

Nicholas Connor interviewed by Samantha Ríos  
October 14, 2019  
Staten Island, NY

Samantha Ríos: My name is Samantha Ríos and I'm interviewing Nicholas Connor in Staten Island, New York on October 14, 2019. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Nicholas Connor: Yes, I give you permission to record this oral history.

SR: Okay. Where did you grow up?

NC: I grew up in Staten Island, New York and I grew up around the Mariner's Harbor area.

SR: Describe your favorite meal growing up.

NC: My favorite meal growing up was my aunt's home cooked chicken cutlet with a side of mashed potatoes with some gravy and broccoli.

SR: Why was it significant to you?

NC: It was significant to me because it was home cooked, it was made with love, and she always added a little extra spice and homemade ingredients.

SR: Okay. Was there meaning behind it, beyond the food itself?

NC: There was meaning behind it because growing up I was raised by a single mother and we didn't have it like that. So anytime I had the opportunity to eat a fresh home cooked meal I didn't take it for granted.

SR: Okay. Does a certain food remind you of loved ones?

NC: A certain food or meal that reminds me of loved ones would have to be my grandmother's pork chops with a side of macaroni and cheese with Brussel sprouts.

SR: Okay. Do you have any memories in regard to preparing meals with an elder?

NC: I remember every Saturday morning I would sleep at my godmother's house and we would wake up and prepare pancakes with a side of bacon.

SR: What is your current favorite meal to eat or to make?

NC: My favorite current meal to eat would have to be chicken parmesan. My favorite meal to make is steak with mushrooms with a side of noodles.

SR: Why is this your favorite meal to make?

NC: This is my favorite meal to make because it is one of my favorite types of meat and I get to add my own special ingredients.

SR: Okay. Does it carry any significance to you behind the food?

NC: It carries significance behind the food because it is one of the first types of- it is one of the first meals I learned how to cook on my own.

SR: Okay. Is there any food you will not eat?

NC: A food I will not eat which I mentioned earlier in the interview was Brussel sprouts. My grandmother used to always cook it and would try to force me to eat it before I left the table, but I was just never a fan.

SR: Okay. Do you abide by any dietary restrictions because of your culture, religion, or politics?

NC: I don't abide by any dietary restrictions necessarily because of my culture or religion but I am lactose intolerant, so I have to try to avoid any type of dairy products.

SR: Are there any certain foods you only eat on special occasions?

NC: I would have to say Easter or Thanksgiving. Every Easter my grandmother prepares a home cooked ham with mushrooms and stuffing with macaroni and cheese and on Thanksgiving we have a nice home cooked turkey with all kinds of sides involving broccoli, stuffing as well...

SR: Is that all?...

NC: ...String beans and a whole kind of variety of things.

SR: Why is Easter and Thanksgiving significant to you?

NC: They are significant to me because Thanksgiving represents family and every year, we go around the table and speak about things that we're thankful for and it's a way to bring family that you don't see very often together and celebrate happy times.

SR: And Easter?

NC: Easter is not necessarily a holiday to me but it's a way of like I said before bringing family together, having good times, laughing, watching sports games and also making each other laugh.

SR: Okay. Who in your life cooks the best meal?

NC: My aunt Dawn, which is my mom's sister.

SR: What does she cook?

NC: She cooks everything from chicken cutlet, to steak, to pork chops, to lasagna, tortellini alfredo, baked ziti.

SR: What is your particular favorite meal from her?

NC: Particularly, I prefer her tortellini alfredo.

SR: Why is it the best?

NC: It's the best because it's creamy it's got meat inside of it, she makes it with love and she also adds her own little special ingredients to it.

SR: What does eating well mean to you?

NC: Eating well to me- well growing up financially my family never really had it like that so I never really had options, so I always had to eat whatever my family had cooked that night.

SR: Do you have a favorite restaurant?

NC: A favorite restaurant of mine would have to be a restaurant called La Strada. It is in the area of New Dorp and it's an old school Italian restaurant.

SR: What do you usually order there?

NC: Well there's a whole lot of options and I like to be different every time I go but I prefer the London Broil medium well with a side of mashed potatoes and sometimes I switch my sides from broccoli to string beans to sometimes French fries.

