Journeys South
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Interview with Frank Olivieri, Jr.
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Frank Olivieri, Jr.

Interview Date: 12/8/08
Location of interview: Pat’s King of Steaks, 1301 E. Passyunk Ave.

Frank Olivieri is the owner of the first cheesesteak business, Pat’s King of Steaks. Pat’s was founded by his great-uncle and his grandfather in 1930.

Interviewer: So why don’t we just start with – if you can just tell me a little bit about your involvement. Introduce yourself a little and tell me about your involvement.

Frank: Okay. My name is Frank E. Olivieri. E standing for Enrico. I am a fourth-generation owner of Pat’s King of Steaks in South Philadelphia. The business was started by my grandfather and his older brother Pat back in 1930. My Uncle Pat had a very modest hotdog stand across the street, and he sold hotdogs, of course. And he got tired of selling hotdogs and eating hotdogs everyday, so he asked my grandfather to go to the butcher, which was down East Passyunk Avenue to get some chopped meat – whatever he had there, and he cooked it up in our hotdog grill. And at the time, the condiments they had were raw and fried onions.

So they put some onions on the hard Italian roll they served their hotdogs on, and a cab driver who ate the sandwich – the same sandwich every day. Hotdog, hotdog, hotdog – saw something different and said, “Hey Pat, make me one of those. It looks really good.” So my Uncle Pat said, “I only have enough for me, so why don’t I just break the sandwich in half, and you can have half of it.” Broke the sandwich in half, the cabbie tried it and said, “This is incredible. Forget about selling hotdogs. You should sell steak sandwiches.” And my Uncle Pat, at that time, started selling steak sandwiches with onions and no onions.

That was probably – from what I’m told from previous members of the family – that incident happened in 1930 – the summer/fall of 1930. Where the business is housed now was owned by a man named Joe Butch. The building itself had several uses. The front part where the steaks are being made was a taproom. That’s what they called bars back in the day. The back part where the office is was a produce stand that Joe Butch used to run, and the back part where the sinks were, are your booths back there to serve the
patrons in the bar the food that the restaurant on the second floor sold – or made.

So Joe Butch approached my grandfather, if that makes any sense with how I just jumbled that around, said, “If you want, it’s getting kinda cold out. Why don’t you come over, take the restaurant over? The guy who was up there left.” So Pat said, “Well, I don’t have any money to pay for the restaurant.” And he said, “Well, when you start making money, then you’re paying me.”

So Uncle Pat went up to the restaurant, and he was making his sandwiches on the second floor and bringing them down to the people who were sitting in the booths and the people that were, I guess, leaning on the bar. And it got to the point where the booths in the bar were so crowded, more people wanted to eat a sandwich than drink, believe it or not. And he had come up with cutting a hole in one of the walls and started serving his sandwiches on the outside. And then eventually, he took over the whole building.

Interviewer: Nice.

Frank: So that was about 1932 when he took over the whole building.

Interviewer: Oh so that was quick.

Frank: Yeah it was really quick.

Interviewer: It caught on immediately.

Frank: It was really quick. So 1932 – that date would coincide with my Cousin Herbie who passed away, who would be Pat’s son -- they believed -- he and his son campaigned that the business started in 1932 when actually the first sandwich was made in 1930, but the first actual “store” was 1932 – got to throw that in there.

Interviewer: And do you – does your family – what are memories like of that time, right around the time when it started? Not just of that process, but also just what the neighborhood was like?

Frank: I’m 44 years old, so my memories of the neighborhood – I would be coming around when I was 11 years old. It was predominantly Italian – cobblestone streets with trolley tracks that were
completely dangerous and treacherous when it was wet – many, many accidents on the corner.

For me as a little boy coming in, just driving down the street in the passenger side or the back with my dad in the car, we would get to Broad and Wharton Street, and we’d make the right onto Wharton Street. And about – around 11th, 12th, 11th Street with the windows open, you can start – just the perfume of the frying onions billowing out through the exhaust fan of the front – just incredible memories. Just like, “Oh my gosh, I’m here now, and I get to go inside and bring the stock down and wipe the counters.” And I wasn’t really allowed to work inside because I was too young, so they gave me a milk crate and a wet rag and told me to wipe all the countertops off because at that time, we didn’t even have tables.

