

Thomas Sambolin interviewed by Montgomery Martinez, Bashir Juwara, Kadijatu Kamara,  
Josery Compres, and Sitara Hodieva  
October 11, 2021  
Bronx, New York

SUMMARY KEYWORDS:

people, pizza, neighborhood, store, business, community, question, streets, pizzeria, Thomas,  
good, pandemic, shop, clean, food, interview, safe, family, person, music

Montgomery Martinez (00:02): Hello, my name is Montgomery Martinez and I'm interviewing...

Thomas Sambolin (00:07): Thomas Sambolin.

MM (00:10): At um at My Place Family Pizza at...

TS (00:19): 204 East 198th Street.

MM (00:21): Bronx, New York.

TS (00:23): 10458.

MM (00:26): On October 11, on October 11 2021 at 3:13pm, do you give us permission to  
record?

TS (00:36): Yes.

MM (00:37): and make public to oral history?

TS (00:38): Yes, I do.

MM (00:39): Please remember throughout this interview, you do not have to answer any  
questions that makes you uncomfortable.

Person 2 Basic Information:

MM (00:53): Second set would be Bashir.

Bashir Juwara (01:02): Yep. All right. um So, some of the basic interview are, some of the basic  
info for the interview, age, gender, ethnicity. Okay. Where are you from ah Thomas? And ah tell  
me how long you or your family ended up in, um in New York City. And when did you start  
working um at the shop? Finally, how did you begin working or starting buying the business?

TS (01:48): Maybe 1718 I knew the owner of the business, when I first started, he gave me a  
chance and I've been there ever since that was 20 years later.

Person 3 Exploring the Business:

MM (02:02): Okay, that was good Person 3 Kadija, Explaining the Business.

Kadija Kamara (02:09): Okay um, for... do you like can you like describe your business in your own words?

TS (02:18): Well, we're...we're a pizzeria, We sell food. uh We're good customer friendly people. uh and we've been in a business for almost now but 35 years since we've been in the same location and we're good community service for the for the community. We help everybody you know, we feed them.

KK (02:41): Um, do you know anything about the history of your business or the name of your business?

TS (02:48): Ah, the name of the pizzeria is My Place Family Pizza, when we first started, it was called My Place and then we changed after the new owner came and as that basically but but it really, ain't nothin' really to it really just changing the name of the pizzeria, new owners. And before we was owned by a Italian guy now the pizzeria is now owned by Turkish people. Basically it.

KK (03:15): Um, has the business become a significant source of pride for you and your family.

TS (03:23): Not really, just, just for the community, yes, I can say for the community for the families in the community. Yeah, you can say yes. It has helped a lot.

KK (03:31): Oh yeah, Okay, um, how long has the shop been open?

TS (03:39): It's been open since 1974. So it's about like 35 years now, maybe close to 40 years.

KK (03:47): That's that's really long. Um, like how do you attract your clients?

TS (03:55): Ah uh, just, just by being there for them, we don't we don't use no no internet, or stuff like that like Zoom or ah Uber Eats like that we just, we just serve the community they come in and we serve them that's it really and telephone deliveries.

KK (04:15): Um-hum...um

KK (04:18): The other question is, um what are like the most popular like food you sell?

TS (04:24): Oh lasagna is the best, lasagna, spaghetti meatballs you know pizzas the number one, (KK saying um-hum) burgers...chicken parmesan spaghetti all that good stuff all that Italian food that we have there too is good. (KK saying that's good)

KK (04:40): Um, that's it.

Person 4 Neighborhood (started):

MM (04:44): Okay, thank you and number um Person 4 Josery Neighborhood.

MM (05:06): Josery are you there?

Josery Compres (05:24): Hi yes, I'm here, um let me ask you a question? (TS saying Okay) Sorry for the noises. Um tell me about your neighborhood what your business where your business located, what streets is on it?

TS (05:43): The business is located 240 East 198th Street Bronx New York 10458, the neighborhood is the neighborhood has changed a lot since since a lot of things happen in the neighborhood people have been, you know missing and gone and passed away.

JC (06:04): Alright um...um, What else is in the street where you work?

