman that she married gave me his name, so I became his oldest son.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: And then he had three other sons, and a daughter. So it was of that group, not my first group of brothers and sisters, who like I said were given away to foster parents and stuff. And I'm aware of them. We know each other and all those things. And I have met them, and we are very close at times. That's a big rule, everybody knows everybody. So the second group knows about the first group, and so on, and so on.

Speaker 1: All right.

Michael: Anything else? I think I covered everything so far. Oh! About my background?

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Michael: I'm basically from New Orleans, and I grew up in New Orleans. 64 years. Went to the public schools in New Orleans. First one was Craig Elementary, up in Tremé area.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: We lived there for a while, and we moved around a lot. So I wound up moving to the Tremé area around St. Claude Avenue. And I was close to Clark Senior High School. I always admired the kids going there, plus I had a cousin that was still going there. So I wanted to go there as I got over there, but things changed. We moved to the Ninth Ward.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And when we went to the Ninth Ward, I went to an elementary school. I was in third grade, going to fourth grade. We went to an elementary school called Joseph A. Hardin. And it was deep Ninth Ward, almost to St. Bernard. So I wound up finishing at Hardin Elementary, and wound up going to Lawless Junior High School.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Where from sixth grade to eighth grade ... you know, play a little football and that stuff. [inaudible 00:04:06] sports. Then went to Carver Senior High School, and finished 9th through 12th grade. Developed some skills in art. I loved art all my life. And as I developed skills in art, my art teacher, who was a Xavier graduate, gave me the ability to put a portfolio together. He saw I had a lot of talent, and I was very interested in art.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So he brought me to Xavier, showed my work to the professor there. They gave me a scholarship in art, fine arts. With me and my silly self wanting to teach all my life. So I told my coaches when I was at Carver Senior High School ... they wanted to send me to Grambling, to Southern University, to play football. I said, "Coach, I want to teach."

He looked at me kind of crazy, and thought I was going bananas, but I had the scholarship to Xavier in fine arts. Knew that when I got there. I changed, cause like I said, I wanted to teach.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So I became a secondary art educator in high schools, and that made me very happy. They dropped the fine arts scholarship, and I had to do work-study, Pell Grants, and other things, and when I finished in five or so years, I started teaching

at Clark Senior High School. So that's my love back from wanting to go to Clark. I wound up teaching there from '78 to '84, 9th through 12th grade.

'84 they moved me, like they do in all these parishes with most teachers, to an elementary school. Now I didn't have a background in elementary, but I adapted pretty good. That was K-6, and I enjoyed it!

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: That was from '84 to '94. Immediately, I got a request by one of my old student teachers that taught me in 9th grade, art, at Rivers Frederick. He asked did I want to be a teacher at 35, where he was retiring. He recommended me. So on that recommendation, I was moved to McDonogh 35, which was a very prestigious school. Blue Ribbon School.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I've always been blessed to have good schools that I worked at. So I worked there from '94 to 2002. Then they moved me to what was then called the Signature Schools. Mr Amato, the superintendent, or whatever he was in terms of our schools ... I think he was superintendent ... had set up a signature school with culinary, pre-med, early college.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So I wound up teaching at the campus that was formerly a junior high school, across from Booker T. And the school was Derham Middle School. And they wound up moving me to Delgado's campus where I taught premed students who were going to college, and I taught students who were going to SUNO and early college.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So I had the privilege of being a non-whatever college professor. And it was funny that people, students that were going to the school that wasn't high school students thought that I was a college professor, because I was walking around with a tie, and looking like a professor.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And some of them asked me, "Can I get in your class?" I said, "No, you can't get in my class, because I'm a high school teacher. After that, I came back from the storm, and I wound up teaching at St. Aug And I originally I wanted to teach at St. Aug, when I got out of Xavier, but they didn't pay enough 'cause I had a family.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So I went to public school. So one of the principals at St. Aug needed to start a art program so he asked me to come there, set it up. And for two years I taught there.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And my son went there also, because when we came back, we didn't want to send him back to 35. The school had changed. So I put him in St. Aug, and they paid part of his tuition, and I paid the rest. By being a teacher they give you a little discount.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: When he finished, I was moved to across the river. I found a job at Algiers Charter School System, which was elementary again. K-8. I loved that school. That school was also another good school. The school was very nice. Behrman Elementary. It was a very good school, and that's when around 2010 I retired, and I'm now just working at the Superdome part-time, and drawing my retirement. And that's another end of the low wire because I make 65.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And I'm probably applying for my Social Security, and moving out of the work sector. I'll finally get a full retirement.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And I'll finally be able to relax and enjoy the fruits of all my work, and sell more of my art work. I've been doing art work since I came back from the storm. And I have a pretty impressive modern art work that I'm trying to sell, and show, and do things. And I'm starting to see that I want to do a show here[inaudible 00:09:45] but that was a little problem here, so I'm waiting on them to tell me what they're going to do.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: But in the meantime I'm working towards doing shows at festivals, Gentilly Fest, working towards doing Essence, working towards doing the Jazz Fest. But you need a lot of money to set up the booths and stuff, and each one is progressively higher in terms of what you have to come up with to set up things.

