

Seth Sullivan – *Interview conducted on the back porch of the Cardinal restaurant in Boone, NC*
by Willard Watson.

Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?

My name is Seth Graham Sullivan and I was born in Morganton, NC on May 12, 1985.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

My dad sells transfer truck tires for a living. For most of my childhood my mom was a homemaker, she started to teach school as a teacher's assistant when I was about 11 or 12 years old. I had summer jobs growing up but it was mainly for spending money, for my money.

Q3 – What do you do for a living?

I own the Cardinal restaurant.

Q4 – How long have you worked at the Cardinal?

Two years on Monday (1.19.2018), we've been open.

Q5 – How'd you end up owning a restaurant?

I worked in restaurants kinda through college and I found that I had a knack for it and I also really enjoyed the work. Basically in this area you kinda have to make a job, there is not a lot of industry and I really like it here. So I decided some years ago that that was the course I was

going to take with my life. Then opportunities presented themselves and I jumped on them, with my business partners obviously.

Q6 – How would you say the work has changed since you started?

I would say that that's kind of a twofold answer. Sometimes I think that not much has changed at all, but that's more because of the kind of climate that we have here with tourists and college students. That being said, I definitely work a lot harder now than I did before. My work is different but that's because I have more responsibility, I'm not sure the industry here has changed much. Food and hospitality here are kind of recession proof because there is the college and there's tourism.

Q7 – Describe a typical work day?

Today is one of my office days so I come in about nine o' clock (in the morning) and make sure the kitchen has what they need to get started on prep, make sure the front of house has what they need to get started on their tasks for the day. Then I set about working on my office work. I manage a lot of the human resources side of things around here, so I do a lot of work with payroll, scheduling, hiring and firing and I also do the beer buying here. So Wednesdays and Thursdays I order beer. I am in communication with the beer reps and also different purveyors be that produce or the people we get our lemons from. Basically answering the phone, a lot, a lot of time in front of the computer, organizing spreadsheets and that kind of stuff.

Q8 – What type of people do you work with?

I think that our employees by and large are locals or are transplants. We have maybe five or six college kids that work here out of a staff of 40. A lot of the people who work for us are young folks who have decided to make a life here or are climbers who want to stay here because of a lot of the outdoor stuff to do. A lot of our staff falls between 25 and 35. We have a few working mothers that work for us, we have three or four mothers that work here.

As far as within the community we work with everything from brewers and produce representatives, local farmers, even local exterminators and newspaper people - so a pretty wide swath of different kinds of people. Obviously we use large big box purveyor for somethings like French fries and that's US Foods, but even the people we are in direct contact with live in this economy. But we try to do everything else as locally as we can. We have several local beers on tap, we have farm fresh produce even this time of the year that we are getting from a local farm, as much as we can. Our produce distributor is a local. That's something that my partners and I, because we have decided to make our lives here, it's really important to us, being able to support a local economy that is kind of insular in some ways, but it is something we make an effort for.

Q9 – When do you work?

Generally during the week, I work day shifts because my business partner, Chris, has children so he is at home with them during the day. So I do a lot of my office hours and office work during the week it's also better because the accountant's office is open, the bank is open, and then on

the weekends I usually work at night - I'm here just through shift change and dinner service to go by and check on people and make sure the staff has what they need.

Thankfully we are at the point now, two years in where I'm not having to like, I mean for the first six to eight months we were open I was bartending. I was bartending shifts and working, it was a necessary part of the machinery to get through a shift and now I get to play Mr. Manager and walk around like its *(expletive) Applebee's, sorry for cursing*, but walk around, check on tables and really facilitate the whole of the service which is a more comfortable place to be in and it pays dividends, honestly, because things work a lot smoother and I am able to jump around. It allows if there is to say Andy from Against the Grain (Farm) or Nathan from AMB (Appalachian Mountain Brewery) is here I can check on them and make sure they are having a good time.

Q10 – Is there seasonality to your work?

There is. We are still feeling that out, because the first year we opened was a good first year, the second year we improved basically 20 percent across the board. So for instance July is a busy month traditionally, last January was busier than our first July we were open. So we are still trying to feel that business out, but yes for sure. Your July, August, October are going to be super busy. February through April will not be that busy. This year has been nice we have had some winter weather so we have had some skiers. There certainly is that seasonality. I think that there is a lot across the board the economy up here is pretty seasonal depending.

Q11 – What do you do with downtime at work?

Usually when I have downtime at work I try to brainstorm cocktails or planning events, the things that don't have to be done every week but add to the business. Whether its planning events, or checking in at upcoming events like beerfest, or working on cocktails that's always something happening.

Q12 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?

Restaurant lingo. 86 – we are out of this. On the Fly - doing something quickly. Right behind you. We have a couple Hispanic ladies working in the back now so we have been picking up a little Spanish here and there which is cool. I get so self-conscious because they can speak two languages and I can only speak one. The guys who work back there with them speak more Spanish than I do. There's all kinds of code words and different things. Tapped or kicked for beers being out.

Q13 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed?