So – and then I’d work upstairs helping one of our Puerto Rican employees, Tino. He was a great, great man. We’d sit up there and he’d talk to me in Spanish, and I had no idea what he was saying, but we’d cut the onions together. I used to have a great time, and go home and just have dinner and reflect on what a great day I had. It was fun on the weekends.

Interviewer: That’s great. And where were you living at that time?

Frank: I was living in – my family and I, we lived at Packer Park, which was actually the last street before Naval Hospital, which is now the Eagles play – practice dome. It was on 18th and Forr – 18th and Hulseman Street.

Interviewer: And how about – that’s great, and I will ask you a couple more questions about that too – but if you think back to before you were born, think back to hearing stories from your family about the ‘30s when it started, and what it was like. What else do they talk about?

Frank: Well family and people outside – people always have – it’s not as many – there aren’t as many people around now who remember Uncle Pat because he passed away in 1970. So he was around 65 when he passed. So I guess his contemporaries were – most of them are gone too, but the memories that most of them had as me growing up and hearing the stories of employees – he didn’t care about money. He was making money. He was flamboyant. He had a tiger in his car one time and the tiger ate all the interior of his
brand new Cadillac. He loved women and he was always stealing people’s girlfriends and stuff like that – crazy stories.

Interviewer: [Inaudible].

Frank: That’s the fax machine. There was an employee of ours – his name was Sal Arcure – A-R-C-U-R-E. And he remembered – he’s long gone, too, but he remembers a story when he and Pat had driven to Atlantic City to go to the 500 Club – I guess a nightclub down there – and they had all the receipts, all the money, in the trunk of Pat’s car – and roads weren’t so good back then. And they hit a bump, the trunk opened and all the money fell out of the back of the car. So Sal said, “Pat, should we go back for the money?” He goes, “Ah, forget about it. We’ll go back to the city tomorrow and get more, no problem.” And he left all the money on the highway.

Interviewer: That’s great. And was it – what was it like – was it populated – was it – where there a lot of Italians at that time, too?

Frank: Here? I guess it was – well, the business wasn’t as busy as it is now. I mean, there were more Italian residents. This was really, really an Italian and Irish neighborhood, and around 5th Street, it became Jewish, and 2nd Street is predominantly Irish. So mixing along the lines of driving down the street, but I think what made us busy on Saturdays and Sundays – the trolley stopped here – or the bus stopped here. People would take a bus to come to here and get off here, and this was the beginning of the Italian market. So this is where everyone would shop for their fruits and vegetables one day a week, or two days a week – so they’d shop for their fruits and vegetables one day a week here, and so it was just natural. You go to Pat’s and get a steak, or – we were like – I think after the Second World War, Uncle Pat said, “You know, why don’t we just stay open? We have a guy here cleaning up for three hours. Why don’t we just give him the keys to the register?” And so the place stayed open 24 hours, and so people who were out late at the speakeasies or wherever they were – people who shouldn’t be out at night – came here to get something to eat because they knew it was open.

Interviewer: Wow, so that whole late-night cheesesteaks tradition started a long time ago.
Frank: Yeah, oh my gosh, yeah.

Interviewer: Wow that’s neat.

Frank: So the cheese, now –

Interviewer: Oh, the cheese is newer.

Frank: It’s a peculiar story about the cheese, okay. The first cheese, just to set the story straight, was not Cheese Whiz. The first cheese was used on the cheesesteak was either provolone – sharp provolone – or American cheese, and we know who did that. His name was Joe Lorenza, or cocky Joe because he was real cocky. He was always drunk, and he was always fighting with people. So actually when cocky Joe was late for work my grandfather always knew where to find him, and that’s right on Passyunk Avenue at Ray’s Happy Birthday Bar. He was sitting in there, or leaning there – there.

Interviewer: And when was this?

Frank: Let’s see, I was probably – 30 years ago maybe? Maybe more.

Interviewer: Okay so just over – around 30 years ago and he’s over at Ray’s Happy Birthday Bar.

Frank: Wow, drinking all the time – drinking up a storm. He was one of our greatest managers, but he just – everybody respected him, but at the same time he just – he was a train wreck, you know what I mean? He was just crazy. There was a story one time that he had told Pat to go “f” himself, and at that time, we had another store up on 33rd and Ridge Avenue, and it was a real big store. I don’t remember because I was just a baby when they had it, and he hung up the phone on Pat. He goes at Pat “f” you, blah, blah, blah, and the manager – one of the guys that worked here, his name was Nicki Cacia – C-A-C-I-A – said it was almost like Pat was standing out back on the pay phone. He said he drove down from 33rd and Ridge Avenue, which came down the Schuylkill Expressway through town, traffic lights. It seemed like by the time he hung up the phone Pat was behind Joe Lorenzo with a wet mop and beat him half to death with the mop.
Interviewer: Okay so this guy – you guys had an interesting relationship with this guy.

