

# Small Town Diners as Extensions of Home Project

## Interview Transcription

Project: Teresa's Restaurant Culture  
Interviewee: Teresa Blair

Date: November 14, 2007

Context: Teresa's Restaurant is on HWY 185 (Gordon Ave.) in Bowling Green, KY. Teresa Blair is the owner/operator and she is the primary consultant for this project. The focus of the interview is Teresa's Restaurant as an extension of home for Teresa, her staff and her customers. She agreed to be recorded for this interview. The interview was conducted in the meeting room of the restaurant with the door to the main section of the restaurant purposefully left open to allow for the recording of the diner sounds that are present in the audio file.

Recordist: Tonya Taylor

Recorder: PMD 660 Marantz, mP3 format.

Accompanying photographs: See accompanying disc.

Transcriber: Tonya Taylor

Transcriber's notes: Restaurant noise is a regular background sound on the recording. In an effort to avoid repetition I have selectively eliminated certain non-critical spoken sounds, such as "uh", from the transcription.

Please note that while all efforts have been made to accurately represent the interview in this transcription, the sound recording (see accompanying disc) should be considered the primary resource for this interview.

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- TT: Good morning, I'm Tonya Taylor. I'm here with Teresa Blair of Teresa's Restaurant. We are in Teresa's Restaurant in Bowling Green, Ky. This interview will be archived in my files under 11.14.2007.Blair, and that is B-L-A-I-R.  
And Teresa, it's just a little bit after eight this morning and you and I have been chatting a little bit before the recorder went on about how, how this place runs and the fact that you seem to know everyone's face and just have a real, a real warmth about you. So that's kind of what I want to talk about here. How long have you owned the restaurant?
- TB: We've been in business nineteen years.
- TT: Wow. But now, you moved from another location.
- TB: This is our third location.
- TT: Third? Where were the first two?

TB: We were on sixty-eight and eighty at Rockfield, that was the first location. Inside of a Minute Mart, we had, half of it was a store and half of it was Teresa's Restaurant. And, we were out there about a year, the guy broke the lease and we went to-- I went back to work for Red's Coach and Table for about six months, got up the nerve to do it again and went on Center Street. And we were there about nine years.

TT: That's the one I remember. And now, the Center Street restaurant was much smaller and you specifically built this restaurant to your specifications, is that right?

TB: This actually was an empty building, used to be Kentucky Bearings. They made bearings here and sold parts.

TT: Really?!

TB: The building had been sitting empty for about three years and I had been in the other location renting for almost nine years with no hope of buying the property. So I took a chance, called somebody I knew and bought this lot and building.

TT: That's fantastic. But now if this was a bearings factory, it didn't look like this.

TB: No.

TT: Can you tell me a little bit about the process of creating the, the environment that we see, which is--I'll, I'll explain it in a little while to the, to the recorder. But, tell me how you created this environment.

TB: We came in, just put walls up and did the necessary things to run a food business out of here and, for the first two years it was a block building, just like eating in a cafeteria. Saved a little money, put up barnwood

TT: That's right.

TB: Put up barnwood and after that, all the customers have started bringing me stuff, stuff that their wives wouldn't let them hang in the house or stuff that they are remodeling and redoing, just special things to them. So, we've got them hanging. They can come in and say "that's my basket hanging up there" or "that's my stuffed fish." So they are all a part of this, it's all their stuff.

TT: I had no idea that that was the case.

TB: Yes. All their stuff.

TT: So they are actually bringing pieces of their homes, maybe they weren't allowed to have it in their homes, but, pieces of their homes in here so that they can feel even more at home.

TB: Right.

TT: That's pretty amazing.

TB: The neat thing now is that there's so much stuff here that if you bring it and give it to me, I set it in the corner, it never gets put up. So, if you can find a spot for it, bring your ladder and your screw gun and hang it up yourself.

TT: Well now, that's fantastic.

TB: Yep.

TT: Do you actually have people who come and do that?

TB: Yeah. So they'll call and so "Okay, I've got some license plates that I want to hang up, have you got a spot?" and I'll say, "well, if you can find a spot bring them."

TT: Teresa, that's amazing.

TB: Yeah

TT: (4:00) What prompted you to open a restaurant? I mean you obviously have a very warm heart, but what prompted opening a restaurant?

TB: I think probably the biggest thing has been out of necessity. Single mom, I was twenty-nine years old with four children and a high school education. I'd waited tables since I was thirteen and always made good money. The reality that I'm going to get older and my smile's not going to make as much money on the table...

