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Interview no. 1490

Leigh Kersh

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University of Texas at El Paso

Institute of Oral History

Interviewee: Leigh Kersh

Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

Project: Paso del Norte Entrepreneurship Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: 21 July 2010

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Biographical Synopsis of Interviewee: Leigh Kersh was born in El Paso, Texas and attended school at Austin High School, The University of Texas at El Paso, The University of Texas at Austin and New York University. Leigh has two brothers and two sisters. She is married and living in El Paso, Texas and is the owner of Chocolat.

Summary of Interview: Leigh Kersh was born in El Paso, Texas to Moe and Rosie Kersh. Leigh attended The University of Texas at El Paso and The University of Texas at Austin before attending New York University and graduating with a degree in Physiology. While Leigh finished her degree at NYU, she worked for Federal Express in customer service and then once she graduated she became their corporate physiologist. Leigh credits her time with Federal Express for learning how to do customer service, how to run an operation, and how to train the right people for the company. Leigh grew up watching her father work in real estate and learned how to be business savvy from her father. Leigh is bi-lingual in English and Spanish and speaks Hebrew and Russian as well. Leigh left Federal Express in New York and to work in North Miami Beach Florida. While in North Miami Beach, Leigh was offered to buy a chocolate shop. Leigh recalled a chocolate shop she loved in Rockefeller Center back in New York and she seized the opportunity to purchase the shop. Leigh spent over a decade in Miami, building the chocolate shop into a massive business which she was able to sell in three months and retire. Leigh returned to El Paso on a visit and was reintroduced to a former crush and they fell in love and Leigh decided to return to El Paso permanently. She opened her own chocolate store in El Paso called Chocolat. Leigh values her customers and takes great steps to ensure that anyone who enters the shop will be able to find the right piece of chocolate for the right price. Leigh has a lot of pride in her store and only offers the best chocolate. Leigh's advice to entrepreneurs is to be prepared to work, be organized, consistent with the product and with good customer service and to be creative so as to offer a unique product.

Length of interview: 94:00

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Name of Interviewee: Leigh Kersh
Date of Interview: July 21st, 2010
Name of Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

AP: This is an interview with Leigh Kersh on July, 21, 2010 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Arlina Palacios and this interview is part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project. Thank for meeting with us today.

LK: Certainly. My pleasure.

AP: We're going to start with a little bit of background information. I'd like to first ask you when and where you were born?

LK: I was born in El Paso, Texas many years ago. Almost six decades.

AP: Really? It doesn't show.

LK: Almost six decades, but not quite.

AP: Okay. Where did you go to school?

LK: I went to Austin High School and then I went to the University of Texas and finished up at NYU.

AP: How was your experience at Austin High School? What kind of neighborhood did you grow up in?

LK: Well, I grew up in a very nice neighborhood. I had a lot of great friends, but I was in a rush to get out of El Paso to be honest with you. I really wanted to learn about other cities and I did. As a matter of fact if that move would have not have taken place and if I wouldn't have left, I don't think that my life would be what it is today because everything – I look back and I see why things happen the way they do. It's amazing.

AP: What motivated you to want to move from El Paso?

LK: Experiences, education, people, getting involved with the right situations. If I wouldn't have gotten involved with the Federal Express Corporation, I would have had no – they paid for my education. So, those times are gone and there aren't too many companies that will pay for education anymore. That provided me a very good life. At that time there weren't too many companies in El Paso, Texas that would pay for your education so I was really fortunate. But I became a physiologist and when I left Federal

Express Corporation I was living in Manhattan and I had a practice and I had a practice for several years.

And I remember walking too Fifth Avenue and 52nd Street, in Rockefeller Center as a matter of fact and there was a fabulous chocolate store there and I would sit outside drinking coffee and just looking at the people that would come out and it was just so intriguing and at point I was really tired of my career. I really was – I thought to myself, "Goodness, is there really a chance for me to have another career?" But what I did was say to myself, "Oh my dear God, why can't I have an operation like this? Look at all the people that are leaving here. They look so happy."

And I remember moving the fog from the window and looking inside and everything was glistening and there were packages with ribbons and there were cases full of yummy chocolate and the aromas were terrific and I looked around and I thought, "This is paradise." So, I forgot about that and went back home and within two weeks I had an offer to join a practice in North Miami Beach, Florida. I took the offer and I arrived and within three weeks I was having coffee with one of the doctors that I worked with and he said, "Leigh, do you know of anybody that would want to buy a chocolate operation? If my wife does not sell it we are going to get a divorce."

And I said, "Let me take a look at it" and I just couldn't believe it. I thought that was really ironic, so I took a look at it and it was a hole in the wall, but I looked around and I thought to myself, "You know, if I really get involved and I really, really marry this business and dedicate myself I know I can make it to be what I saw in Rockefeller Center." I will always have that vision of that fabulous store imprinted in my brain and if I just follow that as a goal, I know it will happen. So I bought it and when I bought it, the employees were so upset that they never knew it was for sale that they quit. So there I was alone and I didn't know anything about chocolate. Nothing.

And I was scared to death and I was nervous and I thought, "My dear goodness, what am I going to do now?" So one night I remember I was working alone and I had 350 chocolate place cards that had to be ready for **Turnberry** Country Club and one out of every 10 was working out. And I would do it but it just wouldn't look right, so I was crying and was very upset. It was about 9:00 at night and all of a sudden there was a knock on the back door and I opened the door and it was an old lady, she was maybe 65-70 years old, and she said, "Do you need help?"

And I said – she says, "I saw your light on and I'm looking for a part-time job." And I said, "But at this hour? Why don't you come back on Monday and talk to me. I'm really in a bad situation right now." And she said, "But maybe I can help you" and I said, "You can't help me. This is about chocolate. Where do you work?" And she said, "I work at Publix" and I said, "Doing what?" And she says, "I'm a cake decorator" and I said, "You're kidding me? Do you know how to write with chocolate?" And she says, "I do" and I said, "Do you mind helping me now? I'll pay you double." And she came in and we finished the project at 3:00 in the morning and the project was magnificent.

And I said, "You're my first employee. Can you start Monday?" And she says, "We'll be seeing each other" so I said, "Let me take you home." So I gave her a ride to this high rise and let her out and I said, "Please call me Monday" and she said, "Very well" and I didn't see her Monday, I didn't see her Tuesday, and Wednesday I was frantic and I said, "I've got to have this lady back in my life." And I want to all the Publix and this lady did not exist. I never saw her again and since that day I knew that God had sent me an angel. There was no doubt about it. And in my heart I got a message knowing that everybody I meet would be for a certain reason.

And everybody that came to work there taught me and showed me and we built the store and built the store and built the store and it became one of the most fabulous chocolate operations in the United States. And after having it about six years, it was getting to be unmanageable because it was so huge, it was 8,000 square feet, I had over 75 employees, and I needed a general manager. And I started interviewing and nobody really fit the bill. They really had to possess excellent customer service skills, they really had to know what they were doing, and nobody fit the bill. So that night, I cried and cried and I prayed out to my dad who had passed away, "Dad please send me somebody." Well, the following morning at 7:00, the phone rings – let me stop there.

My father, when I was growing up, would always wake us up with "Rise and shine up high like a tree. It's a brand new day. If you have a bad attitude, snap out of it" and I was brought up with that every single day. So my girlfriend used to spend the night a lot at our house and the phone rings, its 7:00, and it's "Rise and shine up high like a tree. It's a brand new –" I said, "Who is this?" And she said, "It's **Babette**" and I said, "Babette, I haven't seen you in 10 years. Where are you? Someone told me you're in Houston

and I'll pay you whatever you want, but you've got to come and be my general manager please." She said, "Leigh, I'm here in Miami and I'm calling to see if you need anybody cause I just arrived with my brother."

So, she joined my team and we made it even better. Then at the end of about 10 or 11 years, I was exhausted and I really needed to retire and I decided to sell it, so within three months it was sold. And I intended to go back to Manhattan to live and to just live out the rest of my life and retire and travel and I decided something was telling me to come back home to El Paso, Texas and it was a craving for green chicken enchiladas cause I hadn't had green chicken enchiladas in years. And I thought, "This is the first time in my life that I don't have to work and I can kind of do anything I want to do and not have any responsibilities or obligations. I'm gonna hop a plane to El Paso, Texas."