Then you have to have things printed. You have to be able to do work at these shows. You have to be available to stand there, and talk to people, and all kinds of things. So I had to get more things together. So that's my plans for the future.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: That's about it for right now. Anything else you want to know?

Speaker 1: Yeah! So let's go back a little bit. I feel like you've given me a nice broad overview-

Michael: I do talk a lot.

Speaker 1: -but of course I'm interested in as many specifics as I can get at. So do you remember a little bit about the home that you lived in, in the Tremé area, when y'all moved there. Can you tell me what it was like to grow up in that neighborhood?

Michael: Back then, in let's say the 60's, the early 60's, we lived in areas that were more family-orientated. We could play outside in the yard and stuff. It was fun growing up in those neighborhoods. You could walk to school. We lived in a house. Shotgun houses most of the time, in either half of a house or a whole house.

It was very home ... well, we're very close. My brothers and sisters were like steps, you know.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: A few years apart. So I was the oldest one, so we had fun playing together and stuff in the outside, and just enjoying life. I was sort of the big brother, you know? And they all followed me, and they used me as an example.

That's the Tremé area. I can think about the Ninth Ward, we were even closer because we all, like I said, went to school around the same time.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I went first, then they went in the lower grades, and it progressed that way. If somebody knew me, they knew my brother, they knew my sisters and stuff. That kind of family thing, you know?

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And it was fun growing up back in those times. Peaceful, quiet. I was mostly the person who ... the oldest child who watched the kids when Mom went out, when Dad went out to get groceries or whatever.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And whatever they did, I got charged for!

Speaker 1: Right

Michael: So when they got a chastising or whatever, I wound up getting it too, because of what they did.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: It was funny, but you grow, and you learn, and you understand that when they put responsibilities on you, your parents put responsibilities on you, that you need to make sure that you watch your siblings, and make sure they don't do anything. Wasn't too bad. They didn't do too many things that I wound up regretting.

Speaker 1: Good! So was it ... I'm guessing it was predominantly Black?

Michael: Oh yeah! Every area I lived in was predominantly Black. Especially that St. Bernard area that area that I talk about Derham being, we hardly ever had ... I can't remember ... I guess you could say if you went towards Esplanade you would find the Whites in that area, but mostly predominantly Black in the areas I lived in.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative) And your parents, what did they do for a living?

Michael: My mom was a general housekeeper. Later on in life she went out, and she did some work at what was then S.H. Kress on Canal Street. And she was a short-order cook, and stuff. After that, she worked in people's houses, white people's houses, in terms of around the Franklin area, Franklin Avenue area. She'd go out and clean up their house, take care of the older gentlemen that lived in the house. And she there at Fontainebleau or Fontainederry or something, and they were very appreciative. They gave her a few things like clothes, and stuff that they didn't want.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Because I was a big guy, she would bring out some clothes that I could wear sometimes, and I would wear them.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And they were back then what you're calling expensive things. So when some of them threw their stuff away or just are buying new fashion ... like sander belt pants, those things cost a lot, what I remember, getting old and seeing them. Sander belt was a classy type trouser that cost a lot of money. So when they give them away, they were still pretty good!