First thing you need to be able to survive in restaurant work, this restaurant is not an easy restaurant to work in. Even the people who make the least amount of money in the kitchen work hard. The more the business does well the more we are able to pay those people what they deserve, which is awesome. A hard work ethic, being able to put your nose to grindstone is important. As far as particular skills, I would say you can learn everything that we do here, there is nothing that you have to be preordained to do, you have to be able to learn. A willingness

and an openness to learning and being able to work hard. I would almost rather people come with no experience so I can teach them what to do.

Q14 – What techniques and methods for making your cocktails?

The technique is kind of just throwing stuff at the wall, I mean, that's not true. Finding tastes and flavors that work well together, having a knowledge of spirits and what certain spirits do in drinks is important, things that are going to make a drink taste earthy or fruity. Have knowledge of those things and use that knowledge is a really important thing. We are fortunate to have a local ABC store that is willing to work with us and get cool stuff we want to try. Really the most important thing for that is doing your research and learning, just like anything, learning your tools.

For every one that tastes good there is a couple that don't taste good. Consistency is also a big problem, if I come up with a drink and I'm teaching you make it, it's important that you make it how I set forth or vice versa. Now we are able to have staff members contribute cocktails which is awesome and gives them something to be proud about.

Q15 – What are some things that outsiders would not expect?

I think that for the uninitiated, how hard it is. I think if you never worked in a restaurant and you had no concept of what that work was like it would be pretty easy to say that it is easy work, but it's pretty tough, a lot of long hours, a lot of standing, a lot of talking to people which can get kinda old after a while. There are people that get into it and get their world rocked a little bit because they don't know what to expect.

Q16 – What was originally the most difficult aspect of your job?

Not seeing my wife was really tough. That might be too personal. We got married September 19 of 2015 we got back from our Honey Moon on October the first, we signed a lease on this building on October the sixth. So basically the first eight months we were married I didn't really see her at all. Even for my partners who have been married much longer said that was the hardest part.

Your back being tired, your feet hurting, not getting any sleep, all that is fine but those personal relationships are what make that worthwhile to do in the first place, so not seeing her was the hardest part at the beginning and now it is so sweet by feeling rewarded by being able to see her more by working less, and not working 16 hours a day like we did in the beginning.

Q17 – Most Satisfying?

The most satisfying thing is when I hear somebody that I don't know and that doesn't know who I am talking about the restaurant and saying that they enjoy it, that's really special and awesome and a really unique experience and makes me feel proud. Makes me proud of what I've done without sounding cocky, I take pride in it.

And having a staff that cares, that is equally as awesome, when we look around at the Christmas party or look around and see everybody smiling and loving each other. That's really awesome and something that we want to cultivate is a staff that cares about the place and cares about each other.

Q18 – What advice would you give someone beginning this line of work?

Sell hot tubs. Make sure you can trust the people you are going into business with. And go into business with people. I am in awe and have that much more respect for people like Angela at Proper who does it completely by themselves, or like Mark and Anne at Galileo's who do it as a married couple, the thought of doing this by myself is giving me anxiety just thinking about, it's completely overwhelming. It's so nice having a couple people you can rely on, and make sure you can rely on those people. Get an accountant and a lawyer, don't pay more than 6% of what you think your net sales for the year might be in rent. Those are things I would tell someone starting out.

Q19 – Describe a memorable moment from work.

One of the most memorable moments for me, and this is going to sound terrible, but the first Sunday we were open. We did a lot of the construction work here ourselves, we didn't spend as much time beforehand testing the menu and figuring out what service was going to be like, we did that stuff on the fly to use some restaurant lingo. So that first Sunday was the first lunch service we had ever served, we had cooked everything on the menu a couple times, and my family came in and there were like 15 of them and we were just getting crushed.

It was awful, it was so awful, definitely the worst experience I ever had in a restaurant. My back hurt really bad, because I had worked like eight, 17-hour days in a row. I had been here from the time the doors open to the time they closed all those days. And I was so embarrassed by what was happening around me and it was kind of that moment that I learned there are going to be those times when things are just going to be out of your control. And no

matter what you do, no matter how well you prepare, or how little you prepare, as it were, sometimes things are just going to go off the rails. I think that was a really important and really humbling lesson to learn early on is that I didn't know everything that could happen and that there wasn't anyone above me to solve the problems anymore. I think that was a really important thing to learn really early, that I had to solve the problems as they came along. It was a really horrific and traumatic memory, but it keeps me kinda humbled to think about it.

Scott my business partner was working on the line and he will say it was absolutely my worst day in a restaurant. At the end of the day sitting down with that beer and analyzing all the things that had gone wrong really made me take a step back and reevaluate a lot of things, and that's something I still think about occasionally. All that coupled with physical pain and shear exhaustion. That's another lesson I learned is you have to advocated for yourself and you have to take care of yourself then it's going to negatively impact the business if you're not sharp then the business isn't going to be sharp.

Q20 – Is there anything we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

I love the high Country. I am really thankful for the community that supports this business. The area I grew up in is part of the foothills and the Hickory, Lenoir area is not fortunate enough to have a college and tourism to support the local economy so I am grateful for that, grateful for the community and the college.