TS (06:12): Um there's Chinese Food, there's a Bank, they're opening up a new spot down the block for chicken for chicken spot, um we got we got the Cuchifritos, we got the dominican food, we got a whole bunch of different diversity of different foods in the neighborhood.

JC (06:32): Alright, how has the train, the street or your neighborhood changed since you started working there?

TS (06:39): Definitely has changed It's it's gotten worse and has gotten better in the same time you can say that, because we've I've I've seen good friends lost over stupid things in this neighborhood which hasn't (JC says oh!) shouldn't shouldn't have happened but happened but you know other than that, the streets are safe to a certain point as long you not outside too long, you're good.

JC (07:06): Alright, do you consider a safe neighborhood...do you think your neighborhood is safe?

TS (07:13): Yes it's safe, in in certain areas. Yeah. As long as you do the right thing and you know what you're doing you're going not doing out there no do not stupid, you will be all right.

JC (07:26): Okay, um What does it look like in front of and around the store? What does your store look like?

TS (07:43): I do not know how to answer this question um. (MM Chuckles lightly), Well, basically um at certain times the streets can be dirty and sometimes the streets can be clean, it depends on the type of day it is or the type of week it is (MM says yeah) who's out there partying you guys hanging out there they do a little party down the street, they leave all their garbage in the street and some people they they clean it up some people just leave it there, (MM says right) so it depends on the on the people on how (JC says oh yeah) if they there people, they're gonna leave the mess they're gonna be water beer bottles and alcohol bottles and food dispensary containers everything and just leave in the streets for the super to clean them up or somebody to clean it up.

JC (08:26): Yeah. Okay, and how are the conditions of sidewalks and streets?

TS (08:34): There's potholes everywhere (MM chuckles lightly). There's cracks in the streets and sidewalks and you don't watch you're gonna trip and bust your butt.

JC (08:42): Oh, okay.

TS (08:44): These owners don't don't take care of this streets too much at all, the Supers in the building. And then we got another constructed a next next to our pizzeria, so it's been a real hassle with the dirt and when the wind picks up oh there's debris everywhere.

JC (09:03): Yeah. So it is not um comfortable to walk around. Or it is?

TS (09:10): It's comfortable to work around. As long as you are around the right people, it's comfortable. You don't want to work around people that you don't trust or like, it makes it worse (JC says of course) but when you work around people that you could trust and you love them and you respect them the days gonna go perfect.

JC (09:28): Okay, sounds good. Um do you have access to public transit?

TS (09:35): Yes, we we have buses and trains and all that good stuff, cabs all that, they even put them them electric bikes around the neighborhood. But don't think that they take up so much parking space for everybody now it is ridiculous now with them (JC says oh) them access free scooter things they pay for they take up a lot of parking spaces for everybody so a lot people are upset about that in the neighborhood.

JC (10:04): Okay and do you guys have park..parks?

TS (10:08): We have a few parks, we have we have Mosholu Parkway, we got Poe Park we got Central Park um St. James Park we got a few parks here, some of them are clean, and some of them are not to clean some of them are safe and some of them are not too safe it's got to be know what time of day you going to the park you don't be in the park too late. Because then you have all the weird people walking around.

JC (10:29): Yeah. And lighting. (TS asked "lighting"), are there lights on the street yes?

TS (10:34): The light could be better sometimes there a little to dim for the street lights. But basically mostly most of the buildings already got lights. But there certain areas around here where it's dark and you don't want to walk in the dark streets.

JC (10:47): Okay.

TS (10:49): There is a lot of trees in the neighborhood, they they put up some new trees and stuff like that.

JC (10:55): Oh, that's nice. And do you guys have water fountains...fountains?

TS (11:02): Water property? No, uh not really, the only water property that you can, that I say is the Reservoir that's about it there's no property boys, see water falls nah that not not not here in the Bronx really you got to go to Manhattan or something like that, you know, fancy stuff.

JC (11:19): And there are are streets signs, right?

TS (11:21): Street signs? Yeah, there are a bunch of street signs.They just added the new street signs for big park in Fordham (JC says yeah).

JC (11:34): Yeah. Okay. Next person can ask.

Person 5 Neighborhood (continued) and Community (started):

MM (11:41): Alright, thank you and Person 5 neighborhood and community Sitora, are you up for it?