And I did and so I called my best friend from Dallas that I was coming in on the 415 and so she picks me up at the airport and she says, "Leigh, have you had dinner?" And I said, "No" and she said, "Let's go to Dominic's to eat." And I said, "Dominic's, what's that?" And she said, "Do you remember when you were eight years old you were so in love with my cousin and he was 15 and you were eight and you would stand in the rain on Persian Drive and watch him go in the car and your father forbid you to go to his house anymore?" And I said, "Please, let's not go there. That was too traumatizing. Please." And she said, "We're gonna go, but just don't tell him who you are."

So I walk in and he sees me and I see him and we've been together since that moment. So I decided to go back to Florida, pack everything up, and instead of moving to Manhattan I moved to El Paso, Texas. Never thought I would come back here. And I looked around and thought, "What am I crazy? This is a gold mine. This town is on a crest of a Renaissance." And so I bought a house and I said, "Where's the chocolate store in this town so I can buy my agent some chocolate?" And they didn't have that and sent me to Russell Stover's and I walked in and I said, "This is the first chocolate?" And they said yeah, so I said, "You know what, this is God's way of telling me to do a store." So I did a store and everyone told me it would never work cause the people here do not know about fresh chocolate and they're never gonna go to you and you'll go broke within three months.

And I said, "No, no, no. There are a lot of sophisticated people here and there are a lot of people who love chocolate. Chocolate is

a very loved food." And there were a lot of Mexican-Americans here and chocolate is a root in Mexico. And I know that they'll love it so I went with my gut, which is one thing I've always respected. And I did and from the day we were opened it went through the roof. And that was at 3737 North Mason, eight years ago. And then we outgrew that place five years ago and I was convinced to come here and I wanted to create that store that I saw at Rockefeller Center and I did. And if you'll look around this is a complete facsimile of that store that I saw in Manhattan. It never left my mind.

AP: It stayed.

LK: It stayed and this is exactly the way it was. So, here I am eight years later, madly in love, a great business, and you're interviewing me. How much better does that get?

AP: Going back to running back into your childhood crush –

LK: It's called destiny. And let me tell you, I dated some pretty fabulous people in my past, but you look back and you see why God wanted the things that he wanted and how it was meant to be for me to come home and find the man in my dreams. It was just all planned out.

AP: So, he lived in the neighborhood and you were eight and he was 15. Why was your father –

LK: Cause I was eight years old and he said my hormones were out of wack and that was ridiculous. And I said, "But daddy, he's my movie star." "You're ridiculous. He is 15 and you cannot stand in the rain on Persian Drive and watch that guy." And at that point my parents had gotten a divorce, so they shipped me off to New York and so I came back and went to high school a few years here and then got out again, so I never really saw him.

AP: So, you'd already been to New York.

LK: Yeah, I've got family in New York so they had shipped me off there for a while.

AP: Then you returned and then you mentioned Federal Express?

LK: Yeah, I got on with Federal Express.

AP: Was this during or after you U-Tech?

LK: This was after U-Tech.

AP: What did you major in at U-tech?

LK: Physiology. No, not U-Tech, UT in Austin.

AP: So it was UT that you went to college?

LK: Yes, just for two years.

AP: Then what did you do?

LK: I went to New York, my family was there, and I got on with Federal Express.

AP: Okay, so you worked with Federal Express in New York. And so while you were working with Federal Express they paid for your –

LK: Education – they have a tuition based – I don't know if they still do cause that was many years ago, but they would pay for your tuition and it was fabulous. As long as you wanted and they gave me all the benefits and they gave me a great salary and it was wonderful. I had a wonderful life with them and I learned a tremendous amount about customer service and how to run an operation and how to manage and how to do, so it was a school of hard knocks.

I got my masters really in the school of hard knocks by actually doing with Federal Express. I give them a tremendous amount of credit.

AP: So, what were you doing at Federal Express?

LK: I started out with customer service and then I was promoted to international, then I was promoted to in charge of international, and then once I got my degree I became their corporate physiologist.

AP: What does a corporate physiologist do?

LK: You have to train people a certain way, you have to – when you hire you have to look for a certain profile of people that would work well with the company, if there were ever any problems you got involved, but it's mostly profiling, it's mostly understanding the human physic and why people do what they do, situational leadership. You have to have a lot of that in order to train people a

certain way to make a company like Federal Express work, because many people come from different backgrounds.

AP: So, did you help them in their hiring process?

LK: Restructuring, yeah.

AP: And tying that into customer service, what are the things that you find to be the most important factors in a person's character?

LK: Customer service skills.

AP: Their customer service skills – what do they need to be?

LK: Listening. Many people do not listen to what a customer wants and the appropriate questions. You know, when people come in here it's really important for us to know how to feel if they just want to be left alone and look around, or if they're in a hurry, or if they want to spend \$3 or if they want to spend \$300. So, it's up to the employees here to make customers here feel like a million dollars when they walk in. And our philosophy here is, they could have gone any other place, but they chose us so now we're gonna treat them the best we possibly can. And we try to find out what they're looking for – a lot of times people feel embarrassed if they come in and they say, "I need a gift" and they really don't want to tell you, "But I don't want to spend over \$4" or whatever, but we cater to everyone.

That's why I think our audience is so varied because they'll come – when they're on food stamps and they'll buy a gift for \$3 for their mother, or we cater to the corporate world. We cater to anybody cause everybody loves chocolate and we have every single price point here. If you only have 50 cents, we've got something for you.

AP: How do confirm what people are looking for when they walk in the door? Is it a gut instinct or special training?

LK: It's the way that they come in. You usually can identify – what we do is we try to strike up a little bit of a conversation with them because one of the worst things that you can say to a customer when they come in is, "May I help you?" Usually, eight times out of ten people are going to say, "No, I'm just looking." And if you go shopping and if somebody approaches you and says, "May I help you?" "No, no, I'm just looking" unless you really need help and unless you're looking for a certain item or something. So here,

"Looking for something special?" And then that will open up the conversation and it's always the opening remark of "Looking for something special?" "Yes I am. I'm just accompanying a big gift that I got with a little gift" so we already know that we're not going to show them trays for \$40, or \$50, or \$75, or whatever.

We're gonna say, "Well, just give me an idea on what you want to spend" and if they hesitate and don't know how to answer, say "You know what –" then you become customer service. You say, "Let me show you what you can get for \$5, let me show you what you can get for \$10, let me show you can get for \$2." And then they get involved and they've got to be involved with the process.

AP: So you involve them.

LK: You involve them and it's a much better sale.

AP: So it's worked out?

LK: So far.

AP: So, looking into the window of the chocolate store in Manhattan, you knew that you wanted to work somewhere else and that was your dream or was it just this calling?

LK: No, I knew in my heart – really – to be honest with you, looking in that window that that could never be for me because, number one, I knew nothing about chocolate, number two, how could I ever afford a place like this in Rockefeller Center? That would have been like a million dollars and number three, it was just like if you look at someone and say, "Oh, how come I can't look like that? How come I can't have a husband like that?" It's just – it's not really – I see it, I want it, I'm gonna go for it. It was just a statement, but that vision stayed in my mind and then – I believe – I don't believe in coincidences and I believe that everything is meant to be.

I think that everybody you meet is there for a reason, someway, somehow. Whether to give you inspiration, or whether they say something that you learn, or whether a confirmation of something you should be doing, something and people will depart your life when their job is done. And that's basically what happened to me and it was meant to be that I accept the job in North Miami Beach, Florida in that practice. It was meant to be that that man have coffee with me, which I had never had coffee with him, but we sat down and he's telling me about his role with his wife's. And if I

would not have seen that store in Rockefeller Center and if he would have told me, "I've gotta sell my chocolate store." That would have meant nothing to me, but it meant something to me because of what I had seen at Rockefeller Center.