TT: (Laughter)

TB: Prompted me to get into business for myself. And I have taken care of a large family, so I've always been good at taking care of people; we tenant-farmed, so I had to cook for large amounts of people, so it just all kind of clicked. And here we are nineteen years later.

TT: Nineteen years. Do you remember when--do you remember when this business made the transformation for you from business to home?

TB: I think probably the first few years because I had to spend so much time here. We didn't go in debt; I borrowed twenty-five hundred dollars to start the business and so that meant day to day I bought my groceries at Save-a-Lot for the first two years, day to day. My children had playpens in the kitchen and when the customers would clear out, used to we worked three shifts. We had breakfast, lunch and supper seven days a week, so that, that, you all were my family and in turn, were my children's family. So when the crowd would thin out, I'd put the walker, my youngest son is eighteen and his walker would be out front and I'd be in the back because we didn't have any help there that we didn't have to have, I did all the prep work and stuff. And so the customers would, Claude Burnam is passed away now but he would say, "Teresa, this baby's hung under the table." And I'd say, "Well, drag him out of there."

TT: That's fantastic.

TB: Yeah.

TT: So they actually helped to raise the family.

TB: Yeah.

TT: That's pretty cool.

TB: Of course now the boys don't want to do this now, they're all, they've had enough of it. Enough left-overs, enough. They don't want to do it. There's one who thinks he's interested in it, and he's actually, he's going to culinary school now. But he thinks that I work too much and he's going to, the main reason he wants to do it is to teach me to manage people without working.

TT: That's interesting.

TB: I hope he learns how to do it. I haven't learned how to do it.

TT: I feel as though, as a customer, the main reason to come to Teresa's Restaurant, the food's great, but it's the atmosphere. It's the warmth. It's a cinder-block building, but the waitresses are warm and you're warm. And I'm very interested in how you, how you create that with your staff. Your staff has been with you for a very long time. I know most of them by face, like you know your customers, not necessarily by name. How did you come across your staff and how long have they been with you?

TB: I think probably, you know, it's just something inside of me when I meet somebody I kind of know if we click or not. Our policy here is, you know, you start, you are on a trial basis for the first two weeks and if we get along, if you do your job, I expect a lot. I expect the best, and if this is where God has put you, if you'll do your best, he's going to bless you for it. And it's always been--this is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a nurse, but I didn't have the opportunity to go to school and so I know that of you work hard enough, he's going to bless you for it. It may not be what you think, not the rewards you think you're going to get, but he is going to put people in your path to help you get where you want to go. Over the years we've had girls who went on to school that are doing well and they still, a girl, Margaret Carr called me this week and told me happy birthday and it's been six years since she worked here. She's actually running a salon in Ohio and doing great. Just different stories--now we've got three girls who are going to school. Now we kind of work the schedule so they can work and go to school, too because I know I'm not going to do this forever. I'm ready to get out. They've been with me a long time so I want to make sure that they have the opportunity to do something else.

TT: [Both Laugh] You're pretty awesome. I, I want to know,-- a lot of the questions here, that, that I had were just things that just come out of you naturally; this truly is your home. What time do you get here in the morning?

TB: (9:00) I'm very fortunate now, my staff has been--the key group has been with me better than ten years. And so I usually don't get here until about eight o'clock unless something is going on. If we've got a catering or if I'm going to make a little extra money, I'll get up early.

TT: Well, of course.

TB: I usually, I get up at home at about six and am usually here by seven-thirty/eight o'clock.

TT: But now that's not always been the case.

TB: No. For years, probably twelve years, I opened every morning. I had to get to work by three-thirty and I left at ten that night. Seven days a week, back to the point of this place was my family. And we did that for at least ten or twelve years. My kids just grew up in here, me on the telephone, running up and down the road, getting back before the rush started. So it's been a long journey.

TT: From my side of it, the outcome has been pretty good. Can you tell me a little bit about, about your customers. Did they follow you between those three places?

TB: I've been very fortunate that I've waited tables since I was thirteen, which has been a few years [laughs], and I've had a good rapport with them and they've just followed me, wherever I went, even when I was waiting tables. And so, when I went in business for myself, our first day here in Bowling Green, over on Center Street, we did what I thought in my mind I had figured out on paper how many plates I would have to serve to be able to pay my light bill and pay my rent. We did more the first day than I thought it would take us six months to get to.

TT: That's really amazing. And you, how old were you when you opened the restaurant?

TB: I think twenty-five.

TT: So you had been waiting tables for twelve years at that point so you had built quite a family at that point.

TB: Yeah.

