

Doug Grina
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

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DG: My name is Doug Grina. I am the owner—one of the owners of Al's Breakfast and have been for 42 years.

RH: And I'm Rob Hahn. I'll be asking the questions. Today is Wednesday, January 9, 2019, and we are at Al's Breakfast in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Let's go back to your first memories of Dinkytown and, maybe more specifically, the first time you ever came here to Al's Breakfast.

DG: I didn't come here for several years. I came here in 1967 and it probably wasn't until the 70s that I actually tried to eat here. That was because I had no money. I was living on rice and beans. The first time I came to Dinkytown I visited a friend who was living above Gray's Drug down on the corner. I don't remember much about Dinkytown then because that was 1968 or 1969. I didn't actually hang around here. I was a West Bank dude. I came over here to visit some friends now and again, but I didn't really—I new somebody in the Florence, the really old apartment buildings on the corner of University and Tenth. That was about what I would come over here for. It wasn't until I—the first time I came here, I didn't really like it. I thought, you had to know somebody to get—I was too shy, oddly enough. I couldn't get my coffee cup refilled, so I didn't come back. I got a part-time job here in 1977 and within two months, Al's nephew asked me if I wanted to buy him out in a year. So my plans on becoming a horticulturist went out the window and, instead, I've been here for 40 years.

RH: Was it much of a deliberation for you?

DG: No. I loved food, I loved theater, and I loved everything about this place. I was going back to school because the type of theater I liked doing was called—it wasn't called performance art back then; it was called experimental theater, but there was no money. So I didn't—I thought, well, I actually have to live the rest of my life, so I got out of seven years of theater work because I wanted to find something I could do and earn money. I ended up here instead, which was an absolutely wonderful curve ball.

RH: How I are things—before I ask how they've changed, how have they stayed the same since you owned this business?

DG: Until two years ago, when they started building all these apartments, where there are like 4,000 or more students here in Dinkytown, I could never figure out why for 30 years, nothing changed. Occasional businesses coming and going but no building changes and nothing really got built. It just stayed the same. That was astonishing to me. I think the only thing that changed is somebody tore down a couple of buildings on the corner there and put in what's become the Library Bar. Originally, it was Sammy D's expansion, a little Italian place. I got a José up, and I think I'm done. Am I done? I'm down to my last year here and I am only working three days a week. It turns out when you are the boss, you can arrange things.

RH: Let's talk about the changes. What have you thought of the changes in Dinkytown over the last few years?

DG: I thought it was way over due. I don't mind it. I like the idea that they are going to try and maintain the look by keeping any new building back from the street section. That's a good idea. It will keep it with a small town place that it is now. They can build all they want; those high rises down there or back over in this corner. That would be fine with me as long as they keep this look. That's what appears to be the plan.

RH: Describe some of the characters that have come through here or who come through here on a regular basis—either the well-known individuals or the regulars who are not so well known to the general public.

DG: There's anywhere from street people who line their clothing with aluminum foil to NBA stars, and ex-governors. We used to get—Arnie Carlson used to come in all the time. He was always decked out in Minnesota gear head to toe. I don't know if you remember who he was. He was an ex-governor. We get a lot of different people and the great thing is they all stand in line. You are sitting next to—you don't know if you are going to be sitting next to a wealthy person or a street person when you sit down here.

RH: What was Governor Carlson like?

DG: He's a good guy—a very good guy. I didn't agree—I don't agree with most politicians. I didn't agree always with what he did, but I thought he was a decent, civil, and caring human being. I really like it when he came in. He was always friendly and always a good guy.

RH: You were talking earlier about the media coverage that you got. Why don't you tell me how you went about generating local media coverage with [unclear 05:13]?