AP: So, how did you learn about chocolate?

LK: I didn't – I didn't know anything and that's why people – you know, a lot of times people will say, "Well, you have to know the product backwards and forwards before you buy the business." Not here – you just – I had a lot of faith in myself and I had a lot of faith in the man upstairs and that's really what got me through. The right people, at the right time came into my life and taught me what I needed to learn and I made the mistakes that I made, but I learned and I got better and better and better at it and I became very tough on myself about my standards and about the product and that I wouldn't accept any mediocre work from any of my employees.

It's very difficult to work here. When we hire for customer service very few people make it because if they don't understand that they've got to be on time, they've gotta look good, they've gotta act good, they've gotta be able to work really well here. If they make mistakes it's a reflection on this store and a lot of times what happens is that I never know about those mistakes and that's not good. So I've got to feel assured that the people up front know what they're doing and know how they're taking care of my people.

AP: How did you create the business in Miami, considering that all of the employees quit? Where did you start?

LK: Started out with that angel I got that helped me and then all of a sudden I'm looking through papers and I'm looking through drawers and I'm thinking, "Well, maybe there's some people who want to come back to work here." So there was a file on employees, so I just started calling numbers and all of a sudden there was a girl that had worked there before and she quit because she didn't get along with another person and since there were no people left, she came back to work. Then she knew somebody that had worked here before and she came along and then I developed confidence and then they taught me and then I taught other people and then a team started.

AP: And how were you able to get funding for that store?

LK: I was very lucky because when I had a practice I saved my money. During my practice there was a time when I taught other

physiologist and I traveled around the world and I taught [inaudible]. I went to Australia and I got on the speaking circuit and I taught in Australia, I taught in New Zealand, I taught in South Africa, I taught in Mexico, and since I'm bilingual it helped tremendously.

So I was in a situation where I was able to save good money and then when he told me how much the store was, I said, "You know what – could I pay you like over six months?" And he said, "Well, what if you run this place into the ground?" And I said, "I won't, I won't, I won't." And he trusted me and so I gave them a down payment and then worked really hard and just met every payment for the next five months and I did it. And I built the store – the store was nothing like what I was when I sold it. It was – I was able to sell it for about 18 times more than what I paid for it.

It was hard work and I didn't have a life. I worked from 7:00 in the morning till 11:00 at night, six or seven days a week.

AP: And how many employees did you have there again?

LK: At the very end – about 70 or 80 something like that.

AP: So you decided to sell it and move back to El Paso?

LK: No, I was gonna go back to Manhattan, but when they gave me the money and I'm sitting there and I'm thinking, "Oh, this is great. This is great and I can do almost anything." And I had this craving for green chicken enchiladas and I was sitting in Miami and I thought, "You know, I'm gonna go" and I didn't have to call two weeks in advance, I can take a plane now and American Airlines, Leigh Kersh, I want a ticket. I don't know if you know the feeling that when you wake up in the morning, you can do anything you want and I have never had that my whole life. I always had to either go to school, go to work, do something but I never had a life of my own where I could just wake up and do anything I wanted.

So I had this craving for green chicken enchiladas with sour cream and I thought, "I'm going to go to El Paso, Texas. I haven't been there in years."

AP: So when you came and had your dinner with your friend –

LK: Yeah, he looked at me and I looked at him and my heart was beating, his heart was beating and then he came over and touched

my shoulder and that's all it took. That's all it took and we've been together since that moment.

AP: Your friend told you not to mention to him who you were?

LK: Well, I said, "I don't want to go there. I'm too embarrassed. It's humiliating cause he's going to remember I'm that little squirt that was eight years old and he would always tell me, "What do you want with me?" And I'd say, "You want some water? What can I get you? I think you're beautiful." And he'd say, "I've got a girlfriend. You're eight years old."

AP: When you told him who you were what was his reaction?

LK: Not much – he had forgotten cause gosh darn, we're looking at so many years – 40 years or something.

AP: Was he still living in the same neighborhood that you grew up in?

LK: No, he had been married and divorced and he had kids and – I mean, he was available and I was available so it was just all in timing.

AP: I didn't ask you, what are your parent's names?

LK: Moe and Rosie.

AP: Was your father around to see you get together with your childhood sweetheart?

LK: No, my father passed away, but I remember that I would go to work with him a lot since I was three years old and I would have a chair right next to his. He was – he did real estate, he was a deal maker, he would put deals together and if anybody was in trouble, he would get them out of trouble. Those times were very different and he was a real character. And I would sit next to him and just hear him do deals on the phone. I loved to see him in action and the way he spoke to people. He was a fabulous man.

AP: He was in real estate?

LK: Yeah, he did a lot of things. His place was called public services and anything that anybody wanted – "Moe, I got a ticket. Help me." " Moe, I'm in trouble. Help me." Different things – he was a deal maker and my father helped them. He was a very smart man.

AP: Do you think you got your business savvy from your father?

LK: No doubt about it.

AP: What characteristics or traits do you think that you inherited from him?

LK: Sense of humor. People get bored with boring people. Don't you think? I mean, I've had to do some business deals with the most boring people in the world and it's horrible. You've gotta have a sense of humor, you've got to laugh.

AP: And your mother – what did she do?

LK: Housewife.

AP: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

LK: Yes, but they're not here. Terry's here – Robert is in California and Sunny is in Washington.

AP: So you've got two brothers and one sister.

LK: I've got two brothers and – my mother remarried and so she has a daughter, so two sisters and two brothers.

AP: And are they entrepreneurs like you?

LK: One's a holy roller in California – he's got a big church but now he's president of a big bible college or something. And Sunny's got a quite life in Washington and Roseanne is a mother. I'm the only business person.

AP: And what language was primarily spoken at your house when you were growing up?

LK: English – I am the fourth generation.

AP: You mentioned that you were bilingual – did you take that up growing up?

LK: Yeah, from the maids. I mean, you've gotta talk to them and then they would teach us. My parents spoke Spanish – I speak Russian also and Hebrew.

- AP: Where did you learn Hebrew and Russian?
- LK: Many years ago I converted to Judaism – many years ago, so of course I picked up Hebrew there and I don't get a chance to speak it much here. And Russian I took in school cause we had a choice of Spanish – and I picked Russian because I already knew Spanish. I don't really get to practice it. Whenever I meet someone from Russia, I don't care where they are I start talking whenever I can, but I don't get to practice it very much.
- AP: So, coming back to El Paso, starting a business – how was the first store? What was it that motivated you to move here to this one?
- LK: Space and I was next to a burrito joint and on the other side I was next to a place where they charged you 22 percent interest if you were in trouble, so I didn't want that type of thing. I wanted more of a shopping center where people came, relaxed, and went from restaurant – this place here is fabulous and they've got some great stores. We've got Duck, Duck, Goose, we've got [inaudible]. People that come to this shopping center are gonna want to have a good time and shop. They're not coming to get a loan for 22 percent. They're not coming to get a burrito for \$2. They're coming to get some really unique things in the shopping center.
- Look what we have Chico's – we have great stores here. So those are the people to me, but then again, I also have the people that pitch in \$2 for gas and they all pile into this car with no seatbelts and then they all come out here and buy presents – you know, \$3, \$4, \$5 – I give them discounts. Then they all pile back in the car and go back to the lower valley or wherever.
- AP: Well, tell me about the products that you have here? What do you sell?
- LK: Everything. If I could dip you in chocolate I would sell you. We really – number one, our chocolate – I have a special blend that I created with my company in Belgium and they know that that's my blend and it's a fabulous, fabulous chocolate. To begin with, the milk chocolate is terrific because the milk comes from Belgium. We don't use any milk from the United States. So the dark chocolate is a high percentage, which you rarely find in El Paso and – like for instance, we have every possible nut that you can imagine with chocolate and the secret to that is you have to roast the nuts.