Sitora Hodieva (11:41): Oh, yes. So my first question is, would you like to see any changes made to the neighborhood to make it a more welcoming environment? What will those changes be?

TS (12:02): Uh just a better community efforts for people to, you know, clean the streets and do what they got to do cause lately there's been a lot of people like, homeless people around here and they ask for change and this and that and sometimes it gets a little bit too much because you know what they're gonna do with the money and it's hard just to not say no to them because they know what they're gonna do with the money. So some, some people, they that is buy them food, or they just sit there all day and ask for money in the streets it it is a hassle sometimes cause you see the people every day and they ask you every single day. Sometimes I give it to them, sometimes I don't because I know what I know they can use it for and it's hard to to see them like that.

SH (12:50): Um do you communicate with the neighboring shops?

TS (12:54): Yes, we do. Sometimes if we if we short on some items, we go to the next store and we actually will "can we give you this and then next time we give we give it back to you?" And they say "yes." So we have a good community out look for some some restores. They look out for us and we look out for them. Like a family in neighborhood, you can say?

SH (13:16): Um, Do you engage with the neighboring shops in a collective activities?

TS (13:23): Collective activities? No. Like, like sports activities? No, we don't do nothin like that, or barbecues nothin like that we just, they do their business we do ours and everybody stays in theirs in their space. There's not really a community uh, store friendly community where everybody in the stores help each other no nothing like that not friendly like that.

SH (13:47): So no bonding between local businesses?

TS (13:55): Bonds? No, there is nah haven't seen any like that. Any bonding with local businesses? No.

SH (14:06): Okay um. What are your hours? And how does the clientele changed based on the time of the day?

TS (14:13): Hm, That's a good question. Well, I sometimes I work, sometimes 50 hours a week, sometimes 55. Is long hours sometimes opening the closing 11 to 10, or 10 to 11, or 11 to 11 depending on the shifts. And the people can change in a heartbeat. Sometimes they come in nice one minute, and they come in with an attitude the next minute, you got to deal with it. It's not easy. Being in the food industry is nice because you got to deal with the community, you got to do with the attitudes. And that so called "customers always right," it's a bunch of nonsense. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're not. And they'll sit down and argue with you "oh I'm right, I'm right, I'm right." But then "You're wrong," when you wrong, you're wrong and they don't want to admit it. And that's that's the problem that we've been having in the community with some people. They come in and think they all big shot and they, they, they think they want to run everything in the store, they wanna to get discounts they don't want don't want to pay for the full price, and stuff like that, but you know other than that people okay. There's just certain people in the neighborhood a little too much.

Person 6 Community (continued):

MM (15:28): Okay, and now it's my turn. Community. Remember you do not... Remember... Yeah, something like yeah, I'm my turn community remember you not have to answer these questions if this makes you uncomfortable. Have you been received, received by the community?

TS (15:52): What do you mean by received?

MM (15:54): Umm like, like.

TS (15:57): Well I'm pretty known in the neighborhood like like like like last night I'm in the store, and the lady walks out she goes "oh, you the pizza guy?" That's how people know me by as "the pizza guy." They don't call my name Thomas they call "oh the pizza mans here." The little kids oh they run "oh the pizza guy it's the pizza guys." I could be I could be somewhere else and not knowing not paying attention and I hear somebody "is that the pizza guy?" So um, you could say I am known in the neighborhood (MM says that's). Because I'm a friendly, I'm a very friendly person I treat everybody with respect as long you respect I treat you with respect.

MM (16:34): That's, that's great honestly. How have you interacted with the community?

TS (16:40): Yes I have cause...um Sometimes um well back in the days we used to give free pizza for Halloween to little kids in the community. We used to love that day. But now that we got new owners it's a different they don't want to do it. So this last Halloween we had one of our one of my friends from my from my neighborhood. He paid for for the pizzeria for the pizza. Paid like hundred and something dollars and he we gave pizza for the community. He came with his friends from the he works in a hospital so he came out with some of the doctors from the hospital. And we just gave pizza to come to the community to some people in the little kids. And that was good. We haven't done that in years. And that brought the spirits up for the community.

MM (17:25): Oh okay, have you ever dealt with racism discrimination/ (trying to say islamophobia) in your work?