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I could say also that she worked at a nursery later on, where she once again cooked, and took care of the little kids that were in there. Became like the unofficial grandmother. Last job she worked at was a school off of ... Cabot School off of Canal Street. St. Joseph's, St. Michaels, or something. And she became the unofficial grandmother and cook and all the little things. She did cooking.

And then she moved to Baton Rouge after the storm. So that was a trip coming from Baton Rouge to here. But she finally gave it up and now she's in Baton Rouge, living and relaxing, and doing nothing. But she deserved it.

Speaker 1: And your dad?

Michael: Oh! Okay, Stepdad.

Speaker 1: Stepdad.

Michael: He was a truck driver in the French Quarters, in the French Market area. He used to deliver food to stores like Schwegmann's. Produce and short delivery runs. They'd order tomatoes, or apples, he'd bring them, and drop 'em off at the supermarket, and then move to the next one.

That's what he did most of his life. And he had little side, what we call hustles.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: Where at night, he'd go out ... and at that time, they didn't have garbage disposals or whatever, so he'd take the pasteboard boxes, or the cardboard boxes, and he'd bring them to the dump sites in Saint Bernard, and he threw that away. And that was his whole thing, those two jobs. But he made pretty good salary.

Speaker 1: Okay. And how many kids were there?

Michael: Five in the second group.

Speaker 1: Okay. Five. And did you have a sense that you guys were comfortable? Did you ever want for anything?

Michael: Oh no! We didn't want for anything. We had the comforts of food. We always had three squares and all the healthy foods. None of the junk food that kids get now.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: Lots of fruits and vegetables. We had regular meals cooked all the time. Fast food, I didn't know what that was!

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: MacDonald's, Burger King, and all of them, right, we'd hear about them. But we ate mostly the real foods, and whatever.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And we all were hardly ever sick. Hardly ever had any problems. And if we wanted a snack, we had a lot of stuff there, in terms of fruits and stuff. And my mom would make frozen cups. What we call zip cups. We got different names for them across the city.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Frozen cups you take Kool-Aid ... and cola drink was another thing we didn't have too much of, because we used to make root beer from root beer extract. To make Kool-Aid ... I prided myself when I grew up, I would never drink root beer extract with lemon juice up in it. I'm talking about squeezing lemon. I prided myself wouldn't drink too much Kool-Aid, 'cause I was sick of Kool-Aid-

Speaker 1: Right

Michael: -All through my life. But the other side was getting cola drinks, which was bad, so I cut them out too. Just growing up, we were very happy kids. We didn't have no problems then. All the watermelon you could eat, all the sugar cane, break it, cut it and eat it. All the other things we could find that people don't even know about, or haven't heard about, like kumquats and stuff like that. Some people don't even know what that is!

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Plantains and stuff like that. Look like a banana but not a banana. I could name a lot of things that we had that people now if you showed it to them, or you told them about it, they wouldn't even believe it. Of course the French Quarter's changed, and you don't find those things here too much.

But we were very happy. I remember Chiclets. When he went to Schwegmann's he'd get us certain little things like Chiclets, little bitty gum type things, and Cracker Jacks or something like that. Those simple things, you know?

Speaker 1: Okay, and you mentioned that you met your first ... like you know your first group of brothers and sisters.

Michael: Yeah we met them.

Speaker 1: Did you meet your dad?

Michael: Yes. Later in life when I was around 30's, I met him. I was teaching at Clark Sr. High School, and one of my cousins came over, because they heard, I don't know from who or whatever, they heard that their relative had had a son. So they came up to the school and said, "Look, I know your daddy. And I know your other sister." And I said, "Who is my dad?" Cause I never knew [inaudible 00:19:58]

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So they showed me a sister that I didn't know about. Her name was Gwen also. Cause I had my baby sister was named Gwen.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: So I had an older sister named Gwen, imagine that!

Speaker 1: Hmm.

Michael: So she took me out to Donaldsonville. And I met him. A gentleman, he remembered me as being someone that was born when he was with my mom one time. Cause that's how they operated. It was relationships, it wasn't marriage.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: So when I met him, I saw him as what I was gonna look like at 56. Tall, sorta little bit of gris, sorta like I am now. Tall. He was tall. And I went back and told my mom. I said, "Mom, look, I met this gentleman named Marshall Stewart."

So she tells me ... she get quiet, you know, we was talkin' on the phone ...

