

Interview with James “Bones” Jones

Kathy Hersh: We’re at Joe’s Stone Crab, and today is the 22nd of October, and I’m interviewing James T. Jones here at Joe’s Takeout. My name is Kathy Hersh. This is for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. Thank you very much for taking the time out from your day to come and talk to us.

James Jones: Thank you, my pleasure.

Interviewer: We’ll get some of your history working here on the beach. When did you start coming to the beach to work? Was it always at Joe’s?

Jones: Always. Only place I ever worked at was Joe’s.

Interviewer: How did you get the job? Tell us about that.

Jones: I was living over time next to a gentleman named Paul Wilson. He was the Key Lime pie man here. I was looking for work at the time. I was working somewhere over in the city at a box company.

Interviewer: What year was this?

Jones: 1972. I believe it was January 6th, if I’m not mistaken.

Interviewer: How old were you then?

Jones: I believe I was 21 at that time. He brought me over here, and Calvin was the kitchen manager at the time and he gave me a job washing pots. It was the hardest job I ever had in my life. We didn’t have all the stuff we got now to wash pots. You had to do a lot of muscle in it. I graduated from washing pots, though, in a week up to the dishwashing machine. From that, it just went on to...

Interviewer: Was it hectic, busy?

Jones: Oh yeah, for us back there because the busboy was bringing the dishes in, slap them down and we had to scrap them. It was like a three-man operation, not like it is back there now. It was a different dishwashing machine. You scrapped the dishes, had one man catching it, and one man doing the glasses. You start out scrapping before you start out catching, and that’s what it was.



Interviewer: You're talking about scraping the...

Jones: Yeah, taking all the stuff out, putting the glasses somewhere, putting the plates in the sink, and stuff like that.

Interviewer: You never looked back, then?

Jones: I was interested in the guys who was bringing the dishes to me, and what I would do, I would go and meet them halfway, and then I started taking the dishes myself. Cal would see me doing it, and they was short one night, so he asked me did I think I could do it, and I said yeah, I believe I can. He said, "You got some black pants?" "Yeah, I said I got a pair of black pants." Back in the day, we had – the uniform was a white shirt that the kitchen was wearing. Now it's a white shirt; it wasn't a dress shirt like this, but it was a shirt with a button on it. He told me to bring my black pants and that white shirt at work the next day, and he put me on the floor. That's when I started doing the dining room, and I was there for 19 year. I bussed dishes for 19 year. I became the head busboy after ten years, because the other head busboy – Nat Allen is his name. We worked together for a long time. He's working just about 50 years, too. He got another job at American Plumbers up the beach, so I started being the head busboy at that time. It's not like it is now. You come in and you situate jobs for the other busboys.

Interviewer: How did you get here? How did you get transportation?

Jones: We would catch the bus. We would catch the jitney. Most of the time, we'd catch the jitney, because the jitney came right down 14th Street from Liberty City. Muhammad used to ride that jitney, and he working out at 5th Street Gym, and sometimes we use to –

Interviewer: You're talking about Muhammad Ali?

Jones: Yes!

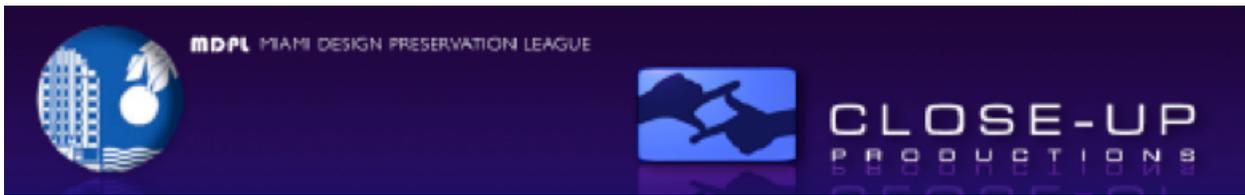
Interviewer: You saw him on the jitney?

Jones: Yeah, he used to ride the jitney.