Frank: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Good manager, but –

Frank: It was a love/hate relationship.

Interviewer: Hangs out in the bar.

Frank: It was a love/hate relationship, but it was – when Pat first started, it was a time when – right after during the Depression, and people were coming up with things. There was this one guy who was a good friend of my Uncle Pat’s. His name was Joe Ambesi – I don’t know how to spell his last name but you can probably find it in your archives. So – Tony Ambesi, I’m sorry, Tony – and he had his horse and his wagon and he would sell a carbonated lemon-lime thing, concoction that he made up on his own. So he said to my Uncle Pat one day – he said, “Pat, listen. I know you like horses. Why don’t you get a horse, get one of these carts, and we can be 50/50 partners, like twenty-five dollars.”

So Pat said, “I can’t. I’m too busy trying to sell steaks over here. Get a horse, you got to feed it apples. You got to clean up.” He said, “Forget about it.” So Uncle Pat didn’t do it with his good friend Tony. Well, Tony was the guy who invented 7-Up.

Interviewer: Oh so that started here, too. Interesting.

Frank: Yeah, so that started here too, and we had – right around the corner we also had Frank’s Beverages, which was right on Ridge Street right behind us, where they made that black cherry Vishnick which is so Philadelphia.

Interviewer: That’s great. Okay, so the first time cheese got put on them –

Frank: Oh, the first time cheese had to be Joe Lorenzo. He probably put the cheese on it because he probably got tired of eating just steaks with and without onions, and then we were too busy here to sell the cheesesteaks here because the people wanted it melted on the grill and we had a lot of Jewish clientele here. So they wanted it to be kept kosher. So we kept the cheese off the grill because we only
had one grill here, whereas on 33rd and Ridge Avenue and the other two stores that we had running we had multiple grills, so we were able to accommodate them.

So around – my dad graduated from high school – Southeast Catholic, which was the first graduating class of Bishop Neuman. Of course, they changed. They made new schools. Dad made the new school – in 1957. So when he was working here he kept – he found Cheese Whiz. He’d keep a can hidden on the side of the grill so his dad wouldn’t see it, and he’d put the cheese on the sandwich for people and people just went bonkers for it, and that’s how the Cheese Whiz phenomenon started.

Interviewer: That’s great. So it seems like one of the most prominent things when I interview anybody around here that they remember from the past is how great the food smells.

Frank: Oh it smells just awesome.

Interviewer: Smelled for many years, but that’s this big part of the identity, so can you talk a little bit about what food means? Not just the history of Pat’s, but also just to this whole area? How food is involved in the way people see this area?

Frank: Oh, wow. Well, if you walk up and down 9th Street on a Saturday afternoon, you have the smell of the fresh fish, or not so fresh fish sometimes, and the pungent smell of fruit. And you have people who are roasting pigs outside – have roast pork going, and that just has an unbelievable smell and flavor. And then, you can walk by a bakery and smell the – nothing like fresh bread baking. It’s amazing, and there are donuts, but food – and then the spice shop of course. You walk by the spice shop and they have to sneeze a half a dozen times, but the smell of food’s real prominent around here.

Of course, on a Sunday – I remember if I was walking across the street to put some trash in the trash bin, I would smell people making their gravy – their tomato sauce for the day. And you could smell – this one’s gravy, and this one’s gravy, and just make you want to go home and eat macaroni – or pasta, as my wife makes me call it. I can’t call it macaroni anymore.
Interviewer: Oh yeah everyone keeps calling it macaroni. That’s what you called it back then, right?

Frank: It’s macaroni. “No, it’s got to be pasta,” my wife says, “And it’s tomato sauce. It’s not gravy.” So she’s trying to break me of these habits, like I’m some wild stallion or something.

Interviewer: Well that’s what everyone around here calls it, or at least the people who remember the macaroni and gravy.

Frank: It’s gravy.

