Journeys South
A Project of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program
Interview with Joe “Brown” Tartaglia

Joe “Brown” Tartaglia
Interview Date: ?
Location of interview: 9th and Ellsworth
Interview conducted by Michelle Ortiz

Joe Brown: My name is Joe Tartaglia, call me Joe Brown. My earliest memory of the market was like, let me see. When I was about eight years old, I was helping my father before that, and I only used to work on Saturdays. So I wanted to work every day. And me and a friend of mine, we were trying to get a job over at Guy Giordano’s. He was the guy who used to sell turkeys and hams and stuff. So we both went over there looking for the job. And he ran up to the guy real fast. I was a little shy, and I didn’t get the chance to ask the guy for the job. So the wind up was he got the job, and the next day, he had to be there at 7:00 in the morning. Let’s get out of the way, okay. He had to be there at 7:00 in the morning or 6:00 in the morning. So I got up about 9:00, and I went around there, and I seen him working. It was cold, and he was working with chicken and with ice and stuff like that there. So I wanted to ask they guy. So I said better me asking the guy. I’m going to just hang around and sell shopping bags and show him what kind of hustler I am that I could work. So I stood around there, and I shouted shopping bags, shopping bags, and I started selling them.

And I went back, and I bought more shopping bags, and I worked from 9:00 to maybe about 12:00. I went home, and then I went around to the park and I played. He got a half hour lunch, my friend. He got a half hour lunch. I went to the park, played ball, come back about maybe 1:30 or 2:00. Bought some more shopping bags, started selling more shopping bags. We were selling them for a nickel at the time. I was selling quite a few shopping bags. Almost 1,000 shopping bags that day. Right. So I turn around, and at the end of the day, it was about 5:00, I go home to have dinner. He’s still working.

He didn’t get done until 7:00. So he worked from like 7:00 to 7:00, 12 hours. And I counted the money I made. I made about $6.50 for the day, which was pretty good at that time. And he came home all wet, all blood from the chicken and turkeys and all that stuff, and his pay was $5.00 for the day, and he had to work for somebody. And that’s the day I told myself I’ll never work for nobody in my life. I was my own boss, I worked when I wanted, I
went there when I wanted and so forth. But I had to work for somebody, so I had to work for my father. So we used to go to the farm and pick in the summer time, and the farmers used to give us a salary.

We used to get like $0.65 a box for asparagus, packing it, bunching it and all that. And at the end of the day, we made a few dollars. We used have to pick asparagus. The field was from here to say Broad Street. And then from here to Christian Street. And we used to go up and down the aisles. Start out in the morning picking the grass up, and by the time we got done, it was mid afternoon. My grandfather used to buy me a soda, that was my pay. And that is to say that the farmers said take whatever you want. So we used to take as much asparagus home as we could carry. And then we would bring it to 9th Street and sell it to one another.

That’s how the market started actually in the early 1900’s. All the men were farmers and pickers and stuff. I’m going to have to leave in a few minutes. Then I’ll come back. I want to drop this stuff off to these people.

Interviewer: Okay.

Joe Brown: And then I’ll continue the story. We went in together, the flower shop. The sweetest smelling bookie joint in the city.

Interviewer: Oh, really.

Joe Brown: No. They want to know about 9th Street, she don’t want to know about Frank Sinatra.

Interviewer: Joe wants to be the star here of the story.

Joe Brown: So where was I at before?

Interviewer: You were talking about your father, that he had a food stand.

Joe Brown: Oh yeah. Well, then I worked for my father one time, and I used to go get bananas, right outside [inaudible], I was about 10 or 11. And we used to go down Callowhill Street, you know where that’s at? It’s the old cobblestones down there. And the stands we had had the big wheels, the big wagon wheels. So my father would wake me up at about 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning, and tell me to go get bananas. So I would go down – [talking to customer]. So I
would go down and get the stand from 9th and Kimbell, pushed it down to Callowhill Street. But when I was younger, I was built like a bull. Even 10 or 11 years old, 12 years old, I was real strong.

In fact, I used to lift like 150 pounds because that’s how much the banana stalks weighed, and you had to lift them up and hook them on the thing after you bought them for like a $0.01 a pound, that’s with the stalk and all. And then you can cut them into bunches, they’d be about this big. They used to weigh 12 or 13 pounds like one shop bananas. That’s the way people used to buy them, too. And then I would get the cart and push it all the way back through, and then get here about maybe 7:30 or 8:00. Then about 11:00, I probably would sell out.

My father would come out, and he’d go where are the bananas? I’d say I sold them. And he’d say go get some more. So I’d have to make another trip down there. So it’s like my son today, when I was selling bananas over here, now they come with 40-pound boxes, and I have a refrigerator over here. And I would say go get me a couple of boxes of bananas, and my son would say what are you trying to kill me dad? What a joke that was.