Interviewer: With everybody else?

Jones: With everybody else, yes, he did.

Interviewer: Did you ever talk to him?



Jones: Not basic holding a conversation. It was like I say, at that time we had to get off at Alton Road. We would come down Alton Road to the beach. He went straight up, run backwards straight up to 5th Street, back it up.

Interviewer: You saw him?

Jones: Yeah, I saw him.

Interviewer: Did he ever come here to eat?

Jones: Yeah, he came here several times. The last time he was here, he had his condition, but the restaurant gave him a standing ovation. Everybody stood up and gave him a standing ovation. He was here one time with his wife. He set in the east wing on a deuce top and people's going up to him, asked him for a autograph. Mr. Wyatt said "Let the man eat. Let him eat." He said, "No, let them come on." He loved signing autographs and stuff like that. He was a real gentleman.

Interviewer: Did you ever go up to him and say, I used to see you on the bus?

Jones: No, no, [laughing]. I never did go up to him. He was always pranking at you when he see you. He'd do that to everybody.

Interviewer: This gave you – having a stable job, how did that improve your circumstances?

Jones: The thing was, like I said, I got married early, too. As a matter of fact, I got married the same year I started working here. Then I started a family. I had a steady job. I didn't have no problem about working here. As long as I had work, I was working. Whatever it was, I would do it to make a living. What motivated me was making money every night. The guys would make money every night, and I thought that was great.

Interviewer: The tips?

Jones: Yes, ma'am, the tips. I thought that was something. You have to learn it. Now there's a trick to that. You can't spend it because you're going to make money the next night. You never make that up. You think you can, but you never can make that up, so you have to save your money, because of the seven months that you



work, you know you're going to be off for five. Back then we was off for five months.

Interviewer: What did you do during that –

Jones: I cut yards, done fish [phonetic][06:45] work. I knew peoples that had a little business and also collected unemployment, and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Did you make enough to – well, you took extra work, you said, when you had time off.

Jones: I worked two jobs. For years, I worked two jobs. When my kid was in college, I worked two jobs. I leave here. I go to work at a service station, worked there til like 7 o'clock in the morning. I go home, take a nap, take a shower, and come to Joe's.

Interviewer: How did you keep that up?

Jones: Like I said, it's something you have to do. You have to keep your head to the grinding stone. It's something you got to do. You just have to make up your mind that you can do it. It's hard; it's not easy, but it can be done. I done it myself for years.

Interviewer: What was the atmosphere here like in the kitchen? Was it all black people working in the kitchen?

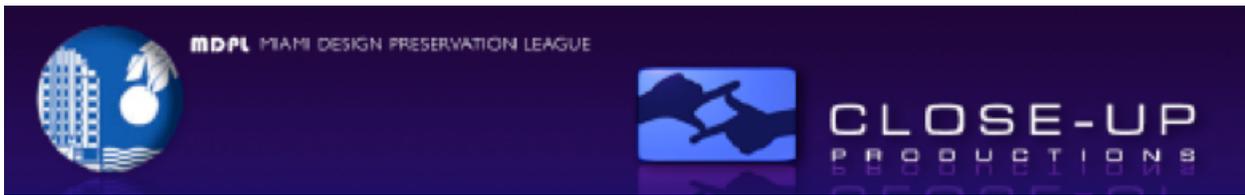
Jones: When I started here, it was mostly black. We had a couple Spanish. The kitchen went through different transitions. We had the Latin community. It had been different Latin, like Cubans; when the Cubans came, they worked in the kitchen. Nicaraguans, they worked in the kitchen. And now like the Haitians, it's mostly Haitians work in the kitchen now. It done went throughout. We was here. When I was started in the kitchen, it was mostly black in the kitchen. Most of the cooks was black, the whole kitchen, basically. Then Calvin was a black guy who managed the kitchen.

Interviewer: You're saying Calvin?

Jones: Yes.

Interviewer: Who was he?

