

Chris Nikas Interview Summary

Interviewed by Angeline Boswell

Part 1:

- In 1933, Chris was born; his last name was Nikitopoulos. He was born in the village of Thanos, now called Tripoli. His mother's last name was Karkouli.
- Their family was poor; his mother died in 1940 when Chris was 7; Chris could not finish his high school because he needed to work to support the family. His father was left with 5 children when his mother died. It was a very difficult time. His father was a well-respected man; a sheriff in the area for quite a while.
- When he dropped out of high school, he worked at a coffee shop. Then he had a job for about a year working in a restaurant, 7 days a week, 12 hour days.
- Later, at about 16 years old, he worked delivering fruits.
- "I felt from that time that I wanted to see what was on the other side of these mountains"; he wanted to travel, "*it was in me.*"
 - He knew of people who had immigrated to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.
 - He applied to come to Canada; he knew about coming to Canada from other people who had done it before.
- He is not sure if he was related to Peter Karkoulis's family, but he is sure there must be a relation. They were one of the only Karkoulis families in Tripoli. Peter Karkoulis and some others sponsored Chris to come to Canada; they knew each other because they were from the same village.
- Chris needed papers to come to Canada; it would have taken him weeks of waiting if the chauffeur for the ambassador did not owe Chris a favor. Chris remembers walking through the people waiting up to the ambassador with the chauffeur, and he said "excuse me, this young man is from Tripoli."
 - He had met the chauffeur at a tavern he was working at, and had given him a nice lunch. This was the favor.
- At the ambassador's place (embassy?), they interviewed Chris and told him he could go to Canada in December (this was the summer; he had to wait a long time).
 - He met a man in Tripoli who was also going to Kingston. He saw him again when he finally immigrated. When Chris immigrated to Kingston, he bought a house, and he let this man stay rent-free with him.
- Chris was part of the second wave of immigration to Canada from Greece; he came in **1951**.
- He felt that the "old Greeks" (ones already established in Kingston) would *distance themselves from the new Greeks*.
- Chris was only 18 when he came here. He left with \$20. He describes how he struggled.
 - He didn't know the language; he didn't really know anyone. He didn't have "anybody or anything."
- He found a job eventually with **George Karis** at his restaurant. He was working for \$18 a week!
- Eventually, Chris went to Ottawa to work for 3 years.
- He had a mentor there in Ottawa – someone he became close to who helped him find a job, and gave him advice for bringing Chris's brother Gus over to Canada from Greece. He speaks of him highly. He met someone else who taught him how to do business. He learned a lot in Ottawa.
- He learned how to speak English when he came to Kingston.
 - He met people who would take him for "dates", and they would read menus with him.
 - He would read comic books and figure out the sentences from reading the pictures.
- Eventually, when Chris was in Kingston, he learned that they needed a bartender at the "Zakos building"
- Joe Condi (sp?) was managing the building at the time.
 - he said he was paying too much rent, and he needed to take over the bar for himself, to make more money. So Chris was unemployed for a bit.
 - Chris recalls memories of working at the bar, how he would always give children candy when they came.
- After that, there was a very old coffee shop – with equipment that was 60 years old.

- “The Karkoulis guys went and made a bet on it and they got it, but when he (who?) went home, the other guys were very upset because they didn’t think they could be successful there... so they went to me and asked if I wanted to have a partnership...”
 - Chris said, “this isn’t a place for a partnership. If you want to sell it to me at the same price you got it, I’ll take it and be the owner.”
 - It took Chris a year to renovate the place.

Part 2:

Chris brought both his brother and sister over to Canada from Greece (sponsored them).

People underestimated his restaurant at first. When they tried it, someone said “I can’t believe I can find a meal like this.”

- it was called the Downtown Coffee Shop.
- on the corner was CKLS; Chris supplied them with free coffee every day, so it was popular amongst them.
- They cooked food; cleaned, did everything. Chris owned it with his brother (Gus)
 - Chris speaks about how the roof of the building burned; he was given insurance money for it. Water damage insurance, \$3000 from the city. He took the equipment out of the building and stored it away. In the meantime, he bought a house on University Ave for his sister.
 - Chris sponsored his cousins as well.
 - Chris’s sister and her fiancé stayed at the place, rent free. “I never charged anybody rent.”
 - Now he was unemployed at this time because of the fire in his coffee shop. CKLS put it on the air, “Chris and Gus burned the coffee shop, you should see the restaurant they have now”.
 - During this time, Chris had contacted George about the possibility of opening a restaurant, but Chris made it clear that he did not want to work for George – he wanted to own his own restaurant. George said to come to his restaurant anyways to talk.
 - This restaurant was where Grecos is now.
 - CKLS made a mistake – they thought it was Chris’s restaurant when they made the advertisement. Chris wanted to correct them but George said not to, because the advertisement saying it was Chris’s was giving them more business.
- He was looking for another restaurant... he opened the grill where Tim Hortons is now. He got a company from Toronto to come and renovate it.
- He bought the place for 16 000 and paid for all the old equipment to be taken out. It used to be a Chinese restaurant. Nick, a Greek in the community at the time, helped with the renovations.
- He went to Toronto to get a loan; he had difficulties. He spoke about how by being straightforward to someone who wanted to be a manager, he got what he needed. Chris asked him: “do you want to be my manager? Then be it now when I need you, not when I have a bag of money.”
 - He didn’t get \$20 000, which is what he needed for a loan. He only got 13.5k, but the manager covered the rest to help him.
- he had mostly university students working for him. Minimum wage at the time was 40 cents an hour. Chris paid them 80 cents an hour.
 - The restaurant became so busy that Thursday, Friday, and Saturday there were line ups. The name of the restaurant was **Embassy Restaurant**.
- He had Greek guys who were illegal in Canada working for him. When he found this out, he made sure they had their papers by the end of the month. “I kept them in Canada”.
- Chris sponsored many, many people. He says he sponsored between 50-60 people, including their children.
 - Chris helped them if they needed help too; finding them jobs or places to stay if necessary. Someone once stayed with him rent free for 6 months because he needed financial help.
 - “I tried to help even strangers”