Interviewer: And so do you remember – so you remember the Italian Market. How about Passyunk down the other way? Was that –?

Frank: Passyunk down this way?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Frank: Well one of my – a great bakery down there is Iannelli’s Bakery, and I remember as a child – still I do the same thing, I can’t say as a child, but – they had the bakery pizza – the big Sicilian pizza. Just a tomato pie, no gravy, no cheese on it, and just going down there for a $1.00 or whatever it was, and just getting this huge piece – this 8½” x 11” piece of pizza and just walking down the street with tomato sauce all over your face or driving in the car and it falling on your lap and flipping it off your hand out the window. And his bread – oh my gosh his bread’s the best in the world – Iannelli’s Bakery.

It’s one of the last – it’s one of two brick ovens left in the city.

Interviewer: Really?

Frank: Yeah, Sarcone’s Bakery, which has incredible bread too. Same – I can’t – it’s different bread. It’s a thinner crust – same consistency inside sort of, whereas Iannelli’s Bakery is more – a little more rustic, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, nice. I’ll have to try it. [Inaudible].

Frank: Yeah. Oh, it’s really good, and grandmom’s cookies in there – oh, stop it.
Interviewer: You’re gonna have to go eat after this. So you said that one of the – that’s really interesting to me that you guys were really careful about – that your family in the past was really careful about keeping the cheesesteaks kosher, and that there were both – there was a Jewish population, also Irish, also Italian. Is your family Italian?

Frank: Yes, we’re Italian Americans.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about what brought your family here, if you know that story?

Frank: I don’t know. I think – well, my great-grandfather, his name was Dago Mike. Dago Mike – I don’t know – Mike Oliveri, and I guess he came here – I don’t know when he came here, but I know – I’m not sure if it was my Uncle Pat was born there, then he came here, then went back to – went to college in Italy. But I’m not sure if it was either him or my grandfather that was born on the other side and came over. On my mother’s side, both my grandparents, I think, were born here, so they were first generation. See me, I’m just happy to have a place to put my hat down.

Interviewer: Do you –

Frank: Do I know where I’m from?

Interviewer: Yeah, do you have – can you mark on that map where your family is from, and if you don’t know that’s totally fine.

Frank: Well let’s see. They’re from – We’re Calabrese. Where’s Calabria?

Interviewer: I don’t know. Don’t even – if you don’t know where it is, that’s fine.

Frank: I’m from Calabria.

Interviewer: You can just write it down, too. You don’t have to –

Frank: And Abruzzese.
Interviewer: Okay. Oh – so it seems like that’s where a lot of people around here are from, right? A lot of people’s grandparents, or great-grandparents?

Frank: Do I need to write this –

Interviewer: Don’t even worry about spelling. I would have no idea how to spell that actually, so I can look it up later.

Frank: Calabrese and Abruzzese.

Interviewer: Okay great, and is that something that – I mean, it seems like different families have different connections with that. Some people feel really a lot of pride about being from that particular part of Italy.

Frank: Yeah, mostly you see the people that are from Rome who are: “I’m from Rome.” You know?

Interviewer: Right, yeah.

Frank: We had a couple of exchange students my wife and I hosted a couple years ago. One was from Rome, and one was from the heel of the boot, and they went – they were going back and forth at each other. They had just met when they came to our house and they were going back and forth at each other. “Oh, you’re from Rome. Ooh whoop-di-doo.” You know?

Interviewer: And how about for your family – is there – do you – you know where you’re from. You know where your grandparents are from, or your great-grandparents, actually. Do you – if you meet someone else whose great-grandparents are from there is that a point of connection for you, or is it just sort of you guys are Italian-American?

Frank: I think it’s just Italian-American. Like if a war breaks out over there, I’m not going to fight a war. I’m here.

Interviewer: And is there anything particularly Italian about your history, about Pat’s, about – or Italian-American – how does that figure into it?

Frank: Well I think that people try to make the connection between the steak sandwich and it being an Italian food, but I did see on – I did
see and I have read before that it has been made – I’m having a short memory span today. People have – the crusty bread with the tomatoes on top, what’s that called?

Interviewer: Bruschetta?

Frank: Bruschetta, yeah – they were making it with the meat instead of the tomatoes – like thinly sliced meat on top of bruschetta, and Celeste Morello – do you know Celeste?

Interviewer: No.

Frank: You should meet her. Celeste is the queen of 9th Street. She knows everything. Did you read the Philadelphia Magazine?