Jones: He was a manager. He worked here 50 years. He was a manager here. He was a dining room manager in the last stages, but first he



was a kitchen steward.

Interviewer: And what was his last name?

Jones: Keel, K-E-E-L.

Interviewer: You mention him a couple of times. He was your supervisor?

Jones: Yeah, he was good to me.

Interviewer: In what way was he good to you?

Jones: In every way. He was good to me at the restaurant and if I needed a helping hand outside of the restaurant. The house that I'm living in now, when I got ready to buy the house, they didn't accept tips as income, so Calvin wrote a personal letter to the company explaining how I made money and everything like that. The guy, he went for it; he took a chance on me. Of course, I didn't want to let him down. It was tough, but I never got behind and thanks to Joe's, I always had a job, and I just kept going.

Interviewer: Were there some times that were tough where it looked like they maybe needed to lay some people off?

Jones: I can't really think of a time that it got so bad. That's why I don't allow nobody to say nothing bad about this place. I know they always have looked out for the people that worked here. Sometimes it might've seemed like it was going down or whatever, but it always stayed. You always had a job, and that was important, if you wanted to work. Now, I'm not talking about you want to shuck and jive. I'm talking about you was earnest about working. It took a long time for me to get to a certain point than it took other people, so I'm not going to say that. Yet, still, I got there, and I'm thankful for that.

Interviewer: The help were helped by Joe's.

Jones: Yeah, the help was helped by Joe. In the summertime, when the time got hard, they would loan people money 'til they get started back working, and they would take it out after they start back.

Interviewer: They would give you loans.

Jones: Sure they would. Sure they would give you a loan. We had a



controller here. Long time ago, we had a guy here, [Allan Myerson][11:37]. He worked here. He kept the books, the accounting affairs. You come over here, and they would okay it. He would write you a check. Give you a check for whatever the loan if you wanted to borrow money. I knew a lot of guys fell short during the summertime. Myself personally, I have borrowed money before. When I ran in the hole, needed a handful of money or something, they leant me money.

They was adamant about that. They would loan you money, and it's just owe your own. They just looked out for you. They always have. Ever since I've been here, they looked out for everybody. Everybody I know that worked here, sooner or later had asked for a helping hand, and I don't know nobody personally they turned down. I don't know. I can't say they didn't do it, but I don't know nobody they turned down.

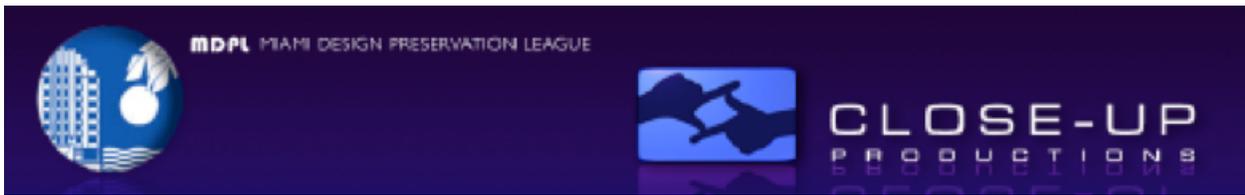
Interviewer: Tell us about the curfew on the beach back a long time ago and how you did that.

Jones: When I started here, I think the curfew was 11 o'clock, and if you was on the beach after 11, you was caught walking down the street going to try to catch a bus. A lot of the cops would pick you up, and they lock you up just for vagrancy. They wouldn't charge you nothing. The next morning they would let you out.

Interviewer: You would spend the night in jail, you mean?

Jones: You would spend that whole night. They let you out the next morning. If you didn't have no car, you didn't have time to go home and change. They had a shower back there in the kitchen, and they had a place where you wash your shirt and hang it up and let it dry to get ready to go to work at 2 o'clock. Most of the time, it wouldn't happen through the week where we would get out in time but on a Saturday night when we stayed late. Mr. Weiss used to get everybody in the car, and take us to Biscayne Boulevard and let us out, and he would come back to the beach.