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: So she get quiet, so then I knew I had her, ya know?

Speaker 1: Ha ha!

Michael: Cause I always really wanted to know. But she was telling me someone else was my dad, and that wasn't my dad, [inaudible 00:21:10] and his name was Richard Russell. And ironically, that's the name that I had on my records in school before she married this gentleman and gave me Bridges. So I moved up the ladder in terms of last names.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: But for a long time, I was Russell. So when told her I met Marshall Stewart, she got quiet. I said, "Well, Mom, why you been telling me that was my dad?" I wasn't mad, I just wanted to know.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: She gets quiet and she tells me, "I didn't want you to turn out like him." I said "Wait a minute, I'm a college grad. I'm teaching. How can I ever turn out to be like him?" Cause he was a sharecropper, picking crops and stuff.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: In people's fields out there. I'm saying to myself, "Wait, how can I ever turn out to be like him? I've been to college and everything else. I'm a teacher. I could never be like him! Because I'm not in that area."

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: So I said "Okay Ma, [inaudible 00:22:03]" And I didn't hold it against her. That's her thinking. It was her thinking, I guess. I was a little surprised. So it was my dad.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: I was just laughing. I said, "Well, the things you find out if you search long enough, or you wait long enough, or you pray for it long enough, you'll find out." And I always say if a person doesn't know his dad, or her dad, or her mom, they need to be told who that person is, because that's something that a child needs to have that connection with.

It didn't hurt me, but I finally got clarity on who my other parent was. He passed at 56, and I passed that stage, but he died of smoking, and I said I'd never smoke. I hardly drink, because my stepdad died of drinking. So I have two things that I really don't like.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Michael: But I like both of the gentlemen. Both of them were ... I consider having two dads, because they were the type of people that gave me certain values that made me the man that I am. The stepdad gave me the work values that I have now. I'm a hard worker, even today. And I don't let anything stop me from doing what I have to do.

The other gentleman. I met him, and I liked him, because he was very friendly, my dad. And he was very friendly, "Oh come here! This is my son!" And just got out there and met him. "Look, come here! This is my son! This is my son!" "Wait, you just met me a few minutes ago, and I'm your son."

Speaker 1: Right!

Michael: But he was glad to know that I was his. He has several other kids too.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: Still making kids before he passed. I was laughing saying "Wow, I'm glad I'm not like that."

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: He was a good man, but I really enjoyed having both of those gentlemen in my life for the times that I had them. I only knew my dad for about three years. Like I said, it was a good time. I was going out there on Father's Day. And he passed from smoking, like I was saying, and it sort of shocked me, because I had the little Father's Day card ready. I was ironing my clothes, and they called me and told me, "Look, your dad passed." I said, "Oh! From what?" "Smoking".

So that blocked that then for me. No smoking. Never.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative) So, you mentioned having your own family. So again we need to backtrack a little bit. How and when did you meet your wife? Ex-wife.

Michael: I was 26, and I was going to Xavier University. And she was in art. A little bit higher in the school than I was. I was like a sophomore, and she was like a junior/senior. Had a little trouble getting out of there. Xavier was a little hard. And we finally met in our department. We talked for a little while. Dated for a little while. Heavily! And she was from Uptown.

That was around St. John, above the Catholic area. And went by her house several times, and we dated and got very close. And of course when you're dating, you want to be developing a relationship, you're very intimate and stuff. So she became pregnant, and that's the next thing.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: We talked for a while, and I told her "I want to marry you." I was getting out of college, and so I talked to her parents, and told her parents I wanted to marry her. So we eventually got married in her church, and I became Catholic, because I was baptist for a while. Well, for my entire life. So that was a new experience, but being exposed to Xavier, and getting the Catholic values from Xavier helped me with that. So it wasn't a major transition.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: I adjusted very well, and became Catholic in terms of that. We were good. A couple of months apart. She's May and I'm February. We had two daughters. Andrea's the one that we had first. And then Kelly came along. Six years apart.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: We stayed married for 14 years, and then she decided that she wanted to find herself. I can understand that now, because she lived with her mom most of her life. She was a baby girl.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I came along and took her out of that into another situation that was like being tied down again, but not really being exposed to the outside world. Also you had the [inaudible 00:27:13] being in the house with her parents and stuff, never went any farther than that.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: So I could understand that. She decided that she didn't want to stay married. Pursued it for three years after that. And she didn't want to stay married, so I sort of moved on. Had taken it a little hard, but I got over it. Then I met my second wife, who we had a son by. And married her for 19 years. And went through the storm and everything else. Had a house and everything, down in the East.