Interviewer: No, I didn’t.

Frank: There was like a bunch of pages on us.

Interviewer: When was that? Was that recently?

Frank: There’s a 100 year anniversary, and I kind of went out [inaudible] a little bit. But Celeste Morello knows everything there is to know about 9th Street. She knows all of our histories better than we know ourselves.

Interviewer: Okay I’ll check.

Frank: But she found out that there were some Italian recipes that had mimicked what Uncle Pat was making. So perhaps the sandwich wasn’t so uncommon, or it wasn’t such a big discovery. It might have been something that he had had before in a different form, maybe not just in a roll – maybe like bruschetta.

Interviewer: Okay, not something that makes it specifically Italian, or Italian-American.

Frank: Right, right, so they try to – everybody say, “Oh it’s an Italian sandwich” -- but there’s a bunch of Jewish guys making them too, so – or Greeks or everybody else. I mean now it’s – I think it’s just assimilated into our culture, so I think it’s just a Philadelphia, or it’s an American type of sandwich.
Interviewer: Do you remember – either you in your own memory or stories that you heard from your uncle or other people in your family – any time when there were – as I said, we’re focusing also on ethnicity and migration and emigration – any kinds of tensions or anything that happened between different ethnicities in this area, either at Pat’s or in the neighborhood?

Frank: Well, I think during the ’60s, there might have been some racially motivated arguments – and the ’70s.

Interviewer: Between which groups with that?

Frank: I guess it would be the African-Americans, and the Irish, and the Italians, and the Germans. Of course they were all around here, and unfortunate – it was very unfortunate times, truly were. But I never witnessed any, so I’m only going by hearsay, but I think at that time – I think it wasn’t just necessarily here. It was all over. The ’70s were a rough time. It was a very dark time in American history.

Interviewer: Yeah, especially in the cities with the financial collapse and everything else. How about the – so there are no stories about that that you can remember that –

Frank: No, I can’t remember any stories about that.

Interviewer: Or that anyone told –

Frank: Even if you twisted my arm.

Interviewer: I’m not twisting your arm. I don’t want to twist your arm. It’s just interesting to think about how this neighborhood transformed from this sort of very – specifically on Passyunk, this Italian neighborhood, and then how it’s changed more recently in different ways. What about the changes that you’ve seen?

Frank: The changes that I’ve seen – it started to change where it was becoming Korean, Cambodian.

Male Speaker: I’m sorry for the interruption. You hungry?

Frank: No, why? What are you getting?
Male Speaker: Hoagies – Parigi Brothers.

Frank: No, thank you.

Male Speaker: You sure?

Frank: Yeah, I have to go and eat with my wife.

Male Speaker: Okay.

Frank: She’ll kill me – saw some Koreans coming in, and some Chinese, and then now, there has been – in the last three years – a huge influx of Mexicans and Latinos. But I mean, Puerto Ricans were here in general, but they were mostly – they mostly lived around 5th and Snyder Avenue. But now, it seems that the Latino – Mexicans and Latinos are basically all over – on Passyunk Avenue. They’re on 9th Street, on 5th Street. They’re on 17th Street – they’re coming. I mean, they’re immigrating here like us Italians immigrated here. It’s just – Philly’s the melting pot.

Interviewer: Okay, and I – you said that Tino worked – you had Spanish-speaking people – he was Puerto Rican – but from when you remember as a child so –

Frank: Oh yeah, we always hired – we were always a multi-cultural staff. We had Tino, we had Juan – please.

Interviewer: And then we – everyone, of course, has heard of the “no Spanish speaking here” –

Frank: Oh, that’s a big joke.

Interviewer: Right, yeah, and –

Frank: So childish.

Interviewer: I’ve talked to a couple of people here and it seems like in this neighborhood there are some people who really agree with that, and some people who don’t. Can you just talk a little bit about that tension, and that media that you – I know it wasn’t you, but it was centered on this part of South Philly.
Frank: No, no, I’d be more than happy to talk about it. I mean when – Joe Vento has it in his mind that he feels as though if you’re in this country, whether you’re legally or illegally in the country, you should speak English. So that’s what he believes, and one of the things that made our country so great and what it is today is the multi-cultural make-up of it, and I’m sure my grandparents, or my great-grandparents did not speak English fluently, so they had to learn, and I know his grandfather, or his father did not speak English fluently. He had to learn. So why all of the sudden are you pressuring the Latino people to learn English?