I remember one time I walking up to catch the K bus. I was living in Coconut Grove at the time. Police pull up to the bus banks and said, "Where that pocketbook at?" I said, "What pocketbook?" They said, "You stashed that lady's." I said, "Mister, I never stashed no pocketbook." He said, "Yeah, you're going to jail." I said, "I haven't done nothing."



By that time, another cop came by and said, “We got him,” and they had another guy who actually stashed the pocketbook down the street further. Now, the bus done gone, now I got no way to go home. All I’m thinking is nobody come back down here. Mr. Weiss was smoking a cigarette out on the back. He asked me, “What was I doing?” I told him what had happened.

He called somebody. They come down in the police car, and he had them take me to the Grove. He did. He said take him home. They had to take me all the way to Coconut Grove. That’s right. Put me out.

Interviewer: How did you feel sitting in the back of that cop car?

Jones: It’s not like I had never been in the backseat of a police car. I just didn’t have no handcuffs on me, and they took me. I just thought they was going to try to do something to me because they was at fault for me not catching the bus. If you miss that K bus going that time, wasn’t no other bus running at that time. It was tough over here back in them days like that.

Interviewer: Just to be clear, the restaurant realized that sometimes this would happen on particularly weekends.

Jones: Some weekend, no, we didn’t get out in time. We used to do everything. They have a cleaning crew now. Years ago, we used to have to sweep the floor, mop the floor. It was two of us. Two of us would do that, and then we would go home. We had a job that we was cleaning up the dining room before we go. Everybody would turn the chairs. We would sweep all the cracks, and we mop it down for the next day. It wasn’t no lunch back then, and sometimes you get out late.

Now, on Saturday night, basically, this is when this happened. He knew what was happening. It was the Chief of Police. I believe his name was Rocky Pomerance. He come out with this police identification card. I think you paid \$2 for it. I’m not sure how much it was.

Interviewer: Do you know when that was more or less?

Jones: It’s like ’74, ’73, I guess, somewhere in there like that. You would buy that card, and if you had that card, you could work on the beach. It was a working permit. All you had to do was show that



identification card.

Interviewer: Did they still pick you up?

Jones: No, after then, they wouldn't. After then, they wouldn't bother you, as long as you had that card. Not only that, the police worked here. They got to learn the people that worked here, so that made a big difference. They would come in, and they would eat here. Before all this new stuff come out, like people were suing people, like they ate something bad, they would feed people out the backdoor free. People come by, and they would give them a meal.

The police ate here all the time. They still do, but they ate all the time back in the day. They got to know people. You got to know them, and then we had that card. That cleared all that up and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you have any stories of nights when something happened that you didn't anticipate in the restaurant or anything?

Jones: No, not really.

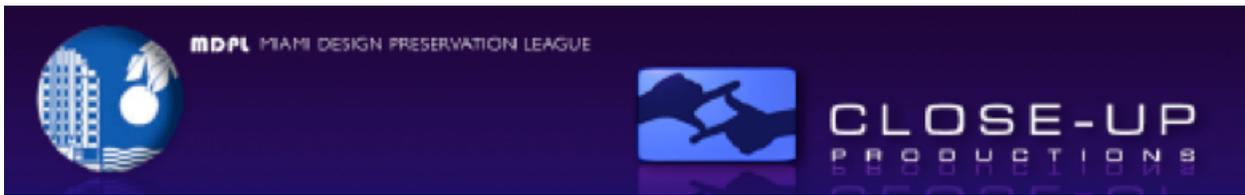
Interviewer: Any stories that people have handed down that they talk about, about the night such-and-such happened or so-and-so came?

Jones: No, not that I know. I know things have happened, but I can't recall nothing drastic happening. I know different people that come in. They'll have problems. Sometimes it happened on my day off. I hear about it, and it just go in one ear and go out the other one. At Joe's, we tried to stay on I would say a consistent basis with everything from the food to keeping the bathroom clean. Greet people at the door and stuff like that.