People just think that they throw the nuts in – a lot of my competitors across the United States would just throw the nuts in there, but when you roast them and generate the fabulous oils and those fabulous oils mix with the chocolate that was just made it becomes an aphrodisiac. People love it so we have roasted nuts and we have plain chocolate for the purest and we have the most sensational European chocolate truffles in the world. Now, one thing that I must say is when I opened up the store here, I had an employee with me that had been with me since day one out there – or not day one, she started about a month or two after I opened up. Norma and she's from Venezuela and she's probably – she's part of my family now. She's like my sister, so when I opened up this place I knew that I had to call her and she didn't want to work for those new owners cause she thought they were strange.

And she ended up coming out here to help me open up the store, so she's here and she's been with me for eight years and she knows my style and she knows how to train the people in the back and she knows a lot of the formulas that only she knows. I don't let the formulas out because we've had trickersters who said they wanted to work here and say that they are just working and they really want to open their own business. We've had about four or five people who wanted to come in here and steal our receipts and open up their own business.

One person in particular offered me a tremendous amount of money to buy this place and came and did their due diligence for six weeks. They came in and they came in and I said, "You're gonna give me what kind of money?" And I said, "Okay, have it. Look around." And all they were doing was trying to copy everything and get brands and copy systems and try to get the receipts and try to get the vendors. And so, the day that they were supposed to – finally I said, "Look, either you're going to buy it or you're not going to buy it because my employees in the back are starting to feel uneasy."

Do you know that they never called me back and they a month they had a store open on this street and it lasted one year. They went broke.

AP: How are you able to keep your secrets secret?

LK: It's hard, but you do it. That's why we don't let anybody in the kitchen. Nobody can go in the kitchen.

AP: And how – the employees that you have – are they fairly new or have they been here working with you for how long?

LK: Two – three of the employees have been with me since day one – since I opened up here, which is Norma, Hilda, and Gilbert. They've been with me from day one so I trust them. They are terrific. I was blessed with great, great – those three people are my base here and they know everything, but if we have other people come we tell them, "Look, you see this knife, chop this, and then put it in here" but we don't ever give them the true formulas. I can't trust anybody after that situation.

AP: So, how many employees do you have here?

LK: This is low season right now, so right now we have one, two – six, seven – seven employees right now. But this is the slowest month of the year and then next year we'll start to hire three more people and get them trained and by September we'll have between 12 and 15, something like that.

AP: So, by low season you mean there's –

LK: This is bottom – not too many people right now.

AP: How many employees do you have during the high season?

LK: Depends on the volume – maybe 15 people and then I have people that will come in sometimes from Florida to work cause I know them and they'll work September till May and go on summer vacation to Florida and that works out great for me.

AP: Tell me about your holiday sales – how is that?

LK: Oh, it's scary because you've got to remember that everything is made from scratch and so if somebody puts in an order for 150 baskets and every basket's got pretzels, Oreo's, fresh chocolates, and so forth and you've got to make them perfect and they pick them all up on the same day or they want them delivered, that's a tremendous amount of product that has to be made and it has to be fresh. So, everything has to be coordinated so perfectly – the Christmas orders start coming in July – we got our first one in June this year.

And the reason being is that lady came to me December 10th last year and she couldn't get her order in. She said she'd be here early next year and by early we thought September or August, but she

was here in June and she paid in full. Everybody has to pay in full because if they don't pay and just put their order in and they change their mind, you're stuck with that product. So, a lot of people couldn't get used to the idea that there are hardly any COD's here. You have to pay in advance and I learned that the hard way.

Here you are with a wedding and they break up, what do I care if they broke up? I'm not stuck with 400 party favors – no way.

AP: So, that's happened to you before?

LK: Oh yes in my early days in Florida. "We're getting married and we don't have a lot of money and we need 400 party favors. So we're gonna give you \$40 right now and then every month we'll come and pay you." If it's not fully paid by the time we start production, we won't do the order unless they pay because we're left holding the bag.

AP: So, how was the business climate in Florida verses here?

LK: Well, I had a kosher operation and so all the Jewish people would shop with me for a lot of holidays because all the Rabbi's would bless my place and they would come and check it and make sure it was kosher and check all my ingredients, so that was a type of business that I don't have here. The corporate world was a lot greater there – a lot more doctors, a lot more lawyers. Now it's just the opposite – they're really hungry out there. They're really having a tough, tough time in Florida right now. As a matter of fact, the store is having – the one I sold is having a real tough time, so we're doing more volume here than they are now out there.

But here the corporate world is catching on. Now I'm trying to get people to – I've been debating on – having a business you have to take risks and I don't know how El Paso would feel about doing this, but I think I want to do it. El Paso's condition to send flowers to a funeral and we don't believe in that, we believe that you need to send something sweet for the sweetness that they represented in life – the person that passed. And when you send a tray of our fabulous product to the house that people can enjoy with a cup of coffee or – people are always at people's houses when somebody dies.

When you send flowers – I mean, you're not gonna go beyond the casket and see who sent what flowers. You're crying, you're upset, so when you send flowers you never know that they sent them, but when people send our goods, it's a nice present. So I want to

advertise maybe around the obituaries, but in a nice fashion. I don't know – I want to do it, but I don't want people to think I'm taking advantage of people dying. It's like those people that call and say, "Are you gonna sell your house?" So I don't want to be like that, but I do want them to know that they can send a beautiful basket to the house of the deceased. That's my next venture.

AP: So, you mentioned taking risks. What other risks do you think that you've taken?

LK: In this business?

AP: Yes.

LK: I took one last week. There's a new program where they'll send you high schoolers to work here free, providing that you train them and maybe you hire them for the season. So that's a major risk and the employees are not happy about it at all because it's a lot of work to train them. So it's gonna be a risk and that program starts probably next week, so we'll see how that goes.

AP: What motivated you to take that risk?

LK: Always trying to save a dollar here and there. If they're gonna work for free and I'm going to train them, they're gonna help me, I'm gonna help them.

AP: Is there a special program you went through?

LK: Yeah, it's hard having an employee. When you first hire an employee it's expensive – you have to spend the money training them, you have to spend the money grooming them, you have to spend it on uniforms, you have to spend on their education as far as how to do, what to do, when to do. And if they don't work out you've lost all of that, so the government had a program – they wrote about me in the paper when I was younger when I had this idea, they said, "Well, if you hire people we'll give you a tax credit."

That's not going to help a business, that's not going to help because people don't realize that the mechanics of running a business. It takes a lot of money to run a business properly. And so many people want to open up a business and they have no working capital. That's the number one mistake. When they open up a business and they spend all their money on inventory or a build out

or whatever and they think that they're gonna get their next month's rent by what they sell, they're already in the hole.

And then you create pressure within yourself and people feel that pressure when they walk into your store, so the number one reason I think that people go under in a business is because they're under capitalized.

AP: Under capitalized.

LK: Definitely. And number two, they leave the business too somebody else to manage. Mexican's are famous for that. They will come here and buy a business and let Joe and Helen run it while they go buy another business and the business goes kaput because – there's an expression in Spanish that somebody told me the other day. Norma – where's Norma – call Norma.

There's an expression in Spanish and she says it really well – she told me one day when I left for two weeks – she says, "Don't forget –" She'll give you – she'll tell you in Spanish what it is. It's something like, "It's better to sell the business if you're not going to take care of the business yourself." Something like that – okay honey, when she comes –

[Speaking Spanish]

LK: That's it – **[Speaking Spanish]** – yeah that's it. And that's what people do – that's the second biggest mistake. They'll buy a business and let the employees run it while they run around and either spend the profits or manage another business or – and number three, I think probably is they didn't hit the mark. And I mean they – "My Aunt Tilley makes the best burritos in the world and we're gonna open up a business." Well, if I see one more burrito stand on Mason – we've got enough burrito stands.

You can just have so much of the same thing and people want different. People want to go and have something different today. Not another taco, not another hamburger, you have enough of those places. So they didn't hit the mark or they start a business with a product that people really don't want that much. I'm trying to think of something that's gone kaput – oh, I know – okay a lady – I'm not gonna tell you what it was, but she opened up a gourmet shop and she had – it was high priced, but you can go to Big Lots and get a lot of that stuff.

Another lady opened up a place where you could come and buy gift baskets, a bottle of water, cheese that you don't need to refrigerate and she didn't hit the mark cause people don't want that.