Let them learn at their own pace. But I feel like -- it is what it is. It’s things going in series – you have an influx of Mexicans or Cambodians and eventually everybody learns, but you can’t just expect everybody to come off Ellis Island and be pronouncing their Rs and Ls perfectly, or just know the language. I’m still working on it, and I’m 44!

See, I think a lot people had misconceptions about that. They thought that I was behind that as well.

Interviewer: I don’t think that.

Frank: (Laughs) I did get a lot of phone calls. A lot of people were praising me for it and a lot of people were damning me because, “Why aren’t you standing in line over there?” Because I’m not a sheep. I’m not going to stand in line behind him. And what I said on NPR, I said, “Whenever you hear someone trying to speak English, remember they speak at least one more language than you do.” And that’s just totally the way I feel.

I mean, I have a Japanese exchange student in my house, and she’s 17 years old. She speaks better English than he does!

Interviewer: I didn’t know you were on NPR. I’m going to look that up. What show was it?

Frank: Oh, I don’t even know.

Interviewer: Was it Marty Moss-Cohane?

Frank: I don’t know. I think it might have been Marty Moss-Cohane. It was great. Actually, my advisor from Friends Select, I think she’s
the head at Penn Charter, she called me and said, “So maybe you learned something in school. I’m very proud of you.” Stephanie Judson. She’s a sweetheart.

Interviewer: It seems like a lot of people here went to Catholic school but your family sent you to Quaker school. Why do you think --?

Frank: I went to Catholic school kindergarten through sixth, And then I finished out sixth – I repeated sixth and went sixth through twelfth at Friends Select.

Interviewer: Why?

Frank: At that time, I needed more specialized help. I wasn’t getting what I needed at the around the corner Catholic school. So my parents through it would be in my best interest if I was sent there, and it helped immensely. Because, you know, there’s a great scene in that show -- you know, “Bronx Tale.” These two boys are sitting on their steps and they say, “Do you know about this place called Queens?” And it’s literally two blocks from where they live. “Have you heard of it?” And they’re 15, 16 years old. I mean, you gotta get out of your neighborhood. I got out of my neighborhood, I went to school with people who had grants and people who were millionaires. People who came from money, and multi-cultural, and – you know, I can’t tell you many bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs I went to. And it made me see that there was more out there – there is more out there than what I learned when I was growing up in Packer Park. I mean, there’s more there than there is here on 9th Street. So I think everyone should experience something that gets them off of their front step. They have to.

Interviewer: Back to Geno’s for a minute, so do you want to just tell me briefly about the relationships between Pat’s and Geno’s?

Frank: Sure. Joe Vento, I think he’s a couple of years younger than my dad. My dad’s 70. So they kind of came up in the same era – folding the cigarettes up underneath their arms, macho guys, convertibles, blah, blah, blah.

Joe Vento views what he’s doing out there like he’s on a battleground. I don’t want to say he has a Napoleonic complex, but he’s out there every day and he’s doing what he’s doing and he’s trying to overtake, beat out, defame us, in any way possible. And
I’m just in here, my multi-cultural staff, which he does not have, and we’re just in here doing the same thing we do every day, making cheesesteaks, making steak sandwiches, not paying attention to what’s going on across the street. So the more we annoy him, the more angry he gets.

So, until he says something about me, and then I just have lash out at him a little bit. Like, I think I recently referred to him as – what’s [inaudible, speaking about Sponge Bob Square Pants] You know Plankton? Plankton’s always trying to steal Mr. Crab’s recipe for the crabby patty. So that’s how I referred to him – he’s Plankton and I’m Mr. Crab’s – but not as greedy, not greedy at all – and he’s trying to steal the crusty crab burger recipe. He’s trying to steal the recipe and he just can’t get it. He’s frustrated.

Interviewer: And he knows you say that?

Frank: Oh, yeah, he knows. I say it all the time. Like he referred to me once before as an arrogant, ignorant person, and – okay, arrogant. But ignorant? I went to private school! I had to learn something.