TT: What do you think it is about you that people...I know that is a loaded question, but what do you think it is about you that people like so much?

TB: I'm not--I think that I'm non-judgmental; I just love you for who you are. And you know that's really hit me hard in the last few years of...just loving people where they're at. And this has--this business has cost me a lot in relationships. You know, I've just not been able to have a good relationship because I'm, I'm--so involved here and so involved with my customers. And I feel like there's not, not many that come in here on a daily basis that I wouldn't do what I could for them. This, if you call me--but I know them well enough to know that if they call me, they need it. You know, if they call me, they really need it. So, it's been--it's been really good. I've had to, you know, just come to the fact that, for years I thought I was supposed to be this Joyce Meyers, or I was supposed to be somebody who made a real difference. And I have found out just this last year--I lost a son and have really rethought everything I've done, and I'm doing what I'm supposed to already.

TT: Absolutely.

TB: Yeah. It's been a hard lesson for me because I don't feel like I do that much. But then I'll hear people...you know I couldn't, didn't work for awhi--a long time after Robbie died. Months. Any more than I had to, and, because I couldn't be Teresa. I, you know, whatever is going on with you, I am really concerned about what's going on with you. And I went through a period of six or eight months where I didn't care about anybody except Teresa and MY loss. And losing a child is one of the worst things that can ever happen to anybody, but because of this business, I meet people every day who have lost children and are still going. They come in to check on me, see how I'm doing and-- In particular, a guy, his son died twenty four years ago I believe. No, it's been longer than that, it was forty-

some years, nineteen fifty nine. The guy's telling me this story, as he's telling me the story, tears are running down his face.

TT: Right.

TB: His wife had just died of cancer and her last thoughts, her last talking, was "I'm finally going to get to see my baby." He's telling me this story to tell me that it never gets any better. That hurt doesn't get any better, but you do live through it.

TT: Yeah.

TB: And for me, too that's been a hard lesson because I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and feel better one day. And I don't really think that happens in losing a child. I think you learn a different way to live and in doing that means, you know, I've got to be Teresa again which is loving you all and just doing what I've always done.

TT: And, by the way, I'm a fifteen year customer.

[Laughter]

TT: I've been around for a long time, too. So, tell me about your--when you came back. Did --when you came back from being away and cocooning yourself after Robbie's death did you feel as though--you've told me a little bit, but did you feel as though the people here wanted to help you?

TB: (14:00) You know, I really do and I think how amazing it is that, I haven't actually counted the cards, but I know it's two shoeboxes full of sympathy cards from the Bowling Green area, and even from people from out of state, who, you'd be so surprised or I'm so surprised how many people end up talking about their experience at Teresa's. And they really have wanted to, they want me better; you know, they don't like me being sad. You know, their, their, their thing about coming to Teresa's is you know, they know they're going to get decent food in a clean environment with a neat, courteous, friendly server who knows that her job is to serve you for that thirty minutes. And they were getting that without the atmosphere.

TT: Right.

TB: Yeah, they were getting that without the atmosphere, and that's what they missed. And not just for their selfish parts, but because they really wanted me to be better.

TT: I know that when I would come in during that time period, I would always ask where you were, how you were. And the servers cared, and then the table behind me would chime in with something.

So, you have people that you see every single day that aren't your staff. They're your customers. Can you tell me about, start with the breakfast crowd, I suspect they are different – breakfast and lunch.

TB: Yeah. We're just, again, just really fortunate, we're fortunate that people, that people are creatures of habit, that when they get--you know, we've got servers here that make out their tickets the night before because they know that John is going to be at E3 and he's going to eat bacon and scrambled eggs and he's been doing that for ten years. And for their part, they're special because--their server, they don't even have to tell them what they want, they just come in and sit down and they get it for them.

If you walk in Teresa's you're going to see, especially at lunch time, you're going to see a very diverse crowd. From the laborers who have been out digging ditches to the people from the housing authority who are struggling to try to get back on their feet, to doctors, lawyers, judges, nursing staff. It's just all a mixture and everybody is treated the same, you know. Their identity, so to speak, is left outside and when they come in Teresa's, they're just somebody we're going to love and try to feed good and sell them some pie.

TT: And sell them some pie[laughs]

TB: [Laughing] Get the sales up!

TT: So sales are important.