AP: Who do you think is your largest customer base – men or women?

LK: Both, big time both. Men get cravings too, but it's both. We have 50/50 here, men will come in for their wives, men will come in for thank you gifts for their clients, men will come in here for – you'd be surprised at the number of men that the wives have given them responsibilities and said, "Here, go by the party favors for your daughter's wedding. I've got my hands full." And they'll come in and I'll give them a hand. Or men – I just threw a big party for one of the doctor's for his girlfriends, soon to be wife, and he designed it all. He designed all the party favors and all the chocolate and everything.

Then women will come in and do parties, and women will come in and do favors for – they're going to lunch and their friends get together and they want favors or come in just for snacks, or they'll come in for a lot of thank you baskets, birthday baskets, congratulation baskets. But you've got to remember that I'm the only one that has over 5,000 molds. I can make anything in chocolate. People say, "What can you do to this get well basket to make different?" We can put chocolate band-aids, chocolate aspirin, or a chocolate syringe.

"What can you do with this other basket that the lady loves gardening and it's her birthday?" Okay, we'll give her an assortment and on top we'll put the gardening tools. "What can you do for an office – a construction office and we're having a grand opening and we want everybody to get a gift." We make chocolate hard hats for them with their names on them.

And then we also do corporate molds – we take your logo and I send the mold to be made in New York and they send it back to me and we have their corporate logo, so anytime they send a basket out their chocolate corporate mold is in the middle and everybody that sees that basket knows that that company sent it. It's not like you rip off the card and you don't know who sent it. Their logo is in the middle of it and I designed that because it's all about marketing. People want their names mentioned all over the place if you have a business and that's why they come here.

AP: You design the molds yourself?

LK: Yes, but they bring me their logo and then I design the mold then I send the mold off to get done. Honey, can you bring me a couple of the chocolate molds from Norma please? Thank you.

AP: I would like to see that.

LK: Yeah. I also have an x-rated department but that is like underground. I proudly designed that too.

AP: How do you advertise that?

LK: I don't. You can tell when the women come in and they wait around for people to leave. It's kind of like they're buying birth control pills or something. And they'll say, "I'm having a bachelor party and I need, you know." And I'll say, "You want China boy, the American, or Mandingo? Am I on the right track?" " Yes you are. Can I see them please?"

And then men will come in and say, "My wife just had surgery and I'd like to send her a little something." And I say, "What kind of surgery? Is it appendicitis?" And he'll say, "No" and I say, "Is it a little higher than that? Did she get a breast job?" " Yes" so then we give – we have these breast – a before breast and an after breast in chocolate.

AP: That's fantastic.

LK: That's one thing about – what's this? No, the corporate molds my love. Baby shower – boom, kid is born – boom, corporate mold – boom, pink ribbon, red ribbon or whatever. We have thousands and thousands of – ask me if I have something.

AP: Do you have a church mission?

LK: Yeah, I got it.

AP: A nun?

LK: Yeah, I got her, but she's in the x-rated department but I can always fix it to where it's not x-rated. What else?

AP: An orthodontist?

LK: Oh yeah. I've got false teeth, I've got a molar that you put the chocolate inside. Our dentist used that for Christmas and then one child – a pediatric dentist uses it for her marketing. It's a chocolate

molar and we put chocolates inside – I got false teeth, I've got one tooth, tooth brush, tooth paste.

AP: How about a cardiologist?

LK: An anatomically correct heart.

AP: Anatomically correct?

LK: Oh yeah, the veins and everything. I've got a kidney, I've got a liver, I have a rear end for the proctologist, I got it all. You've got to be different in business. I can't just have a chocolate store. People have to be able to come in and say, "Let's have a good time with this. What do you have in this category?"

AP: What kind of businesses do you work with here in El Paso?

LK: All kinds – I've got Las [inaudible], I've got Del Sol, the City of El Paso Chamber of Commerce – help me with some of the corporate hon – who else has come in corporate – the magazines, the car dealers – if they sell a car they give them a little chocolate car. Honey, can you think of any other corporate that come in here? All the nursing homes – what corporate come in that you can think of? U-Tep comes in here – the only thing is that I cannot get their mold because it's – I gotta be careful. Texas Tech – I can't get their hook – they won't let me copy it because of the copyright.

I'll do a football, I'll do a basketball, I'll do the colors – they can't sue me for that.

AP: Are you a member of – you mentioned the Chamber of Commerce as one of you –

LK: No, I'm not, but they still do business with me. I'm on the board for Hospice, but it's very difficult for me to get away. It's very difficult for me to get away – when you get involved with too many things and it pulls you away from this business, for some reason I will come back and she will say, "You're not going to believe this. Three customers came in and they didn't want to buy because you weren't here." And there's nothing that makes me more furious than that, but what am I gonna do. A lot of people want me here and a lot of people don't because I'll design, I'll do and they think they're getting a discount. So many people will call here and say, "She's got my number" and I don't even know who they are.

Tell her Sally came in – who?

AP: Did you have any mentors?

LK: In my life?

AP: Yes.

LK: Oh yeah, I met a lot of people, but I met the people at the right time. They – a lot of people sometimes didn't even realize that I was learning from them. People I met along the way – this old man that was 97 years old that used take me to dinner and teach me about business, but he was just so – I don't know what word to use. What's another word for horny? He was 97 years old and he would teach me so much and I just – he would take me to these magnificent restaurants in New York City that I could never afford. And he said, "Just talk to me. Just have dinner with me." So I asked him to teach me about his world – he had hotels and he would teach me a lot.

AP: So, you learned about business?

LK: Yeah and about deal making. Different people taught me different things.

AP: What do you think you learned from him in terms of business? What did he teach you? Anything that stands out?

LK: Never cry in a business deal. Once you cry, forget it – if you're upset and trying to negotiate or you're trying to fight or you're trying to stand up for yourself – if you cry you just lost about 10 pounds of ammunition. You don't cry – once a woman cries you can forget about it. Any time a person cries – it's called a PAC in physiology – the Parent Adult Child – that's why a lot of men say, "Hey man I married a woman I didn't marry a mother. You're acting like my mother." Because the woman will take the motherly role of "I told you to throw out the trash. I told you to clean up the yard."

And men hate when you act like their mother or if a woman gets emotional and she'll go to the child mode and she'll say, "But you never hug me, you never kiss me, you never take me out to dinner." So the man doesn't want to stay married to a child and he doesn't want to stay married to a mother. He wants the woman that he initially married.

AP: And how has it been for you as a business woman?

LK: What when I lose my temper here? Oh, I've kicked people out of my store. I kicked two people out of my store and said "You can't come back for six months." They got other people to come here and buy stuff for them. One of them said, "Look at this. I was in the car and she got it for me." No problem, as long as they spent money, but I put them on probation and they couldn't come back for six months because they mistreated my people and they were demanding and they created a big scene in my store and I kicked them out.

AP: In terms of business deals – how do men treat you cause you're a woman? Have you faced any challenges?

LK: Oh yeah, especially with Latin men from Mexico and I set them straight real fast.

AP: Can you give me an example of their attitude toward you cause you're a woman?

LK: Yeah, one of them came in – this was about 2 years ago and said he was in a hurry and he wanted me to get it right away and he was snapping and saying hurry. That's when I stopped and I said, "Whoa, just one second. We're gonna start from scratch." And then he was very upset that I didn't speak Spanish to him and then he started saying, "Look where you come from. You should be speaking Spanish to me." And I started speaking Spanish to him and I said, "Look I'm going to have to apologize to you. My Spanish is not as good as your Spanish, but you can't come in here snapping your fingers. This is a wonderful product and we're gonna try to do it as fast as we can, but you can't behave like that in my store."

And he settled down and he still comes in and his behavior is totally different. I learned a long time ago in my personal and in my business life that if you set the record straight from the very beginning people will not take advantage of you, especially a man. Once a man knows that he can have his way and that he's got you figured out, they will walk all over you and that's why so many women become victims. They didn't set the record straight from the very beginning. Same thing in business, you've got to set the record straight, especially with employees and especially with customers. Not that I'm tough with customers, but they can't come in here demanding and being upset that we don't have a particular product or we're not gonna take your order.