Interviewer: And instead, you had to go all the way to Broad and Callowhill to bring –

Joe Brown: Well, a lot of difference in times. I had to get out of school when I was in sixth grade and go to work. My kids went to military school. Big difference.

Interviewer: So you own this –

Joe Brown: Yeah. Go to Wilensky’s, for $2.00 he’ll sell you the bolts.

Male: Joe, you got the drop leaf for this?

Joe Brown: Ain’t it over there?

Male: Is this it?

Joe Brown: Let me see. It was over there.

Male: Somebody stole it.
Joe Brown: It was over there. They must have thrown it out. No, that ain’t it. Twenty dollars. That’s all you got to do is buy the bolts around the corner at the hardware store, and you got no leaf, $20.00.

Interviewer: Your friend just said that you could even sell a dead cat. He said you’re so good at selling stuff.

Joe Brown: I’ll sell anything.

Interviewer: He’s looking at the nice girls.

Joe Brown: I love girls. Thank God I wasn’t born gay.

Interviewer: So Joe, the last time we asked for you to give us one word that would describe the market, and you said sad.

Joe Brown: Sad.

Interviewer: So why?

Joe Brown: Well, like I said, when we were kids, there were so many – like up one little street, there was like 50 kids within a 3 year age bracket. So working down here was like hanging out on the corner. Every corner was our corner.

Male: Joe, he said $15.00.

Joe Brown: Just burn it. Put it in the fire for $15.00. Two dollars each one. And where were we at again?

Interviewer: So you were saying about people being close to the age, and it was like hanging out.

Joe Brown: Mostly everybody that lived around here had a fruit stand. And everybody – $2.00 each for one. And we all used to hang together. And like work wasn’t nothing. You could put 12 hours worth of work in and then go out and play. It still felt like you were playing when you were working. And now, it changed so much around here. All the kids left. I mean, all the men grew up, and they sent their kids to private schools. They don’t want to be bothered with the business. And it’s kind of depressing to see the neighborhood go like and make a big change. Asian people came in, and started buying all the property because after 9/11, the city got infested with all New York people.
They’re so used to paying big money for apartments and stores and stuff, and when they came down here, they built those two big towers, and all the businesses came. People from New York came, they were scared to stay in New York. They started seeing the prices of the properties around here like I bought a property for like across the street $15,000.00 or $20,000.00 like that. And right after I bought it is when the boom started, and I could have got $200,000.00 for it. And $200,000.00 to them was cheap. And the apartments, my kid was in New York, and he used to pay $2,100.00 for an apartment.

Interviewer: For just renting an apartment?

Joe Brown: Yeah. A real small apartment. And out here, I got the whole third floor for $600.00, 4 bedrooms.

Interviewer: So when you say about those people that are no longer here, you mean those people of your generation that you feel –

Joe Brown: They just left. They moved to Williamstown, they moved to Arizona, they moved to Vegas, they moved to Florida. All the old time – then a lot of people died off, but the kids didn’t take over the businesses. The stands, they’re not here anymore. It’s like my backyard. Sometimes, I feel like a stranger walking. And I’ve lived on 9th Street down the street, and I hung down there. And I was Vice President of the market, and I got involved with the market and all, and I still feel like a stranger. It’s the way you feel when you come down here. You just about know people, and that’s the way I feel. Whatever, do you want it?

And throw it away after, the hell with it. I’d rather throw it away than give it to him for $15.00. Son of a bitch.

Male: All he’s got to do is redo that top and sand it down.

Interviewer: So that’s what Emilio from Di Bruno’s was telling us because some of the stands, the original people who had set them up and either passed away or moved away or retired. But then there are children that continue.

Joe Brown: There’s still quite a few people that are third generation, fourth generation. And they’re still operating down there. Like the Fante’s. Well they’re no longer the Fante’s, they’re --- Esposito’s
owns Fante’s now. And the father gave that to his son for a wedding gift, that business. They bought that off the Fantes. Giordanos have handed down from family to family, they’re still there. And Di Brunos and, let’s see who else, family to family. And the Gerottos.

Interviewer: Anastasio.

Joe Brown: Yeah. Family to family. I’ve had steaks at Geno’s. Most of all these other people down here, from here to the corner, they’re all new people. They’re all gone. All the old timers are gone.

Interviewer: So your perspective of how it is now, you feel that you’re a stranger in this place that you –

Joe Brown: Not completely a stranger, but I don’t feel at home no more like I did. Like before, I would never think of getting away from here or moving or anything because my roots are here. But my roots rotted. They’re not here no more.

Interviewer: So what do you do when your roots aren’t here anymore?

Joe Brown: Maybe I go to Florida or somewhere or an island, buy a nice home on an island. I got enough property that I could sell instead of worrying about taxes and putting up with the city of Philadelphia with the licenses and things and all the bullshit you got to go through with them. You know, it’s rough.

Interviewer: How about your sons?

