

KAPPA SIGMA FRATERNITY: JOHNNY BROWN, COOK

"[C]ooking is hard. It's harder than it looks. It really is. It's not easy. But...once you learn, it's fun. Because you can always create something different."

--Johnny Brown

FULL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION:

Johnny Brown, cook
KAPPA SIGMA FRATERNITY
University of Mississippi
Oxford, Mississippi
April 6, 2004 @ 1:00pm
Kappa Sigma Dining Room
Interviewed by Amy Evans
[Approx. 14 minutes]

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here. This interview occurred in the dining room at the Kappa Sigma house. Even though lunch service was over, a few guys can be heard coming in to get ice and drinks, which are situated adjacent to the table where the interview is being conducted, and visiting with each other. There are a couple of instances when chairs can be heard being dragged on the floor as people get up from their seats.

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Amy Evans: This Amy Evans on Tuesday, April sixth, two-thousand and four, and I'm at the Kappa Sigma fraternity house at the University of Mississippi with Johnny Brown. Johnny, would you mind stating your name and your age, if you don't mind, for the record?

Johnny Brown: I'm Johnny Brown [short pause] twenty--th--[short pause]--s--start over. Can we start over?

AE: It's fine. Just go ahead. [Short laugh]

JB: I'm Johnny Brown, thirty-six years old. I've worked for Kappa Sigma--almost four years now, and it's a good place to work.

AE: Okay. What's your role here at Kappa Sigma?

JB: Well, um, I cook breakfast. And I do lunch. And, uh—it's just what I do.

AE: Okay.

[Sound of Mr. Brown rubbing his hands together in the background]

AE: And what, um—Mrs. Gough [Kappa Sigma housemother] was just telling me that you're one of their [the fraternity member's] favorites here.

JB: Right.

AE: Because you'll cook anything they want. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JB: Yeah. Uh, basically, when they come in the morning time, um, some—some of them want omelets. Uh, cheese eggs. Uh, French toast. I basically cook just about what they want.

AE: Okay.

JB: It's—it's on certain things. You know, I just cook what the men want. Just about what they have a taste for in the morning time.

AE: So do you cook per person—specifically for the person?

JB: Specif—yeah.

AE: Okay.

JB: So, for the person. Yeah.

AE: Okay.

JB: Like that.

AE: And where'd you learn to cook?

JB: Well, I went to cooking school.

AE: Did you?

JB: Well, two years.

AE: Where?

JB: In Knoxville. It's a class that they have up there. It's not a school that they have year-round, but a—a—it's like a, uh—school that they have—they hold a class up there this year, and next year they'll come back and finish the class up. So, two years. That be it then.

AE: Okay. Well, what made you want to go to cooking school?

JB: Well, I like to cook. Uh, it's pretty fun.

[Short pause]

AE: Was cooking school what you thought it would be?

JB: Pretty hard.

AE: Yeah?

JB: Real hard.

AE: Hard, how?

JB: You have to, um, mix a lot of stuff and, uh, you got to get the—basically, they put it out there and just learn how to cook it. They tell you what to cook, and you got to learn how to do it.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: And it's not easy. It's—it's harder than what it—what it seems like and what it sounds. Uh-huh.

AE: Before you went to cooking school you cooked a lot at home?

JB: I did. I cooked a lot at home.

AE: Do you have a big family?

JB: Yeah, I have, um, five brothers and four sisters.

AE: My goodness. And where are you from originally?

JB: Well, I'm originally from, um, here in Mississippi, but we moved to Knoxville. And, um, when I got to twelfth grade we moved back here to Oxford. So I been here ever since.

AE: Okay, and you like it in Oxford?

JB: It's looking pretty good.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: It's pretty quiet. Pretty good place. Quiet. And, uh, pretty good.

AE: Did you work anywhere, um, between cooking school and coming to Kappa Sigma?

JB: Yeah, I did. Um, I worked at the Regency [Hotel] in Knoxville—the--the Hyatt Regency.

AE: Uh-huh.

JB: I was a cook there and, um—uh, we cooked for probably [short pause] about two hundred peoples a night. And, um, it was—it was real fun. And, uh—I cooked there at the Regency, I cooked at a, um, s—steak house in Knoxville. And moved back here to Oxford and, um, cooked at Kappa Delta. A girl's sorority. It was fun there too. So—basically, I been cooking for a while. About fift--

AE: How—

JB: About fifteen years.

AE: Yeah?

JB: Yeah.

AE: How did you find out that there was an opening here on campus?

JB: Well, um, I heard about it—just by mouth. Someone told me about it.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: And so I came and checked, and I talked to Ms. Gough, and she hired me.

AE: So you knew other people who cooked in fraternity or sorority houses on campus?

JB: Um, not a lot.