Like, if somebody comes in right now and become very demanding with "You have to deliver it by 5:00!" The drivers are already gone, the best I can do is maybe – maybe I can hire a courier service or maybe – "Well you take it!" I can't leave my store – when they have that attitude, that makes me want to do less for them because I know that – it's not gonna work.

AP: How about in the corporate arena? Have you faced any challenges there with deals?

LK: Oh yeah, I just faced on this week. Somebody called and wanted us to do the chocolate fountain for the Kim Kardashian deal that's this weekend and ordinarily we charge \$100 – I mean, \$400 for a 100 people and they were having 400 people. So the bill was going to be \$1,600 and then they said, "Look, this is going to be part donation and we're going to be giving a lot of the profits to the child crisis or something like that." And I said, "Well, we're done with donations, but I will help you a little bit. Make me an offer and I'll be more than happy to help you." So, they called me back and they said, "We'll take it for \$800." And I said, "Oh, that's a 50 percent discount and you want it for four hours when we usually do it for two. I'll tell you what I'll do – I'll go ahead and do it for \$1,000." And she was so mad that I had the nerve to do that that she never called me back and we had to know if we had the deal or not cause we had to get more chocolate. So I called her up and she was extremely rude and she said, "You don't realize what you lost." And I've learned that in business, you cannot cheapen yourself – I was already willing to give a very nice discount, but I wasn't going to give it away free because once you start doing that you'll have everybody at your door.

You just have to put your foot down a lot of the times.

AP: Everybody's talking about the economy – have you been hit by the economy?

LK: Yeah, and what we do is we have recession busters. Deals for the next four hours, 50 percent off, free delivery for this week, celebrate going home on a Friday night, come between these hours and you'll get this at a certain discount, recession buster, try our new creation. See if she's got that new recession buster – the caramel corn with the chocolate ready so my friends here can taste it. It's our recession buster for tomorrow.

AP: Where do you advertise recession busters?

LK: Internet, the sign, like this one's coming in to get me for advertising right now. Watch how I handle this okay. This is the way – she gets me every single year and this year I just can't do it.

Hi Wilma. How are you? I'm in a long interview my love but that's okay. Are you here for what I think it is? My dear, we're not gonna be able to do it this year. No, we – you know what it is, we have so many people asking us and then – Richard kind of taught me how to do every quarter, so I'm booked till March. It's all allocated so I can't this year.

Wilma: Well, I'll do it after March.

LK: We decided to go with the customers – yeah, if she can just cut me off a few pieces –

Wilma: Are you doing an ad?

LK: No, this is for an interview for entrepreneur for U-Tech. What we did this year was looked in the computer and the corporations that asked us for whatever – the people that did the most with us is who we gave the advertising too.

Wilma: This is not for advertising – this is for Gail when you did the gift basket.

LK: When's it for?

Wilma: August 22nd.

LK: That's just around the corner my dear.

Wilma: I know.

LK: We've got the 10 allocations going out this month. I'm sorry. How come you came to me so late this year?

Wilma: Just things have –

LK: I know. I'm sorry Wilma.

Wilma: That's okay. I'll check back with you next year. Thanks.

LK: Let's see – in a week I probably get about 12 requests like that. And you saw how I got out of that because it's just overwhelming,

but I have to keep in good because that's the opera. Thank you baby. I'd like a little bit smaller piece my love. Just tell her to make it a little bit smaller please and a couple of napkins. Everybody asks us for donations, but you saw how I got out of that.

AP: Gracefully.

LK: And we do 10 a month already. 10 donations a month.

AP: Is that – this is the continuation of the interview with Leigh Kersh.

LK: You want to taste my recession buster?

AP: I definitely want to taste the recession buster. This is popcorn?

LK: Caramel corn done to perfection with chocolate. Nobody in town has that. Isn't that wonderful?

AP: Oh yes.

LK: Would you like to have some camera girl? Yeah, so we'll have a deal tomorrow here.

AP: This chocolate is amazing.

LK: I know. It's also an aphrodisiac, so I don't know what you have planned later, but be careful cause it will make you very merry. Fabulous and once they start eating that they start buying me out.

AP: So, you're not having to advertise the recession buster in the paper?

LK: No, because it won't – anytime that our – and this is good for anybody that owns a business – people don't realize that when you advertise you better get back that money plus more or you're wasting your time. And too many people will advertise and spend a lot of money on an ad – like if I were to go to the El Paso Times right now and do an ad it will cost \$800 to \$1,000. I better sell a minimum of \$1,000 in order for it to work and it's doubtful that I will sell \$1,000 of this if I put in \$1,000 ad – for one day.

AP: How do you decide when to advertise or how to advertise?

LK: A lot of people don't really do an analysis of what works and what doesn't work and we have gone through the whole gammet. We have done magazines – we have done everything and what works

best for us is television because this is a visual product, people have to see it, people want to see the strawberry's and the dripping chocolate, and the people producing it and all that. It's a visual. We do horrible on the radio, so the only advertisement that we do is television and bench ads. If you go up and down Mason you'll see a fabulous strawberry with dripping chocolate and they come in because of that.

We sell hundreds of strawberries in a day because of those ads on the street. And I had billboards, but then billboards got crazy. I had billboards for five years and we just ended it this year.

AP: By crazy you mean?

LK: Price wise, so we decided to discontinue them to see if there was gonna be a difference. Oh yeah, that would bring in the business so I'm probably gonna get them back. I'll probably look for billboards this fall.

AP: What role has your family played in the business with you?

LK: I don't believe in bringing family in – family does not work well in my business because everybody has to be treated the same and they have to work just like everybody else. They can't be late and they can't call in sick and they can't work when they want to work. If I bring family in at all it's because – they might help for Valentine's Day when the lines are long.

AP: Tell me about those lines?

LK: Tremendous – it's just scary. You have to be so focused and you have to work fast because one thing I don't like is when my people keep people waiting. I hate to be waiting in line and I don't like to be at Albertson's while the woman that's checking out – a customer is showing pictures and talking and talking about a party she went to and in the meantime I've got to get home and fix dinner. There's nothing more aggravating than having to stand in line when somebody is slow and there's a whole line.

So these people are trained to work fast. Norma knows me like the back of her hand, so she knows that while people are picking, she's packing and I'm charging. It's like a machine – a well run machine. If you were to come here when it's busy, you would be in awe of how it works back there. We're making bows, we're getting them out – the objective is to make them happy, get their product and out the door. People say, "Why don't you have coffee

in here?" Cause I don't want people hanging out. I don't want to make \$1.25 and then read a book – I don't know how they do it at the bookstore. They've got people reading books and having coffee and not buying the books.

AP: You mentioned that they – one woman put in her order early and how do you handle the late comers?

LK: Oh, it's so hard because if it's a customer every year – and some of them say, we didn't have the money. We know how you are with no COD's, so I just somehow say, "Well, let me see what I can do." One time what I did was I gave somebody a 10 percent discount and they did for New Year's – I said, "Do you mind if I cancel your order and maybe what we can do is do a New Year's package and send it to all your clients and I'll give you free delivery and then let this man have your chocolate?" And he said yeah so it worked out well.

One thing physiologically is people love the words sold out. They love them because when people can't have something, they want it and they will come back. So what I will do is when we sell out – "Let me take your order. You'll be the next in line so come back in two days." And I'm already sold out again, so that's the whole thing. When I sell out at Thanksgiving, I push them on to Christmas and when I sell out at Christmas I push them up to New Years.

People want something they can't have and that's why when we sell out here, it's a positive thing because they'll come at 6:00 in the morning and wait in line.

AP: So, the advertising is also word of mouth?

LK: A lot of word of mouth. The majority of people that come in here we will ask them, "Where did you hear about us?" And they'll say, "Somebody told me to come here." Or "I passed by here and I saw your sign."

AP: And as successful as you are as a business woman, what advice – what words of advice would you give to someone who's thinking about starting a business?