Joe Brown: My son, like I said, the one lives upstairs, he’s an entertainer. He’s a natural born entertainer. Like I said, he’s an artist. He was a comedian. He won youngest comedian for HBO when he was 11. And then after he won $10,000.00 at America’s Funniest People first prize. He had his own TV show on MTV when he was 13 called Squirt TV.

Interviewer: Oh, awesome.

Joe Brown: And right after that, he worked for a place called All True, and they were ready to give him a TV show on Comedy Central, and that’s when 9/11 happened, and his company was only 3 blocks away from there. And his type of business was pranking people on the street, and nobody was into getting any pranks at that time. So
I told him to come back to Philly. Because most of the entertainment and movies started happening anyway. And so I had that store over there, the Ric Rac, you been in there, right?

Interviewer: So now he went from being away from this place to now returning. How do you feel about that? The fact that he’s now back into this space?

Joe Brown: I love that he’s around me. I like my kids – I don’t like my kids far away. Most of the times, like we work to keep the family always together. I mean, they’re welcome to leave and go where they want to go, but me personally, I’m happy that he’s staying local. I can still keep an eye on him as old as they are. And make sure they don’t have no problems and stuff. And straighten them out if I see them a little too drunk or you know. One son is 42, and the other one is 30, but they’re still my babies.

Interviewer: What’s your happiest memory of the market? What’s the thing that when you think of it that it brings a smile or feels good to remember?

Joe Brown: Hanging around the parks, drinking half a gallon of wine and sitting on the steps at night with all the guys that work after you got done at work. Hanging out, playing cards, shooting craps. Happiest memories. They’re all good memories, and just walking down the street they were good memories. Hanging out, playing with the girls, throwing watermelons at them. A lot of good memories down here.

Interviewer: And was there ever – I heard that there’s like a code in the street or like a code of conduct. Like how vendors would defend each other or help each other out.

Joe Brown: Oh yeah. Nobody came down here and gave –

Interviewer: So what would happen if somebody would try to steal some fruit or some –

Joe Brown: Oh steal something, the first thing they’d do is they’d get knocked out. If the guy that’s doing the knocking out didn’t knock him out, then somebody else would help him knock them out. And as far as them robbing down here, there was only one murder down here, one robbery in the history of 9th Street, and that was down on 9th and Carpenter where one of the employees, it was a black guy that
worked for a guy named Sabellis. And they had an abstract company, and the guy, he killed his boss, and he got the electric chair like about a week later. That’s a nice bike for $80.00.

Male: No. They stole mine, and they left this old wreck, and it cost me $70.00 or $80.00 or $90.00 to put new tires on it. You can buy a new bike in Wal-Mart for $90.00.

Joe Brown: No. That’s a Schwinn. I bought my grandson a bike. A little piece of shit cost me $160.00 over –

Male: My grandson got a Schwinn for $300.00. It’s got actual rubber tires.

Joe Brown: Well, put that outside, maybe the guy will take that back –

Male: There’s a guy sitting there that knew what’s his name. He’s in Arizona now anyway. You’ll know him if I say his name, but I can’t think of it right now. He said it was worth it. My bike is $300.00.

Joe Brown: That’s a good bike.

Male: Hey, Joe. That over there, the Marilyn Monroe picture, and I got my car there.

Joe Brown: I’m going to be here until about 4:30 or 5:00.

Interviewer: Joe, is there anything else you want to say?

Joe Brown: I don’t know. Is there anything else you want to hear? You’re asking the questions.

Interviewer: You know what, what we didn’t get on video is where your parents are from and how did they arrive here? You talked about your grandfather.

Joe Brown: My grandfather, I don’t know how he got here. My father came on the boat when he was 11, and my father-in-law, he came on the boat, too. He slept inside one of them stacks, and the lady was feeding him every day. He was here illegal.

Interviewer: And your mother?
Joe Brown: My mother was born here.

Interviewer: Were her parents from Italy?

Joe Brown: Yeah. They were from Calabria.

Interviewer: Calabria?

Joe Brown: Yeah. And my father was from Palermo, Sicily.

Interviewer: And they both met here?

Joe Brown: Yeah. My mother used to live up Kimball Street, and my father lived on 7th and Kimball when he first came.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to Italy?

Joe Brown: Yeah. I never went to my hometown. I went to my wife’s hometown, which is in Sicily. My wife is from Sicily, too, her family. And they own a home up in the mountains. In fact, they own the whole mountain. They’ve got like 100 houses. And a church and they own everything, the churches and everything. They got their own family priests, and they don’t let nobody in the town unless they’re related, they have to be cousins or family. And the whole town is all related. In fact, they marry one another.

Interviewer: In their families?

Joe Brown: Yeah. They don’t marry outside of the village. And I don’t know what caused that either. They raided Sicily, and they raped all the old ladies or was it during the black plague when Messina, that’s where they’re from, was the first town the black plague hit. So they didn’t trust nobody else outside of family. If they didn’t have it, they didn’t want nobody in their village. So they would stand on the side of the highway with shotguns and not let you in.

[End of interview]