TB: Yeah. Sales are important. You know, while I was gone the girls did an excellent job with no supervision. Nobody was in charge here. They just come in and did their job to the best of their ability. But, in turn, sales were off a little bit and mismanagement or no management, so to speak, and so being the controlling freak that I am I made a commitment to myself to come back to work for six months. And my thoughts when I came back in here was in six months, if it doesn't turn around, I'm done. I'm auctioning the building off and I'm going to be done. We're about three months into it, business is back where it's supposed to be. I'm feeling a little better, it's not a struggle to get up and come here every day. When I see different people, like you this morning and recognized who you were [TT laughs], just a little flutter of this IS what I'm supposed to be doing, you are where you're supposed to be.

TT: AAHHH. I completely agree. I want to go back to the fact that you wanted to be a nurse. That's probably not to take care of sick people, right?

TB: Right.

TT: That was more to be what you've termed "Teresa", just caring.

TB: Just loving people. And I've been just really blessed that, you know, I have the--and I don't know why--I have the capacity to love people right where they're at. And to try and not judge their circumstances because I, and probably from my own experience, you know I've had some crappy stuff happen to me. Some of it is self-induced. I've got a, as my pastor tells me, I've got a bad picker.

TT: [Laughs] And I think Teresa is referring to men there.

TB: Yes. And in turn, but I don't want to go though life thinking everybody is going to hoo-doo me. What a miserable life to think that everybody's out to get you. So, you know, I just keep trying because I figure one of these days, somebody's going to be able to get along with Teresa. [TT laughs] But they have to share me so much. My children have to share me with every other kid in town that comes to Teresa's.

You know, it's so funny, my youngest boy is eighteen. My other boys would always use Teresa's to "you know, I'm Teresa's boy." I have four sons--"I'm Teresa's boy." Well, Clint doesn't do that and so he'll come in with some of his friends to eat, they actually did it Saturday morning

and I went out and kissed him and they're going, "MMMM." They didn't know I was his mom. You know, I kind of got my feelings hurt, like, I can't believe, Clint, you didn't tell them I'm your mom. He said "well, mom, you know how they do, you know they think Teresa's something."  
[laughs]

TT: (19:30) Teresa is something. You would have hugged him even if he hadn't been your son.

TB: Yeah.

TT: You've been hugging me for fifteen years.

TB: Yeah.

TT: So tell me about the fact that you feel comfortable hugging people here.

TB: You know I've been, again--I just know that there's been times in my life where all I needed was a good hug. I didn't need to tell them anything, I didn't need them to tell me anything, I just needed to be hugged as a human being. And that's kind of what we do here is that, I know a lot of these people, especially our older people, they don't have anybody, nobody to love them, nobody to, you know, our contact with them is probably the most human contact they get in a day or a week or whenever they come in.

We've had to kind of change the rules. I've got that inner thing that tells me who to hug and who not to hug. And there's some that, just because of human nature, some people I don't hug. If you see me walk around the room, sometimes you'll see me stick my hand out and that's not anything other than it makes me uncomfortable to hug them, for whatever reason. And so, the girls, our policy here is I'm the only hugger. Teresa's the only one that gets to hug, to keep them from being mistreated or abused.

TT: [HMM]

TB: Because it's...a lot of people take kindness the wrong way, especially in this atmos--in service, in servers. So we don't want them to think we're selling anything here but food. So, if you need a hug, Teresa's over there in the corner or she's washing dishes, hang on just a minute and I'll get her.

TT: That's pretty cool, I had no idea that it had become policy. I'd noticed it for years, I just assumed you were the queen hugger.

[both laugh]

TT: (23:00) Tell me about the folks who sit at the counter. This restaurant still has a counter, which is becoming a thing of the past, tell me about the people who choose to sit at the counter instead of a table.

TB: I think the people at the counter get a little more personal attention and they usually see what's going on behind the scenes a little more. And for them, you pretty much know when they walk in that that's their spot at the counter. Of the mornings, I've got a guy that, his job is, he comes in, sits at the same spot every day and his coffee's waiting for him when he gets here and he has to put the flag out before he leaves. That's his job. And if I don't-sometimes he'll not do it and I'll say "Sam, where's the flag?"



And he'll "oh, oh, I forgot, I forgot." You know, but that's his job to put the flag out.

TT: Who takes the flag down?

TB: The cashier. She takes the flag in of the mornings. But, his job is to, you know, when the door opens and he comes in and gets his coffee, as he goes out the door, he sets out the flag.

TT: That's pretty cool. So even your customers sometimes have jobs?

TB: Yeah.

TT: Do you feel like the people who sit at the counter sit at the counter maybe so that they can have that special contact?