So it is a little -- One day, I was standing outside and a film crew was filming me, and my pavement was completely packed. You couldn’t even fit a thin dime on the table. And he had absolutely no one on his pavement. So they were filming me towards my store and were, like, “How much busier are you then him?” And I said, “I sell ten to one. I sell ten, he sells one.” He said, “How do you know?” And I said, “Well, look here. And look over there.” And there’s one guy cleaning the counter. And if you look really closely, you can see it says quarter of two on his clock. All the way in the back of store. Well, he saw that on TV and he freaked out! Freaked out!

Oh, another thing he does – he does some crazy things. Like he’ll fire one of his employees and he’ll send him over to work for us and we’ll let them work for us. They’ll work for us for a couple of days and then they’ll quit and go back to work for him. That way he can see how many we sell, what’s going on. He sends spies over. It’s kind of fun.

Interviewer: Wow, that’s kind of – he’s scheming.

Frank: Yeah, he’s scheming. I’m telling you, he’s like Plankton!
Interviewer: And how long has he been here?

Frank: He’s been here since 1967. Actually, if you look through that door, this was steakhouse as well, years and years ago. This was called Joe’s Steaks, owned by the Vigilante family. Across the street, there’s a blue house that was Mike and Carol’s, which was the Vigilante family as well. They sold cheesesteaks and hoagies, predominantly, mostly hoagies. And Joe Vento’s father had a little cart across the street where the park is. That used to be a cemetery. And that empty lot across the street used to be a church. So, he worked in here for, like, 25 dollars a week, and then finally saved up enough money to buy a place across the street.

Interviewer: I know that he was involved with the Padre Pio Festival. Do you do things like that with the community?

Frank: He was involved with the Padre Pio Festival?

Interviewer: I think, yes. He was.

Frank: I do things silently. I don’t, you know, say to everybody, “Hey, I’m going to make this ‘Fallen Cop Day’ and give out money.” For instance, when 9-11 happened, I sent thousands of steaks up there and I didn’t tell anybody. And he was on the news and said, “Yeah, I sent 300 steaks here…” But what he meant was, he didn’t send the sandwiches. People came and bought them and then took them there. I was calling people and asking them to take them. That’s the difference. His philanthropy is made-up. But mine is real. I give money – if someone comes here and wants to film a movie here, give me, like, $25,000, I say, “Okay, make the check out to Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia.” Give them the money. I don’t need the money. That’s why I do. I do things silently. When an officer passes away, the money goes directly to the widow. It doesn’t go to some big slush fund. I don’t believe in that. I do things quietly.

Interviewer: Is there anything else specific about this neighborhood or Pat’s that you want to talk about?

Frank: No. It’s changing. You know, there was a jail down there at the end of Passyunk Avenue. And Al Capone spent the night there.
Interviewer: I did not know that. Where was that?

Frank: It was right where the Acme is. The Acme shopping center. He was in Philadelphia and he got caught and he spent the day in jail there. The evening, I think he slept overnight.

What else? What else about Passyunk Avenue? Well, the reason that this building is here is, actually – see the other Italian building, restaurant – my uncle Pat, and father and grandfather, owned that, and all the other corner spots they bought up, too. Because they weren’t going to build the Walt Whitman Bridge. They were just going to keep the Ben Franklin Bridge and make Passyunk Avenue two ways. So that building that Joey Vento is in was actually a condemned building. But he bought it when it was a condemned building, to fix it up. And now it’s like Las Vegas over there.

It’s so funny -- my Italian exchange students, we took them in one night to get them cheesesteaks. And I gave them the tour of Philly, Kelly Drive, whatever drive it’s called now, anyway. And they were like, “What is this place across the street? It looks like Las Vegas.” They were, like, it was overwhelming. He’s got flames, and the sign: “Geno’s is the Best.” Who says he’s the best? He says he’s the best! You’ll never hear me say that! He’s always claiming he’s the best.

Interviewer: I might go talk to him, too.

Frank: Oh, he’s always fun to talk to. When you talk to him, he’ll point to his tattoos. But he’ll point with his middle finger. Ask him about his tattoos.

Interviewer: I will.

Frank: Like I don’t have any tattoos that say “Pat’s Steaks.” ‘Cause I know where I work.

Interviewer: Oh, his has –

Frank: Yeah, “Geno’s Steaks”. He has a motorcycle [inaudible] with “Geno’s Steaks” on them. Anybody who hangs out with him or rides a motorcycle has to have a “Geno’s Steaks” sticker on their car. ‘Cause they all lack identity. What am I wearing? Look, “Morristown Friends School.” (Laughter)