TS (17:31): Um, kind of cause we have a different initially, initially (trying to ethnicity) that comes we have Asian we have we have so many people that come in all different races and cultures, and you have to deal with them and you have to treat them with respect. Like if we have a Muslim customer come in and they want to slice we have to make sure the knife is clean. Because we use we use pork and we use a lot of and they don't eat that stuff so they come in and they say "oh, can you clean the knife for me please when before you cut the pizza?" and we say "sure no problem," we try to help everybody out.

MM (18:07): Oh, okay. Are there any memorable events that took place at the store since you've begun working there?

TS (18:15): Um yes, we've we've we've had someone shoot a music video next door to our shop. We've had someone um do a mu... a movie. Actually, a couple of weeks ago they filmed a movie in front of and in our shop in the back for Netflix, but we don't know which when is supposed to come out. Um I myself shot a video across the street from the pizzeria so that's what I'm also working on music at the same time I'm doing pizzeria, so it's it's been a hassle. It's been tough. Not easy.

Person 7 Clientele:

MM (18:47): Oh okay. That sounds awesome. Bashir...Person 7 Bashir with Clientele, you right? (TS saying yes to agree)

BJ (18:56): Yeah, yeah. Hey, Thomas um. Has the clientele changed since you've worked there? uh, If he has in what, what ways like what comes in? And who comes in and when?

TS (19:10): Well, we've had a few new people that come in and they love the pizza. They "oh I just come from Arizona and I never tasted pizza like this before." So we say we've we've had our fair share of new clientele. They've come in and they love the pizza and they will and they never ate pizza like that before and they've always come back. There's some that (TS and BJ speak over each other).

BJ (19:35) What was your reaction, like?

TS (19:37): And we shipped a piz, we're not shippable but we we we freeze the pizza for them, and they'll take it to Florida with them. That's how that's how that's how good our pizza is.

BJ (19:48): Wow. That's awesome. So what's your reaction like when somebody told you "I never had any pizza like this before?" Like, as somebody who worked in the store, what's your reaction to the customers?

TS (20:00): Oh, It's it's a relief that that they love the pizza, you know some people in the neighborhood, they "oh their pizza tastes different," this and that. But when somebody comes and say "yo this pizza is awesome man what when did you when did you make it?" "Made it right now make it fresh, people." (MM chuckles lightly) There's nothing to it and they they fall in love with it and they always come back with the little kids. We've known little, I've known this man I've known this man since he was a little kid he's no little kid no more, that's from the pizza.

BJ (20:33): He's the pizza guy too right?

MM (20:35): Yeah, I quite enjoy myself having pizza and this guy always makes it for me and every day he makes it's just like delicious and stuff so I'm very proud of what he does for his career.

TS (20:49): I do my best.

BJ (20:50): That's that's amazing Thomas, um what are what are they? Like? um, What is the most busy times in your store?

TS (21:00): Um, The most busiest time, What time is it now? (MM chuckles lightly then BJ and TS speak over each other), it about time by lunchtime and dinner time sometimes it gets busy like around eight o'clock at night time right when we're getting ready to close, so it's it's a hassle time on we have to rushin this and that. Sometimes we got to make like 10 pies when somebody orderes 10 pies and some lady will order like like 8 baked ziti, so you have to rush (BJ and MM says yeah to agree), yeah is the food is good man, whenever you get a chance you come over here and I show you man.

BJ (21:34): Definitely definitely so that's like your rush hour (BJ chuckles lightly), um do you develop bonds with with people who enter in the shop? And if so, how? Like what are the strengths and weaknesses opportunities like people who enter in the stock in the shop what kind of bonds do you create between them and customers?

TS (21:55): You make bonds for life. Like I said I known this kid since he was I don't know maybe 5 or 10 and I known him ever since and sometimes the kids come in and I know them now they like 18 years old, like "damn where the hell have you been at" (MM and BJ chuckled ), like damn I got to look up, I break my neck I look up to these kids now, they grew taller than me now it's crazy.



BJ (22:19): Right um, I since we are in pandemic like with economic effects what is there like any economic effects like technology, environmental or cultural or like a legal challenges that you have faced at your store?