Restaurant business is tough business because everybody want to be number one. You have to make everybody feel like they're number one. That's the key. As years go by, you see the kids grow up. You know their parents. Then you see them. You know their kids. It's just like one big family. You see the circle in a circle. You learn a lot of people, and that's what happened. That's how it happened.

Interviewer: Does your family ever come here and eat?

Jones: My mother and father never had the chance to come here because they died awhile back, but my sisters have and my daughters and



my son. They have come sometimes.

Interviewer: Do you feel a sense of pride of working here?

Jones: To tell you the truth, if I had to do it over again, I would do the same thing. They have been real good to me, JoAnn, Mr. Weiss, Sweetie. Her name was Grace, but we used to called her Sweetie.

Interviewer: That's JoAnn's mother?

Jones: Yes, ma'am. She was real good to me. She was proud when I started to become a captain. She was real proud of me, and she always told me that.

Interviewer: JoAnn talks about growing up in the kitchen, that you all taught her how to do things.

Jones: Yeah, she would come back there, and right that day she would get a broom and see water on the floor. She'll get it. She don't tell the porter. She'll do it. She'll get a broom and go sweep it. She used to come back in the kitchen and wash the dishes like anybody else, yeah, Steve too. I come here a lot of days. Steve's back there strapping dishes, yeah.

Interviewer: Who is Steve?

Jones: He's JoAnn's son, yeah.

Interviewer: It's a real family restaurant.

Jones: It is. Same family ever since I've been here. I've been blessed. I'm going to be honest. I've been real blessed. My kids went to college from this place. Like I said, I work hard, sent both of them to college. Now they're grown and everything, got their own job, own family. A lot of the money that I made here went toward that. Working here enabled me to do that where, if I would have another job, I couldn't have done what I had done if I hadn't had this job.

Interviewer: When the Mariel exodus happened from Cuba in 1980 and there was a lot of crime on Miami Beach, particularly South Beach...

Jones: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Did that effect business here?



Jones: Not really, not at all. I could be wrong. I'm not for sure. I think every year, basically, we break the record, or we come close to it. We have overcome a lot. Sometimes the crabs get short, and we have to reach out to other sources for different things. We hung in there, and we made it through it. It ain't all flower beds and these all the time. There have been some rough times, but the good time overpower the rough time. It was always like that. For me, it's always been like that.

I don't know nobody else's story, but I can only speak for myself. They have been behind me, and they stood by me. I always had a job, and I always asked to come back. Now they do what they call an evaluation. Back in the day, they never done that, but now they evaluate you. When they get ready to give my evaluation, I ask the first question. "Am I coming back?" They said, "Well, you'll retire three or four times. Are you coming back?" I say, "I'll be back."

Interviewer: You just work two days a week.

Jones: No, I work three.

Interviewer: You work three.

Jones: I work Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday. Those are my days: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday.

Interviewer: You wouldn't have known Joe but Jesse, the son of Joe.

Jones: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, he was a character.

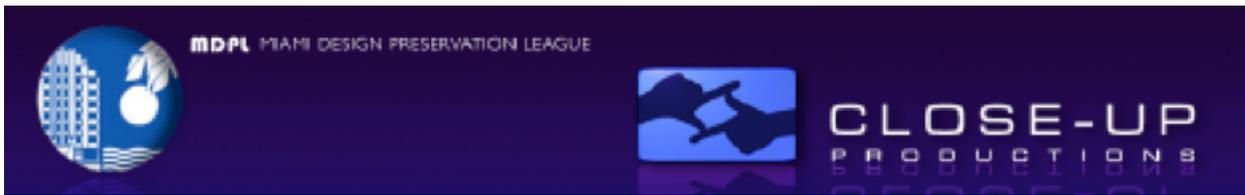
Jones: Oh, he was a [sport][24:00]. Yes, he was.

Interviewer: It sounds like he looked after his people.