LK: Number one, are they ready for the hard work it's gonna take? Are they ready – if they have children, are you gonna be ready to work something out with those kids and your husband and caretakers because you're not going to be able to get home when you want to

get home. And you can't just leave a business when you want to leave a business. And you've got to have nerves of steel and you've gotta be ready for the low times and the good times.

AP: How does your husband help you with that?

LK: Tremendously. He owns Dominic's so he thinks like I do. He works seven days a week – he leaves the house at 5:00 in the morning, so I needed to have been married to a worker. If I would have been married to somebody that was on the couch when I came home and on the couch when I leave, it would have lasted three minutes. I can't stand a lazy man. And he is fabulous and we're always helping each other with ideas and with what to do and how to do, marketing ideas. His son is helping me with creating a Twitter account and Facebook and communicating with people about deals through that – all these people want to be my friends and I don't know how to tell them yes. So I'm always learning – technology is not one of my favorite things, but I gotta get into that Twitter and Facebook action because it's a fabulous marketing tool.

So the advice I have for somebody who is going to start a business tomorrow is get ready and work your tail off, number one. number two, have procedures in order and consistency – consistent product, consistent customer service, consistent everything because if somebody comes to your store and they get great service or they get a great product and they come back another time and it's mediocre, like a lot of restaurants in town, people won't go back. You tell me how many restaurants you've gone to the second time and it wasn't as good as the first time and you won't go back.

That's business. You have to be consistent, you have to keep your eyes on the figures, you have to know when to cut back, you have to know when to lay off and cut back hours, you have to know when you can't buy, you have to know when you have to get creative, and you have to be on time opening and on time closing, and there's nothing more infuriating than when somebody comes to your store and they sign says 10:00 and you're not here and not open. Or when you know they close at 6:00 and you fly here and get here at four minutes till 6:00 and they're closed. Somebody got fired for that here – she changed the clocks.

AP: For closing four minutes early?

LK: No, I don't know how early she closed, but she changed the clocks and that's when we put cameras in.

AP: So, customer service is a big deal?

LK: Got to be cause there's nothing that will ruin your business more than customer service. They won't come back. You can have the best product and the best food in the world, but if people treat you badly, they're gonna remember that and that goes – it's a physiological thing like – if you make a person feel bad, they remember of another time that they felt bad and they don't remember the situation, they remember the feeling and they walk out and they don't forget it. People don't forget feelings, people will forget incidences and people will forget situations, but they will not forget the feeling they got. You agree?

AP: I agree.

LK: Like even in a relationship – like if you mother, hypothetically used to scream at you and made you feel bad and if somebody screams at you and makes you feel the same way, you may have not forgot that your mother did it but you know the feeling is there.

AP: So how do you feel that feelings are connected to chocolate?

LK: You should have seen your face when you ate the first piece. I was answering a question and you just did this – you didn't even care you said, "This chocolate is so good!"

AP: It is really good.

LK: It's a feeling and people have to have that feeling when they come in. One of the reasons I designed the store the way that I did is because I want people to walk in and forget they're on Mason, forget they're in El Paso, just have a good time. Look at the drunk woman up there, look at all the chocolates, look at the containers, does this remind you of when you were a kid. I want people to look around and just be dazzled.

AP: Do you think feelings effect the product when it's being made?

LK: Oh, I know so. You know, any time that anybody cooks – if you're mad or you're depressed and if you're making a roast beef, that roast beef is not gonna come out right. It's been proven over and over again and the majority of bakers will tell you that. In our business if we've got somebody that's got a bad attitude in the back and she's ticked off, my supervisors will come and tell me and we'll send her home. So, the tempering of the chocolate, the sheen,

the flavor, everything has to do with who's making it and that's why I keep the same people making it.

AP: What else can I ask you because you're a wealth of knowledge.

LK: In opening up your own business, be careful who you partner with. My father always taught me that partners were for dancing. Be careful when you have a partner – when you have a partner you have got to have – you've got to really know that person and you've got to have boundaries and you've got to know that that person's gonna do what they're gonna do and you're gonna do what you're gonna do and it's equally divided because a majority of partnerships that I know of usually break up.

AP: Did you ever have a partnership?

LK: Never. Like I told you before, my father said partners are for dancing. Many people want to be my partner and I wouldn't think of it. Why would I want to mess up my thing?

AP: How did you decide to decorate –

LK: I wanted it to be European. I wanted it to be like they were in a different land. I wanted it – I want them to walk in and feel like of – kind of look at the people and – honey, can I ask you my darling when you walked in did you like it?

Female Speaker: Yeah.

LK: Are you enthralled? Are you looking all over the place?

Female Speaker: Yeah.

LK: Do you feel like you're in El Paso?

Female Speaker: No.

LK: Great, that's what I wanted.

AP: How much time did – how much time went into the build out?

LK: Two months working every day.

AP: Can I ask you how much?

LK: A fortune – well, a lot of money. But I cut corners, like for instance, seeing that it's not my property I wanted a stone floor and I didn't know what to do cause a stone floor – I'm not gonna pay \$15,000 for a property that's not mine. So what I did was told the guys, "Look, put the cement and then we're gonna go to Home Depot and got one of those molds and then we're gonna buff it up and we're gonna chip it and make it look old." And they came out pretty good.

And then the walls – the plasters really didn't know what they were doing, so I said, "You know what? That's okay cause we're gonna make it look bad and make it look like it's old. You screwed up over there by the sink and you didn't plaster it right, but it looks like it's part of the deal." When life gives you lemons you've got to make lemonade and that's what I did here.

AP: So, what would you say to the people said that El Paso is not ready for chocolate?

LK: They were so wrong. El Paso is on the verge of a renaissance. And I have a lot of friends in New York, a lot of friends in Florida, a lot of friends in California and all those people are suffering so much. Even though we're having a tough time here, we're still on top, we're still okay, we're still generating sales. It's not as bad as the rest of the country. El Paso is a fabulous place to be right now and I just hope that it will attract a lot of the people that left because I'm living proof. You come here and you think, "Oh my goodness gracious." You can buy a fabulous house, the people here are so wonderful, I met a lot of people from around the world, especially when I was in North Miami Beach, Florida – met a lot of Cubans, met a lot Argentinean's, met a lot of – all those Latin Americans, South American countries – Russia, Japan, China and the Mexican-American/American-Mexican whatever you want to say here, the manners are so wonderful.

Even when you have a little beggar that's two or three years old, the Mexican's – they even have manners. Manners are taught like I've never seen in my life and the people here are so gentle and they're so humble and you can't find that in other parts of the country.

AP: So you would encourage people who have moved away to come back?

LK: In a New York second. The views, the weather, except for lately, the weather, the possibilities. People will spend money here if there's a place to spend money.

AP: What are your plans for the future?

LK: Sell my store to the right people and retire.

AP: You retire?

LK: Yeah.

AP: Isn't that what you thought you were going to do in Florida?

LK: Yeah, and what will be so exciting is to see what God has planned for me. You just kind of have to follow his thing – whatever he wants, if he wants me to sell it then he'll bring me the right people. If he doesn't want me to sell it, then I'll continue to work. If he wants another opportunity for me then he'll present it and that's my attitude in life. You just have to let go and let God and everything works out okay.

AP: But what will we do without your chocolate?

LK: Oh baby, things aren't forever.

AP: So, you mentioned your father.

LK: Yes, Moe – Big Moe. I love him.

AP: Tell me more about him.

LK: Oh, he was so wonderful. He was a very, very sought after bachelor. He worked in the Old City Market and he had a poultry operation where they killed chickens and stuff – they'd cut off the neck, take off the feathers, and give it to you – fresh chicken. I grew up in that environment and eventually they sold it, but the Old City Market was just so wonderful cause we would go to [Effey's](#) and have lunch. I was very close to my dad. As a matter of fact, my parents got divorced and we stayed with my dad. He was terrific, but he was 37 years old and my mom was 17 years old and she was a magnificent looking girl and he was a very handsome guy.