TS (22:35): Now with the pandemic going on, it's been a hassle because now you cannot sit in the stores, unless you show the vaccination card and some people don't like that. When you try to ask for it they give you attitude like "why why I got to show you card for?" Man, I'm not trying to get sick (BJ says right). People are just some people in this neighborhood is just they didn't want to get the vaccine they don't want to do nothin with them themself. They just want to sit home, watch TV curled up on the couch and get fat, (BJ says very true). In this pandemic you can't do that right now you got to make sure your family safe. Make sure you get that vaccine it's important. Some people just don't want to get it. Some people say "oh I'm not getting a vaccine because it's it's a you got a chip in your you're gonna put a chip in your arm." It's a bunch of nonsense. "Look the metal will stick to my arm, I put a wrench to my arm and the wrench got stuck." Come on man. It's just nonsense. People are just talking nonsense. Scaring people.

BJ (23:41): I guess I got the device um too, um I got my vaccine .

TS (23:46): (asking Bahir) You got both shots or one?

BJ (23:47): Yeah, I got both shots.( TS saying he got both vaccine shots too).

TS (23:50): Can't...can't mess around man, your family...Your family is important man. You don't want to get your family sick.

BJ (23:56): Alright um, Has gentrification um, into your neighborhood like has gentrification affects your business in your neighborhood?

TS (24:05): No, it just makes it it just brings more business to the store that's all. We we're not we're not discriminative about to anybody. We we accept any any race, culture. If you want to be bi, trans, doesn't matter. It it's a business, we we serve a food we got to serve food to everybody. We're not just gonna serve, "oh we not gonna give you no food cause you you black, because you Chinese." No we give to everybody. Everybody's welcome in our store.

BJ (24:36): Thats...that's excellent. Thank you for that uh, thoughtful answer. Next.

Person 8 Work Since 2020 (sarted):

MM (24:42): Next um, thank you Bashir, next person will be Person 8 Work Since 2020, Kadija?

Kadija Kamara (24:54): Me? Ok, oh Kadija. Um for question eight um, What anxieties did you have about working at the start of COVID-19 pandemic?

TS (25:03): Oh um, try not to get sick. At first I didn't want to get the shots at first, but then my moms and my brother and everybody else yo you need to get a shot because you work in a food industry you are around people every single day different people different just different people. You walkin around Manhattan, unmask, you got to be careful with this stuff nowadays, so it made me want to get the shot because I wanted to be safe for my family and my friends and everybody else.

MM (25:35): If you would like to redo work since 2020 or the...

KK (25:44): Yeah, yeah I'll do it...So how has COVID impacted the workforce at your shop?

TS (25:58): Well lately it kind of affected the job because we can't have people sitting in the store eating without them showing the vaccination card and it's been a pretty hassle cause some people have attitudes when you ask for the card. I know one time in Manhattan, they beat up some some girl in Manhattan because she asked for the vaccination cards so it's been kind of scary actually asking for the card. But some people are nicer about it then they show us the card and some people don't show it and the people that don't show after they have to step in the inside the store they can't eat inside, so it's been it's it's hurting hurting us a little bit here and there. It's impacted a lot of stores. A lot of stores in the neighborhood actually because you see all, everythings like boarded up you got plastics everywhere around the stores it's like you went in in a funhouse something weird looking place now everybody's all boarded up trying to get safe.

KK (26:57): Definitely umm so what measures umm if any does your store take in the battle against COVID-19?

TS (27:06): Well I've been using so much umm anti that that damn that soap that spray I've been killing the stuff we been buying buying so much of those those those first aids soaps and everything and trying to keep everybody safe in store. That's about it. That's not to say we just been (makes swooshing sound) like crazy. Juicing up the arm hands and everything with them juices tryin keep try try try keep cleaning using a lot of Clorox. Clean the store, table and everything make sure everythings clean and disinfected. You don't want to work in a shop where anybody gets sick. All it takes is one person to get sick in a store like that cause we're we're close in the store where we bumpin into each other and you got to make sure everybody's safe everybody got their vac everybody got their vaccination in the store so which is good. But it's been scary, it's been scary.

KK (28:09): Yeah definitely. Umm guess that's it for me.

MM (28:13): Oh okay then. Thank you. Thank you, Kadijatu. umm, I, Josery your Work Since 2020.