Jones: He did. He was my buddy. The first new car I bought, he took me to Finch Oldsmobile down on 2nd Avenue and said, "Give him a car." That's right.

Interviewer: He had that much sway, did he?

Jones: He was good. He was recognized. I'm telling you, he was that, and he was tough. He used to send me to the dog track. He liked a



number. I think it was number 457. He said, "Come here, boy. Run over there and put this in for me." I run out the backdoor. The track was right over there. I run and run back. He would do it.

Interviewer: That's right. The dog track used to be right over there.

Jones: Yeah, it was right there. Yeah, he liked stuff like that. He used to play cards with [Bobby Moorehead][25:07]. Played cards with Calvin and stuff like that. He liked the gambling side, the stuff like that. He loved that, yeah.

Interviewer: Carl?

Carl: Was the wait staff black or white, and when did it change?

Jones: I don't know exactly when it changed, but it was white. It was basically white, all white when I started. At the time I started, I don't know what year it was. They brought in some guy. His name was [Deon][25:49], I believe. He worked there for a while, and Mr. Weiss used to eat at Cye's Rivergate downtown. He had a guy down there, [Eddie Rowe][25:59]. Mr. Weiss brought him in. He was black. He was a black Bohemian.

After then, I don't know, maybe it was two or three. Then, of course, we went through that discrimination about the women thing. I don't know how many black guys applied for the job. When I wanted to be a captain, I was refused for two times. I knew the job was open, but they would put somebody else in.

Interviewer: A white person?

Jones: Yes, from the wait staff, they would put somebody in. I got up one morning, and I came over here. It was on a Thursday, and I went upstairs to talk to Jo. I told her that it was an opening for a captain, and I applied for it. They said that I had to go somewhere and get some experience. She called the manager upstairs.

Interviewer: She, JoAnn?

Jones: Yeah, she called them upstairs and asked them, "What was the problem?" He said that the maître d' told him that they wasn't ready for me to be a captain yet, and she wanted to know why if the job was there. She told me, she said, "Hon, take this money, and go get you two tuxedos." I told her, "I don't need it. I got the money to



buy the tuxedo. I need the job.” She said, “Well, report to me in the morning.” She started me at lunch. I was out there I think one week.

She came in to eat dinner one day, and I had on a busboy jacket. She asked me why I wasn’t working, why they had somebody else working, and I was a daytime captain. I told her I’m just doing what I’m told. She called the maître d’ back, and she told him at that time, from that day forward, she wanted me on the door. Not only on the door. She wanted me behind him, and that’s where I’ve been ever since. That’s a fact.

Interviewer: We’re you the first black person on the floor?

Jones: I was the first black captain that ever worked the door here. After then, my cousin and that Allan was brought in for waiters and another kid named [Bospan][28:44]. [Winterspan][28:45] was his name. From there forward, then that’s when we started. Now, it ain’t like it is now where you got multiple people of color or whatever, women or whatever. Back in the day, when I started, it was all white. Over the years, like everything else, it changes. Time brings about a change and everything in a way. That’s the way that was.

Some of my best times here were bussing. I’m serious. Some of my best time here was when I was bussing. I couldn’t wait to get back in. We had fun. We ate good. You understand what I’m saying? We worked hard, working as a team together.

They have here now at Joe’s I believe 18 busmen. When I say a busman, they stopped call them busboys. Back when I was bussing, we were busboy. Of course, we didn’t have to do what has to be done now. Basically, all we had to do was make sure the dining room stayed clean. Clean the tables. Bus the dishes. Change the tabletops, and set up the table. That’s basically all we had to do, and haul out ice. Keep ice to the bar. We could do it with ten people easy.

We broke the record here which was over 2,000 people working 10 busboys. Paul Wilson, the night they had his service, that Saturday, and I think they closed for lunch. We just opened it up for dinner. We broke the record that night with ten busboys. Back in the day, we used to hustle. It was a hustle. That’s what it called for back in the day.



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