And she came into the poultry place looking for a chicken, I guess. And he told his brother Saul, he said, "You see that girl? I'm

gonna marry her." And he said, "You're crazy. You're an old man and that gorgeous, magnificent girl will never marry somebody like you." That was around Thanksgiving – oh, she was there for a turkey for Thanksgiving, and they were married by January 15th. And then they had four kids – they were married January 15th and I was born October 25th and then she had another one – four kids and so the poor lady never really lived. She just became a mother very young and when they got a divorce she went away and we stayed with my dad.

And he did a fabulous job and we were always trying to get him set up with women. Everybody wanted him and everybody wanted to date him – the young ones especially. So finally we found him someone that was a little closer to his age and – she was 35 and he was 58. And they had a daughter and then he passed away when he was 76. Great man – hilarious, funny, great business man. And even if he didn't have it he would find it to give us. One time I remember when I was in high school and he – we only had one car at that point and he let me have the car and he took the bus to work. Now, that's a good dad.

He had a loud speaker at his office on San Antonio Street – it's not there anymore. They knocked it down to build a parking lot or something and all the judges knew him and all the lawyers knew him and all the women knew him from the courthouse and he would stand in his office with a loud speaker and say, "Baby, look at the one in the blue dress. Look at the way she walks." And you know, you're walking down the sidewalk and people are saying, "Oh my gosh. Judge how are you? Judge coming down the street." And it was like a big parade.

People would just love to come down the street cause at 4:30 he'd start his announcing.

AP: He made people feel special?

LK: Always. That's it – my father always made everybody feel like a million dollars. Always. Even from – there was a rooster that used to hang out and he had one eye going that way and one eye going that way. His name was Chewy [inaudible], I think and he was always running for Mayor, but he was like – he was mentally handicapped for sure. But my dad always made him feel like a million dollars. I can remember being five or six and just watching that guy with one eye going that way and one eye going that way and really rugged. And he'd say, "Moe, I want to talk to you about buying that building."

And my dad would make him feel like a million dollars and he'd say, "You remind me of my dog Blacky, he's got the most beautiful eyes just like you." And Chewy would say, "Hey, I remind him of his dog. Look at my eyes." And people would look cause they were cross-eyed, you know. That's the way my dad was and he always helped everybody. From – anything you needed he would help you. He was great.

AP: So, besides teaching you that partners were for dancing, what else did he teach you?

LK: Gotta do the right thing in your heart. That's what he taught me. Like, I made a mistake – see those cookies there? I made a mistake on those cookies for \$2.85 and I overcharged, but I know who it was and I'm gonna call him and say, "You have a credit here." I have to cause I overcharged him and I'm not gonna be a ease, but I know he's from [inaudible] – he's the pharmacists. And I owe him a \$1 or \$1.50, but whatever it is I gotta give it back to him. You've gotta do the right thing in your heart.

AP: We're gonna go ahead and come to a close on the interview, but before I want to ask you – is this a woman owned certified business or –

LK: What does that mean? I am a woman and I own it.

AP: I know, but have you – since you're not involved with any of the chambers or anything like that – the certification that some businesses get –

LK: What's it for? You get money or what?

AP: Well, I think they probably do look at you a little different because you're a woman owned business. You don't think that you've had any advantages being a woman owned business here?

LK: None. None. I mean, you know – I don't really go for any of that stuff. I just think that people just need to do what they've gotta do. If I were to go and get certified as a woman owned business, what's that gonna do for me? You think other women will come to me? I'm not talking about the groups I've been involved in cause I was voted entrepreneur of the year for the border women something – not sure what it is but I've got the trophy in my office.

AP: When was this?

LK: A couple years ago. And it's great when women can talk with other women to get motivated and to help each other with business. Like networking, I think that's terrific, but as far – if I were to go and get certified as a woman owned business – everything I do has got to have merit and got to have a reason for me to do it. Like this afternoon, I rarely ever spend this much time with anybody, but I know that you're gonna do something with this. I don't know what you're gonna do with it, but I might have helped you personally and I don't know if there's somebody special in your life and I don't know if maybe you've got a man that someday might take advantage of you, you know to put your foot down now and don't let him get away with it.

So, something I might have said might have triggered something that might change your life and that to me is worth it. Might not be about business, it might be about business, and I might help somebody else with something I said and that to me is worth it. so if I'm gonna go and do something with a group of women, it's gotta be for a benefit or – I do a lot of public speaking for some of these people and every single time I have done public speaking for any of these groups, people have walked away and said, "You know what? That's what I needed to hear. I've gotta make a decision."

AP: And how was it that you were nominated and given that award?
That's an honor.

LK: It is. They called me up and said "You are under consideration and you got it." And they threw a big luncheon and I had to do a speech and I did it on relationships and they said, "Now I understand why he acts the way he does." And I explained to them that you either have a problem or you are the problem. And I can assure you that at least 75 percent of those women said – they were crying, "I'm the problem." If you change from the person that he married then you're gonna have problems.

AP: Is there anything that you would change about how the business has gone, how you started with – maybe something you would have done differently?

LK: No. I really – no. I can't do anything – this is our slowest month and we're used to making and doing a lot of business, but this gives us a chance to do a lot of different things like get our favors in order, get our planning in order, creativity, and we never really have time. She created some cherry worms and it's been a hit, so this gives her a chance – cause she's new to really grasp the job

because I told her that if she doesn't know everything by September 1st it will eat her up alive. The pressure is so tremendous that you'll freeze and won't know what to do. People think it's a piece of cake working here – now way. It's hard working here.

AP: You mentioned the orders – that you'll order chocolate from Belgium.

LK: Yes, 18-wheelers drive up.

AP: Do you run out of chocolate often?

LK: No, I'm pretty good at it now with projections, but it takes seven to eight days to get it here.

AP: One last question – how were those enchiladas when you came in?

LK: You're not gonna believe what I did – first before the enchiladas I went to that Taco Cabana joint over here – they were the most fabulous, but when I first got here they were so good and I told the manager they had the best in the world. I went like every single day and I couldn't get enough and I did go – I won't tell you the name of the place – to a certain restaurant to get the green chicken enchiladas and they were horrible. The place had changed, it's not the same. If I wasn't on the machine I would tell you who it is.

I went to another place and it was too Americanized and then I went to the graveyard and they were good there – J & L or something.

AP: And you found your husband.

LK: I found a lot of things in this town. A home I'd always dreamed of having but knew I could never have it. I always wanted to live in Tuscany and I always wanted – after that movie I said I wanted a Tuscan home and I got a Tuscan home – thank you God.

AP: Any parting thoughts or ideas you'd like to add? Cause this project is for business for those El Pasoians who would like to know what it is that makes business people successful.

LK: Number one, like I said before, you've got to have money. Good credit for a loan or something but you've gotta get that money thing. Number two, you've got to know that you've hit the mark

with the type of business you're gonna open. Don't open up another taco joint just because your mother knows how to make good tacos. What are you gonna do if you have a fight with your mother and she quits? Now who's gonna make the tacos? So you can't do a business like that. Number three, you've gotta have excellent customer service and consistency in your product.

And I think that once you know that you're not undercapitalized and that you hit the market with a product that you're going to have for the public and number three, excellent customer skills and treat the people like a million dollars. To have the philosophy that we have here, they could have gone elsewhere, but they picked us, now let's take good care of them. That's my philosophy and it's worked.

AP: Is that something that you teach your employees as well?

LK: Oh yes. How do I feel about customer service my dear?

Female Speaker: It's very important.

LK: If her back is turned and I've got somebody waiting here – she knows that I'm gonna get nervous. I don't want my people to wait. I want them to be treated like gold. I don't care who they are. The guy that makes \$5 a day – his dollar is just as good as Paul Fosters. That's our philosophy here and I don't care if you're a millionaire, you're not gonna go from the back of the line to the front cause these people have been waiting. I don't care if they make \$7 an hour, they're gonna get the same service that you get. That's how I feel.

AP: Thank you so much for your time.

LK: My pleasure.

AP: It was a fantastic interview.

LK: Really?

AP: Yes. This concludes the interview with Ms. Kersh.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 94 minutes