So when she asked for a divorce in 2010, I said, "Wait, not again!" But I was laughing, I said, "Well, you know. Let it go." My son finished high school and stuff. Went off to college.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: We stayed friends for a long time, then all of a sudden, like in 2016, ten ... no six years later, she says she's ready to fill out divorce papers and stuff, and she sent me the divorce papers. And I was laughing, 'cause we was very good friends. We were still dating. I could still go to her house and wash clothes, clean the vehicle, had access keys and all that. And she told me " to myself. I didn't question it. I said, "Okay, I'll bring the keys over." She said, "Don't fight it." I said, "Okay, I won't fight it!"

So, I'm presently single. For a while. Finally moving on and happy and stuff like that. I'm better, and have someone I'm talking to now, who's more like ... we're more compatible. Two teachers, ex-teachers. Years, same years and all that. I say "I...", she would finish the sentence with something. You know, it's a better situation.

I think that I have a better relationship, and that it's closer, and it's more suited to me. And it's a "We" thing, not an "I" thing.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And I finally get exactly what I wanted. All the years that I wanted ... cause from 26 up until now, all I ever wanted to be was married. All I ever wanted to be was a family person. I don't want to date. Man, I don't even like that dating. I don't want that dating stuff. That was half my life I been married. And I'm more of a family man.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: I'm more of a man that likes a stable relationship. I don't like dating at all. And dating scares me!

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: Cause people out here aren't the same. Guys aren't, women aren't. They're seeking different things and it's just crazy. With cell phones, and texting, and all them other things. Yes, I use them, but you could say a lot of things in texting, but you can't really feel what a person is thinking with a text.

I like to talk deep, exposed to the physical. You can tell things by talking to a person and seeing how they react, and view expressions and stuff. I'm more of an emotional type guy.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: So that kind of stuff is what I'm looking for, and I'm getting that. I tell people, "You stimulate my mind; You got me." Because first of all, you got my attention, you got my curiosity. And that's what I look for in a lady. A person that will stimulate my mind, as well as my body, but I want the mental stimulation first.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: That's what I look for first. Now all the other stuff is gonna come down the road.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: But I like to make people smile. I like to be a happy person. I like to give. I'm a caring person, and those type things.

Speaker 1: Okay. Any grandkids?

Michael: Oh yeah! Three boys.[inaudible 00:31:07] And they're all doing well. One is getting out of high school this year, and one in elementary. And one is a little cutie pie, about three years, four years.

Speaker 1: Also you mentioned that when you relocated for Katrina ... where did you end up going?

Michael: Oh! First Dallas, then Houston, stayed in Houston for six to eight months.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: Came back and worked on the house then moved back here into the East. Got the house back up and all that. That was a lot of work. I used some artistic skill to do tile

floors, put them down, take them up. Paint the walls. Put in stainless steel stuff. Do the gas work on the pipes and stuff before they came then to connect everything. Got compliments from the sewer and water boards. "Oh you did a good job! People usually have to pay a contractor." I'm just good with my hands, you know?

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Put granite tops on the things ... the house was brick so all we had to do was gut it down to the studs, which I did. Then come in there and take care of all the stuff and put it back together. But it's better. It was valued at a certain price. A low price, about \$50,000 when we bought it. And now it's valued at \$150,000. Big double driveway and all them other things. And just a fantastic place.

But she has it.

Speaker 1: Hmm.

Michael: I'm not in it!

Speaker 1: Well did you work at all while you were in Houston? How did you guys ...

Michael: No, I'll tell you what happened. She was coming back and forth to New Orleans to work.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: And I was privileged to ... didn't have to because I had money coming in from all these past school systems. Superintendent was paying us a little stipend. Plus Houston gave us food stamps, so it wasn't really a necessary thing for me to work. She worked for the state as a social worker. So it was pretty much easy.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: And we wasn't there too long. Six to eight months, it wasn't that bad.