AE: Yeah.

JB: Um, I know maybe—a couple peoples that cooks at fraternities. Yeah.

AE: Well, what's a typical day like here?

JB: Pretty busy. [Short pause] Pretty busy, um—pretty fun. Uh, the guys keep you laughing all the time. And, um, mess with you. Joke with you a lot. So—

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Pretty fun.

AE: What time do you start work in the morning?

JB: Six in the morning.

AE: And do most of the boys come down—what time for breakfast?

JB: Uh, most of them come down around seven-thirty. Seven-thirty in the morning.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: And about quarter to nine, so—pretty busy most all morning.

AE: And then do you start cooking lunch immediately after breakfast?

JB: Uh, we do. I do. I start up lunch, and we get through lunch at one-thirty. So, it's—pretty good.

AE: Do you have roles in the kitchen? I know there are two other cooks—

JB: Yeah.

AE: --who are here.

JB: My role is, uh, breakfast, um, washing dishes and, um, I clean up after them—after lunch time and breakfast time so—basically, uh, kind of busy all day long.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Up unto, uh, about a quarter [to] two.

AE: Okay. And Ms. Gough was telling me that you have—there are about forty-five guys who live here and about a hundred and fifty members.

JB: Right.

A: Um, and how—could you maybe speak to how working at a fraternity house—cooking at a fraternity house might be different, if at all, from working in the hotel business?

JB: Well, for one thing, you have different peoples—look, the boys here, they, um, you know—it's just a lot of different stuff. And some of the stuff kind of strange, and you have to make it up. T—

AE: How do you mean?

JB: T—to fit their taste and, um—some want a hot sauce omelet. You know, stuff like that. You know. You have to make it up to fit their tastes.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: You know, so it's—its real different.

[Short pause]

AE: Do you—

JB: It's pretty good.

AE: Do you like this better than the hotel business? Or the same?

JB: Yeah, because you have a little more freedom.

AE: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JB: And, you know, it's—it's more fun. It's in the open. You—you don't have to be so barred down with it.

AE: Right.

JB: Yeah.

AE: It's not all about—

JB: It's real good.

AE: --service so much—

JB: Right.

AE: --as it is nurturing and--

JB: It's real fun.

AE: So what kind of relationship do you have with the pledges and the—the members here?

JB: We have a good--good relationship. Yeah. Uh, basically, I'm friends with—basically, all of them. But—w—basically, there's one, um, that I see a lot. And, uh, I leave at, uh, two so many times I don't see 'cause they come to dinner time. They don't come to lunch or breakfast so--

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: But, uh—I enjoy them. I'm pretty good friends with them. **[Counter 05:27]**

AE: Um-hmm. Do you have some good stories—

JB: [Soft laugh]

AE: --about your time here after four years?

JB: [Laughs. Short pause] Yeah, I probably couldn't say it on tape though. [Laughs] but it's good—

AE: [Laughs]

JB: Good stories. [Laughs]

AE: Fraternity kinds of stories, I bet. [Laughs]

JB: Yeah.

AE: Um, so what's the rest of your family life--or your home life like?

JB: Well. My mom's retired. My dad is retired. And, um, [short pause] um, basically, uh, [short pause] Oh—

AE: Do you have a family of your own?

JB: Oh yes, yeah, I do. I have a—I'm married. I have three boys.

AE: Okay.

JB: Yeah. One's--one eleven [years old], and, um, one seven and one is, um, six months.

AE: Do you cook at home?

JB: Yes, I do. Um, I'm basically the one to cook at home. I do.

AE: What kind of things do you cook at home?

JB: Well, I cook, um, lasagna. I cook a lot of, um, vegetables and stuff like that. And I, uh—quiche. Uh, different kind of pies and cakes.

AE: Do you have a specialty dish that you would say is a signature item at home for you?

JB: Yeah, I cook, um, zetti.

AE: What's that?

JB: Zetti.

AE: Ziti pasta?

JB: Yeah, I'm sorry. Ziti pasta.

AE: Okay.

JB: I makes that—I makes that sometimes at home. It's pretty good. They like that. So.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Tastes pretty good.

AE: Is there, um, ever a time when the stuff you cook at home and the stuff you cook here kind of overlaps and you—

JB: All the time.

AE: Yeah?

JB: Yeah. I cook it here and—and sometimes I feel like I—yeah. I want' to go home and cook it too.

AE: [Short laugh] Um-hmm.

JB: So—

AE: Well, that's a lot of cooking.

JB: It is.

AE: Cook here all day and then go home and cook.

JB: Go home and cook.

AE: You *must* enjoy it.

JB: Yeah, I come home—my wife. She don't cook so—

AE: No?

JB: No, she don't.