Person 9 Work Since 2020 (continued):

Starting at 28:24 technical difficulties....

TS (28:48): You you

MM ( 29:01): Sends message to Josery in Zoom chat

MM (29:18): Josery are you still there?

Josery Compres (29:22): Yeah I'm here

MM (29:27): umm Josery...yeah...Josery would you like to ask work since 2020 set of questions?

JC (29:22): Yes. The number nine?

MM (29:39): Yes. Number nine.

JC (29:44): Okay. Has the government stepped in to offer support?

TS (29:57): No they haven't, we haven't gotten no support from the government at all. Other than them sending the board health to check the store is that's about the only thing I can say. Other than that they haven't done nothing they haven't give us no leeway no money nothing no help at all.

JC (30:19): Ok umm... Has the relationship between workers and business been altered due to government?

TS (30:27): No no we all been working together for for so many years that we kind of used to each other and we kind of help each other out. Which we don't try to look for help for help from other people you sort of help each other as much as we can cause the government not gonna do it we gotta do it ourselves.

JC (30:47): Ok.

TS (30:49): We do the best we can at at with the little that we have.

JC (30:59): Yes, Has the protest of Black Lives Matter that swept the city after murder of George Floyd impact you business?

TS (31:08): No not really (Josery asks no?) It hasn't affected the business cause the George Floyd thing. (Josery says oh). I know that I know a lot of other businesses I could imagine (JC says Yes) TS resumes response: When everywhere it happened I could imagine what was going on with them with that situation but no it hasn't really affected us too much. (overlapping chatter)...We heard a couple of stories of what happened and that's about it nothing really affecting us really.

JC (31:40): Ok um And have any other protest protest moments impact your your workplace? another one?

TS (31:49): No we haven't had any...no we have had any a protest or nothing in front of our store really. No. Can't say no. It's been it's been pretty good with that kind of stuff with the protesting and stuff we haven't seen none of that.

JC (32:10): Ok umm, Have how have you overcome the challenge in the past two years?

TS (32:18): Well...over the past two years, just working and now that I'm doing other things besides pizza, I'm trying to do music right now. Ahh that city that pandemic kind of helped me out a little bit because it is turned me into a music music producer. I produce music now for my friend and he raps over the beats. So in a way it's kind of made me to the person I am today. So I no not thats thats the challenges that I faced right now is becoming a producer. Get my business up and running from scratch from the ground floor up that's what I'm working on when I meet my friend.

JC (33:02): Okay. umm I'm sorry, because there is a lot of noises (TS responds: thats ok, we hear you) JC and I'm like (TS: you got a lot of kids over there now) because I am like working right? Yeah, I'm working right now.

TS (33:16): Okay.

MM (33:16): Oh ok.

JC (33:18): So that's.

TS (33:19): It's all great. Thank you for coming.

JC (33:24): Thank you. Thank you so much.

TS (33:27): You're Welcome.

MM (33:28): I thank you and any and does anyone else have any follow up follow up questions or anything like that? Um, Thomas Do you feel like we need anything or we good?

TS (33:47): No that was pretty good interview I unless you all want to ask something else. It's up to y'all, y'all the interviewers

MM (33:54): Is everyone okay with the questions we asked?

BJ (33:59): Yeah, definitely and Thomas like like Montgomery just say...Is there anything you think like we should have asked you and we did not, or anything you would like to add to the interview?

TS (34:10): Well, you basically asked good questions and happy to be here and I'm happy to give my my my two cents and help as much as I can. And I'm happy I'm satisfied.

BJ (34:28): Thank you. We appreciate that.

TS (34:30): You're welcome man.

MM (34:32): I um a quick question. I do have actually are you so comfortable donating this oral history to a public collection?

TS (34:39): Sure why not? More, the merrier. If it's gonna help somebody and help somebody else, hey, more than merrier.

MM (34:48): Right right, I and I guess with that, I would like to say thanks. I would like to say thank you, and that later we're going to sign the form of consent and stuff like that. But as of right now everyone did their part which was awesome. Fantastic. We had a steady beat, (TS shows two thumbs up). Thank you for Thomas. He's a proud pizza worker that I'm always happy to buy pizza from.

TS (35:14): Welcome very much.

MM (35:17): So I'm going to stop recording.