Came back here. Got a job. New Orleans Parish. And resumed through [inaudible 00:33:41] school system. I was a teacher for thirty-four years, and it was ... we didn't have too many problems.

Speaker 1: Did all the kids come back here? Or are they based in other places?

Michael: My oldest daughter wound up being moved to Atlanta, Georgia.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: Ironically, she lived in an apartment in the East. When she went to Atlanta, she got a big house, her and her husband, and it saddened me. Because you could move from an apartment, and you couldn't get a house here, but when you go to Atlanta, you've got a house! And I don't remember what she was doing, but he was a bus driver. So the salary that he was making was enough to get them a house. Ironically, they did divorce, and the house went South, and she moved back to New Orleans. She now lives in the East.

My middle child, my daughter, she lives in Baker, Louisiana. She's been married for about three or so years. She married a nice young man, and he bought her a house, second year of the marriage. And he works in a plant, good country boy, and gives her anything she wants. They have no children. They have two dogs. And they're very close, like children. And they travel and do stuff. Like I said, she doesn't want for anything.

My son is working on his Masters now. So he's in Texas, and he's working on that in psychology. And that's about it.

Speaker 1: Okay. What about you in terms of traveling, or other places that you've lived? Have you been out of the country?

Michael: No! I can answer that.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Michael: I've traveled to different parts of the country, Texas, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, through teaching and stuff. And I'm planning on traveling more. Next year's gonna be the year, cause I'll be not working, and traveling more, and do more things. I've traveled somewhat around the country. I want to go to other places in the country, but ... so that's the plan.

Speaker 1: Okay, and then ... it's come up a little bit in my interviews, especially with people who attended Xavier during some of the student demonstrations ... how strong is your recollection of any of that stuff? How affected or how close to civil rights activism

Michael: [inaudible 00:36:29] First of all, during the time I was going to Xavier, we had this thing about getting involved in the Vietnam War. And I was the age that you could be drafted, and you had to sign up for the draft. I was opposed to going to Vietnam, and war situations, because I didn't believe we should be over there in another country, in other people's business. And I believe there was more than that, but my thing ... why'd I have to leave my country to go fight somebody else's war? So I'm glad I wasn't drafted.

We had other things before that. We had Black Panthers and stuff in the Ninth Ward. We had racial tensions as I was growing up, but I was always pro-Black, in

terms of being a person that was about Black rights and stuff. I didn't like segregation. I didn't like things that Blacks were put down for, and I've always been a strong proponent to the Black identity ... trying to think of what I ... see back then it was stronger, today, it's not that strong.

Things that pertain to Blacks being considered better people, not at the bottom and stuff. I've always been that kind of person. I tried to instill that in kids that I've taught, the Black Pride.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: The Black image, like Angela Davis, and ... I'm trying to think of other people that have long passed ... Thurgood Marshall. I'm thinking about Martin Luther King. We went through that too. That was in '68 when he was shot and killed. Assassinated. I was very strong about that civil rights and stuff. And I've always had that feel. And I used to teach that, you know when I was teaching in school, things that would make a Black child feel proud about themselves. I've always had that instilled in me, and I am that way today.

I look at a lot of the things on TV today, and I say, "It's nothing but history repeating itself."

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: But we, most of us as Black individuals, Black Americans, have kind of gotten away from certain things. We see it, but we don't see it. It's like we have blinders on, and look at it and I say, "You just don't realize, it's the same thing, but a different guise." And some of us older people are more conscious of it. Some young people feel a little bit all right about being involved in it. But you just see it. It's not the same feelings that we had. Some of us were very strong about it back then.

A lot of kids today, kids being shot like Travon Williams, unarmed ... I call it getting away with it. So they think they're getting away with it, but it's the same thing. A lot of Blacks were killed back when we were coming up, and it was swept under the rug.

But I'm very strong about things that pertain to Blacks. And it just bothers me sometimes that ... I used to teach Black history, and Black History Month, I was really pushing it. And now today, if you go to a school, you're not going to see much being said about Black history, and nothing being done about Black history. And I see it, you know? It started dropping off when I was getting out of teaching. They stopped having Black History programs, they stopped emphasizing Blacks, the rights and things of the accomplishments that they did.