DG: We had a zero marketing budget. I wanted to increase our exposure. I would—on our birthdays particular, I would call. I knew some people who worked in the—like floor directors and that sort of thing. I would call them up and say, listen, we are going to have a band here. Usually, with that guy down there—David Baldwin and the Summit Hill Brass Quintet were coming over here and play out front. David, wave to the camera. You're not David. I know David and you're not David. David is the guy who looks like William Shakespeare. Anyway, he would come over with his group and play out front. Then we would get the TV come. So Channel 9 and Channel 11—I would get at least one station every time. After awhile, they learned that I was good for a short piece. So we would get the man-on-the street stuff a lot. They would come over and ask us about something. I remember they came over once and wanted to talk about new eating habits of people. One of my customers said, "Oh, I'm trying to cut down on fat. I pat my bacon dry." I could hear—I was wired up, and I could hear the nutritionist in the booth going—laughing out loud that he was thinking that he was making himself more healthy by patting his bacon dry. So yeah, we've gotten coverage.

RH: You mentioned Dr. Baldwin. We are going to talk to him in just a little bit. He wrote a musical piece on Al's Breakfast.

DG: Yes, "Music for Al's Breakfast."

RH: What did you think of that when you first heard it?

DG: I thought—well, having your restaurant be a muse for a piece of modern music is amazing. I was delighted. I'm still delighted.

RH: Do you think that Al's continues to remain almost, without being redundant, a microcosm of Dinkytown?

DG: I don't know that I would necessarily say that. It's more like we get business that the rest of Dinkytown doesn't. We get a lot of tourists and things like that. In a way, we're a little different from the rest of Dinkytown. The rest of Dinkytown is more like fraternity houses and residents' halls, and young students. The people in here—most of them have jobs. We do get more students now because there are more in town, which is a good thing. Al's has always been more of a microcosm of the area than of the University.

RH: Has there any—have you ever given any consideration under your ownership of expanding?

DG: I always said if you want to open another restaurant, that's fine. But don't kill the one that works. So no, we're not going to expand it. We did talk at one time about opening another place. But mostly, I knew that what I wanted to do was run this wonderful little submarine. So that's what I do.

RH: How would you define—where are we at, fourteen stools? Fourteen stools. What's the magic of it?

DG: For me, it's like a living thing. It's almost as if I can watch the building breathing. I know every corner of it. I love the idea that every aspect of this, I know how it works and how it works together. We work as a team. Everybody tries to learn every job. I think it is terrific. I try to make it a reflection of the ensemble work I came from. It's a lot of fun for me working here. Having it be this compact, it's very intimate both with you guys and with us.

RH: Let's go back to some of the well-known individuals you mentioned. The NBA stars and you mentioned a few others by name. What are your memories of them?

DG: Jim Petersen, a local announcer and long-time NBA and college basketball star ate in here for years. He just had a few years ago a heart bypass surgery, so his diet has changed, but he still comes in. He's a terrific person. Trent Tucker who works locally now works with the University. He's been a long-time customer.

Unidentified Speaker: Latavius Murray came in today—the Vikings running back. He ate in here.

DG: I don't notice—I'm not so good at recognizing media people, so I don't know them. Apparently, many long years ago Sam Shepard and Jessica Lang came in and I had no idea who they were.

RH: What am I forgetting to ask that you want to add about Al's or about Dinkytown or anything else?

DG: I don't know. What about Al's? Al's is—we once got an award from the Gilbert Society because of the way we work as a business and interact. It's more like we're a part of the community than we are business that lends in the community. Our people are connected to us forever. The people who worked here 40 years ago still come in and visit. Everybody who ever worked here come by. People come back and work again. Most of my employees worked for many long years. This is not a big turnover business like most restaurants are. This is us. It's an "us" place and we try to include as many of the people who come in into the "us" as we can. I don't know. I'm an introvert. This brings me out of my shell. It's a place—that was when the first guy with the aluminum foil clothing showed up. He wasn't harmful to anybody but he didn't belong on the streets. I don't think the government ever went back to being—the Federal government anyway to—he declared it freeing, which I'm not so sure it's true.

RH: So you are saying that you noticed a dramatic change.

DG: I noticed a big change. Ever since, we've always—now it's getting—it kind of ebbs and flows. Oddly enough, it doesn't seem to ever be in sync with the economy. The economy is great right now and we have more street people than I'm used to. I think there are a lot more people who are just saying, "The hell with it; it's not working for me."

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