SR: Okay. Are there any other restaurants that's your favorite?

NC: Another restaurant that would have to be my favorite, I've been to it, but I've had the food from there it's Peter Luger's it's a steakhouse which I believe is somewhere in Manhattan or Brooklyn. I've always wanted to go there but I've had the food from there.

SR: Okay, what did you try?

NC: It's, like I said it's a steakhouse, so it was a classic steak and I think the sides were cauliflower which I'm not a fan of and they have some really good baked mac and cheese.

SR: Okay. How does the food you eat or the food you cook make you who you are?

NC: The food I eat makes me who I am because I am Italian so growing up my family always made something involving the Italian culture such as chicken parmesan, baked ziti, we ate pizza a lot, chicken wings, tortellini alfredo like I said before and my aunts famous but not her best- I would have to say would be her linguini and clams.

SR: Okay. Is there any food in particular that reminds you of home?

NC: A food in particular that reminds me of home would have to be when I lived in Pennsylvania with my grandmother, she used to make pork chops with Brussel sprouts and broccoli.

SR: Why does this remind you of home?

NC: It reminds me of home because I grew up with my grandmother and my father and I remember I used to give my grandmother a hard time about eating my Brussel sprouts because I never liked the way they tasted.

SR: Is there anything you eat because of your cultural background?

NC: Almost every Sunday my family would gather, and we would try to continue the tradition of eating pasta fazool which is an Italian dish, and everybody always came to the house and we would eat it every weekend.

SR: If you could go anywhere in the world to try a new food where would you go and why?

NC: I would love to go to Italy and try their pizza because pizza is an Italian dish and that's where- Italy is where pizza originates from.

SR: How would you differentiate the pizza from New York to Italy?

NC: I feel like the pizza from New York is kind of different because maybe the way that it's made in New York compared to the way it's made in Italy.

SR: Okay. What is a meal or a snack that you can eat all the time and not get tired of?

NC: Well, a meal that I could say I never get tired of would have to be a nice homemade plate of macaroni with broccoli.

SR: And snack?

NC: And my favorite snack varies from the chewy chips ahoy cookies and cannoli's which is a representation of my culture.

SR: Okay. How does the environment you live in impact the food that you eat?

NC: The environment I live in is surrounded by a lot of fast food places and it's unfortunate that we're not surrounded by a supermarket which would give me the opportunity to choose a healthy meal.

SR: Is there any specific practices in regard to your religion?

NC: A specific regarding my religion. Every Sunday my family and I would attend the nine o'clock mass following up with a traditional family breakfast at the World's Famous Coffee Shop. Also growing up I went to Catholic school and we were taught how to participate in church and had to remember prayers such as The Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Glory Be and also learned things such as the Ten Commandments.

SR: What does family mean to you?

NC: Family to me is always being there for one another, pushing each other to do great things, always loving one another, accepting each other for who you are, never judging but also when you make a mistake be there to correct you and guide you in the right direction.

SR: Can you please describe to me what it was like growing up in an Italian household?

NC: Growing up in an Italian household it was always strict. Everyone in the house always had chores to do. It always smelled like a home cooked meal. It was always very clean, a lot of animals.

SR: Such as?

NC: Such as dogs, cats, we also had a bird. There was also always music playing and every night we would all say a family prayer before going to sleep.

SR: Does your cultural background and religion ever go head-to-head?

NC: During Passover every Friday you're not supposed to eat meat but growing up in an Italian household- that was always hard to resist.

SR: Okay. Is there any traditions you would like to pass down?

NC: A tradition that I would like to pass down to future generations to come would have to be every Sunday, family that you don't see often gathers for a classic Sunday dinner followed up with an old school Italian movie.

SR: Is there anything culturally that you wouldn't want to pass down to other generations?

NC: A cultural tradition that I would not want to pass down would have to be- growing up I wouldn't be so strict towards my kids and also every Sunday if people aren't able to gather for dinner that would be understandable because they have their own family and they have other things to worry about. They could be busy with work, school, their own traditions to follow and yeah.

SR: Is there any questions throughout this interview that I have not asked that you would like people to know?

NC: No, I feel as if this was a great interview and you asked me great questions and I answered them to the best of my ability.

SR: Okay, thank you so much for your time.

NC: No problem.