And I saw it. And nothing was said about it. But that's how times change.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: Even the shows on TV. You see it yourself. You don't have too many Black History Month programs, or going back to things like Roots. You see it! Swept under the rug. But that's the way it is. That's our times. I try to teach everybody that I see, kids or whatever, little things even today about Black history. I'd say "Did you know that this was invented by a Black man?" Like the cotton gin, or something like that. And they're like "Wait, you said a Black did that?" "Yeah! A Black did that!"

The traffic light, the simple traffic light, a Black man invented that, but you never hear it. The refrigerated things on a boxcar, a Black man did that. People don't understand. We have a rich culture, and a rich heritage. We came from Africa, but we had a heritage before that, and you can't forget that. You can't discount that. You can't sweep it under the rug. That's where we came from.

And you gotta remember, that you're descended of kings and queens. You're not just the average little person. You have a lot of talent, you have a lot of skills. Most of us are very good with our hands. We can see something and do it. We don't have to go to school, but we should go to school to obtain the proper knowledge. But most of us can do things with our hands quicker than we could do stuff with writing, and doing things.

College helps. I tell kids "Some of us are not made for college. Some of us are not college material. But you can do other things." I don't just scare them about going to college. Telling me you want to try another avenue like junior college before you go to college. Then go to college if you feel comfortable with it. Do it. But there's beauty schools, there's schools for nurses, there's different things you could do.

I don't discourage a kid. I try to give them hope, and let them see that they could become something.

Speaker 1: Well the last couple of questions I have are more specifically just about the Semester of Wisdom of the Elders. What made you want to take the class? Would you want to participate in another semester?

Michael: Sure. Sure. I can answer that.

Speaker 1: And did you have anything that you either didn't enjoy, or that you felt we could do better next time?

Michael: I felt I don't have any things I didn't enjoy.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I'll participate in the game, and talk to a new group, and try to inspire them to put all their efforts into trying to share something with their families that we have to

offer. Because a lot of us don't share stuff, and some things get lost through time, or we pass. And I've seen that myself when I'm at a slight young-old age. I'm in the middle. 'Cause when I talk to some older people, "Oh he's still young!" When I talk to some older people, I mean younger people, they tell me, "You're a little old!" So I'm in the middle.

Speaker 1: Right.

Michael: I can't fit right in the pocket, but I don't worry about that. I believe in sharing my knowledge before I pass. And I told my son one day, "Son, you know we have Indian blood in us." And my momma told me that, so I'm sharing something. He said "I didn't know that Dad!" And I said, "Yeah, you do." So that's something that we should do and share with our kids and our grandkids before we pass, because they don't know.

If they know, then that makes them a better person, and have a connection with their families, their ancestors, or whatever, any way you want to put it.

Speaker 1: And since you were one of my three who actually came to orientation-

Michael: I try!

Speaker 1: Right? So what was the major draw for you? Why did you want to participate in the program?

Michael: I wanted to find out about my family history. I wanted to be a part of sharing that knowledge. This is roughly the second book that I have been in contact with. Another student who went to Southeast and wrote a book about ten black artists, it's in the libraries, I'm told, as a reference book now. And I was privileged to be one of the younger artists in the book. John Scott who taught at Xavier, Lloyd Bennett, Jack Jordan, those people. I was gonna complement those people, and I wasn't even an artist, you know I'm just a little [inaudible 00:45:11] artist.

And I was privileged to be in that group, and the lady was interviewing me. I didn't know the depth; I didn't know the value, the historical reference ... it's a reference book too ... and I look back on that as the early beginning of what I was gonna be exposed to and what I was going to be a part of.

Like this.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michael: I'm going to be a part of something that you're doing, and it's a good thing. And I felt interested in that because you're sharing knowledge, and learning something about myself, my family. That's good. That's good to know, and I'm not going to close my[inaudible 00:45:50] I'm always open, innovative, creative, curious person.

That's why I attended all the classes I could. That's why I was interested, because once again, it was stimulating my mind. And once you're stimulating my mind, you got me!

If I didn't go, or come, it was because of personal things that happened, but I tried to make it here all the times I could. And I would get upset when I couldn't make it! I'd say "I've got to do this, then that!"

Speaker 1: All right. Okay, well did ...