Chris, busy with his family and kids, wanted to own something that was easier to manage than a restaurant. He hired someone (salesman) to help him with finding them; they visited a Variety store that was not well organized, and the people working there (husband, wife, kids) were “suffering a nervous breakdown”. Chris was interested in buying the variety store; so he told his salesman to make them an offer and condition it to 6 o’clock, so that they would be rushed and need to say yes. By not giving them enough

time, they didn't have time to go to lawyer, banker, etc to get advice. They accepted his offer, and it was "substantial." He knew they wanted to sell it; it would be better for them, and for their business, if Chris bought it.

- The real estate agent cursed Chris for not giving the people enough time to decide. Chris told him he didn't know who he was dealing with... he told the real estate agent that the man who signed for the sale was old enough to make the decision.
 - o the man eventually came back crying, saying he had made a mistake. (he doesn't conclude with what happened...)
- Chris kept it as a variety store; they sold everything. This was on the corner of Alfred and Earl.
 - o It was making money... and Chris and his brother still had one day a week off, and still had a month off in the summer since the students were away (many students used this variety store).
 - o They both wanted to make sure they had time with their families.
 - o Now his nephews are running it; it is **Campus One Stop** now. It used to be called **College Variety**.
- Chris doesn't want to pat himself on the back, but he has street smarts. This is because he has been independent for a long time; he always worked hard and bettered himself.
- Chris also paid a lot of attention to detail in his restaurants. Everything was homemade in the store. He would tell the employees to never serve something they themselves wouldn't eat. He said he would lose money on it, instead of serve something that wasn't good.

How many businesses did you own?

- he has owned four businesses, and all of them were very successful.
- he treated his employees "humanely". One woman, Judy, worked for him for many many years; he would make sure she had every Saturday and Sunday off, that she had bonuses, that she had time off for the holidays, etc.
- Chris believes you cannot lose anything by treating employees kindly; happy employees will "produce for you".
- Chris also made sure that customers were well communicated with; Chris told his employees to always greet the customers when they walked in.
- He believes these are the things that kept him in business for so many years.

Part 3:

Retirement...

- Retirement can be good; it depends who they are and what they want out of their retirement.
- In Chris's retirement, he wants to be close to his family all the time.
- On a trip to Greece in 2007, Chris called his granddaughter (Christina) every day. Chris says "everyone is the love of my life, but Christina is special."
- When they lived in a different home, closer to Christina's, he would be there all the time playing games with her, like hide and seek.
- Even when he visited his brother in Athens, he saw a young girl who looked like Christina playing soccer and he realized how much he missed her.
- He felt welcomed like a King when he came home and Christina and her mom were waiting at the airport.

Marriage to Murva...

- he met Murva through the coffee shop he had on Brock Street. She was working for a lawyer at the time, and she would come and pick up the coffee for the office. His English wasn't very good but he would write her messages. He would practice what he would write for her the day before...
- One day he gave the cup that was supposed to be to her to another woman. They felt embarrassed because when she got it, "she knew their secret."
- At one point, Murva was living in Toronto and he would drive every weekend to see her.
- It was very hard being a Greek who married a Non-Greek; it was hard for them.

- He remembers Murva said “if you don’t marry me I am moving to Vancouver”. He said to her, “what do you know about me? Do you know my environment, culture, etc?”. So he brought Murva to St. George’s where the church services were being held at the time, to show her his culture before they got married.
- People in the community had it in their mind that he would marry their daughters, so they were surprised when he brought Murva. Some would turn their back and wouldn’t speak to him because he was marrying someone outside of the community.
- But marrying Murva was the greatest thing. Not only do they work well together – she also helped him a lot with the business; she is a good worker.
- Murva was given books to read about the religion before she became baptized and married into the church.
 - “and now she is more Greek than the Greeks are.”
 - she is very involved: organized the youth, Folklore, Sunday school... she has worked for 50 years for the church. She is loved by almost everybody. They value her. She is a huge part of the church, and everybody knows that.
 - “When Jimmy married Shirley, she became the same thing!” (Mrs. Claus, Sunday school, etc).

Kids...

- He has wonderful kids: Jim and Tony.
- From the time they were young, they kept buying houses, getting bigger and bigger ones. They changed houses 7 times during their marriage. They stayed 26 years at MacDonnell Street.
- When they were getting older, they wanted less stairs. They are living in their dream home: Murva already knew the house from her time working for the Symphony. It was a colleague’s house.
- Tony was always athletic; Jimmy is a hard worker but impatient. He wants things “yesterday”.
 - (Describes their experiences in school; their kids working at restaurants...)
- “All the money in the world doesn’t mean a thing if you can’t speak to your children, love your grandchildren, etc...” You need to try to help your family as much as you can – while letting them have the space to be their own person.

Chris is now enjoying his retirement surrounded by his two sons, daughter-in-law (our daughter really) and his treasured granddaughter. “Of course, we both enjoy our two grand-puppies too.”