TB: I think part of it is and I think part of it is the seeing the behind the scenes stuff. You know sometimes behind there it's chaotic, everybody trying to get everything done. You know, my reputation around here is if you're not doing your job, I'm going to holler at you across the room [TT laughs] You know, "you really think you've got time to be leaning on the counter over there" or "I think you've been talking to them long enough. They know you can't be standing and talking, you've got things to do." It has actually gotten me in trouble a time or two, you know the work force has changed over the years.

TT: mmmm

TB: But I still expect you to come in and do your job and do it the way I want it done. There's, a, you don't have to work here, but if you do, you do it the way I want it done. No ifs and buts about it.

TT: Because it IS TERESA'S Restaurant.

TB: It is Teresa's. And my, for years, my little saying, and the customers will even say it, is "See whose name's on the house." You know, "Go outside, see whose name's on the house. If you don't like it, don't come in here if you don't like it. But if you're going to like it, remember it's mine."

TT: I think that's pretty cool. You're wearing a t-shirt that has a dancing fork, a dancing spoon, Teresa's Restaurant, the address, the phone number, but on the back, yours says--

TB: "The Queen Bee"

TT: The Queen Bee--now everyone else in the restaurant, or all of your staff wears exactly the same shirt, except the back of theirs says--

TB: "No, I'm Not Teresa." [laughs]

TT: I can guess how it started, but--how did it start?

TB: The really neat story is that for, we were at the smaller place, we had about a hundred seats, everyone that walked in the door, I knew them by name. And that was kind of our little niche is I knew everybody by name. We moved to this location and the building is three times larger, we seat almost three hundred people and when it fills up, I'm very good at recognizing everybody, but as far as knowing their first names, a lot of times I don't unless you've been trading with me a really long time. And I am doing whatever needs to be done at the time, bussing tables, washing dishes, working on the grill, whatever needs to be done to make this place click is where I'm at. So nobody, the new people didn't know who Teresa

was. So every server that would come to the table, they would say, “Are you Teresa?” or “Is there a Teresa?” And so mine, The Queen Bee means I’m the boss, and different sayings depending on who you talk to. It’s kind of funny, the customers, they’ll joke, “Now what does the B stand for?” and I’ll say “Beautiful, beautiful.” And they’ll just laugh, they think it’s hilarious. They know it means the B word.

TT: Oh my God. [Laughter] I hadn’t put that together. That’s fantastic.  
TB: Yeah, and it’s amazing how the kids love the shirts. You know, we sell them for ten dollars apiece, which is what they cost us, and you’ll see them all over town. You can go to the mall and see the kids in them and see them at Western. The best story is a guy came in from a football game, a VERY large man that I ordered the shirt just for him. He wanted a XXXL t-shirt, red, that says, “No, I’m Not Teresa.”  
TT: And he’s huge.  
TB: And he’s huge and it’s hilarious at the people who see him out in it. “I was at a football game and I seen some great big guy that said ‘No, I’m Not Teresa’.”  
TT: And thank God he’s not Teresa.  
TB: Yeah. It’s been a good little ploy for us.  
TT: It sounds good. But you sell them at cost. Tell me about that.  
TB: Well, the girls have to furnish their own uniforms, and so over the years we’ve tried different things to where everybody will look good. Most of them are single moms who are always in a hurry, so starched shirts didn’t get it. So the t-shirts kind of wash up good, they give the kids something to-you know the kids like the little design on the front. And for them, I let them wear different colors so it doesn’t matter, as long as they have on a Teresa’s shirt, they can wear different colors and that gives them a little diversity, you know where everybody’s not wearing blue, or everybody’s not wearing green. Through the week, we wear khaki pants and on the weekends they can wear blue jeans, but everybody has to be in uniform.  
TT: (29:00) And you close now, you mentioned weekends and it reminded me, you close now at two?  
TB: Um-hm, two o’clock.  
TT: And you are closed on Sunday.  
TB: Closed on Sundays.  
TT: How did that occur when you used to be seven days a week, so many hours?  
TB: I actually got involved in church about fifteen years ago. And before then I always thought I was a good person, but I never knew what my purpose was. I always felt lost, like, there’s got to be more to life than this.  
TT: [laughter]  
TB: And I started going to church and every Sunday even though I was going to church, I would get called in to work. I would have to, because somebody wouldn’t show up. And my heart got heavy about, if I’m going to church, why not--I’m not giving my girls an opportunity to go to

church. Whether they will or not, they don't have the opportunity to go.  
So, we started closing on Sundays.

30:15

END OF TRANSCRIBED SECTION OF INTERVIEW. Interview continues to 51:12