AE: So are there any things, um, you know, over the four years that you've been here—things that have changed with the menu that maybe reflect some—some bigger things, like food trends or diet trends? I know the Atkins diet is real popular right now.

JB: Hmmm. I be, um—most of the guys now want egg whites.

AE: Really? Okay.

JB: Egg whites and—they mostly want stuff that is, uh [short pause] that's really not fattening. You know?

AE: um-hmm.

JB: Most of them on diets now, trying to lose weight. Tone up real good, so—it don't change—it don't change—well, it basically change the eating habits now so—

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Yeah.

AE: Ms. Gough was saying that it—there's not a lot of, um, deserts that y'all serve so much anymore.

JB: No, it's not. It's not. I think, uh, once a week, I believe. It's once—once or twice a week. For dinnertime.

AE: Um, and so what do you do during the summer when the house is closed?

JB: Well, I've done some—I've done some—sometimes I—sometimes I work in the summertime. And, um, uh, I work out a lot. I teach martial arts so--

AE: Really? **[COUNTER: 08:08]**

JB: I do. I teach that.

AE: Here in Oxford?

JB: Tullahoma [Mississippi]. And I have tournaments a lot so, uh, basically—that's what I do in the summertime.

AE: Are any of the members here—have they taken martial arts classes from you?

JB: No. No, they haven't. No, they haven't. Um, I've got a couple guys I jog with in the morning time that's here—uh, like I jog two miles before I come to work every morning so—I work—a couple guys.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, what's the favorite part about your job here?

JB: What the favorite part is, uh [short pause] is—it's stress free. Yeah. Stress-free and, um, I get along with everybody, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: You always got something to laugh about. [Short pause] So—that's what I like about it.

AE: Do you plan on sticking around for a while longer?

JB: Yeah. I'll stick around for a while.

AE: Um, another question I want to ask you is—is about the members here and—we have, you know, people on campus from around different parts of the country and come in from different places with different eating styles, you know.

JB: Okay.

AE: Mexican food is a big part of being a Texan and all that kind of thing.

JB: Okay.

AE: Does that influence, um, your menu or what y'all serve at all?

JB: Uh, I don't think so. I don't believe it does. I don't think so.

AE: Okay. Um, are there many special events that y'all prepare food for over [course of] the year.

JB: Yes, we have a lot of, uh, dinners here for the parents and, uh, we have, um, s—uh, banquets here too. We c—a lot of banquets that we cook for here.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: And, uh, we—like for the [foot]ball games we do the food for the ball games and everything. So we basically do a lot. A lot. It's pretty good.

[Short pause]

AE: And after four years, are there any, um, guys that you keep in touch with? That come back to visit you or the kitchen?

JB: Yeah. Um, um-hmm. They do. They did. Uh, there about—there's three of them that I know for sure that keep in touch with me. So. Yeah. And they're, uh, good friends to have. Pretty good.

AE: Do they guys ever come in and—and want to cook something?

JB: They'll come in and want to cook something, but they'll back up. They'll be joking about it so—but, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: It's pretty fun, you know.

AE: [Laughs]

JB: They'll keep you laughing a lot. So. It's all right.

AE: Um, during the course of the day I know you make three meals, obviously, but are there other times when guys just come in and grab something or—

JB: Oh, yeah. They come in and have peanut butter and jelly.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Uh—and that's a favorite, you know. Peanut butter and jelly. Or a bagel. Something like that. So, uh, they'll do a bowl of cereal.

AE: What are some other favorite foods that the guys have?

JB: Um, like, um, little fruit pies. Stuff like that. Uh, honey buns. Donut type stuff. They like that.

AE: Ms. Gough was also saying that, um, you know, she does the ordering—OR you all share the responsibility of ordering for the kitchen.

JB: Right.

AE: And, um, that the menu doesn't really change a whole lot, and you kind of stay with the—the standard that the guys like—

JB: Right.

AE: --and that they're used to and—and what y'all can afford to put out—

JB: Right.

AE: --to serve so many—so many people. Um—

JB: Right.

AE: --are there things that if you had your, you know, run of the kitchen that you would serve or like to try?

JB: Yeah. I probably would, uh, um, do a lot of pasta dishes. Pasta and, um, probably a lot of protein dishes too. I would. I—I would do that. And [short pause] that's what I'd probably do. And I would change it up a lot—the menu up a lot. And try to try something different. And, you know, just see—just see what they like.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: And—that's what I would do. **[COUNTER: 11:40]**

AE: Well, back to your own family a little bit, um, did your father cook when you were growing up?

JB: No, my father didn't cook.

AE: No?

JB: No. My—uh, my father built bridges. Uh—

AE: HE Builds bridges?

JB: Builds bridges. Um-hmm. And, uh, he be trying—be trying for—uh, but my mom—my mom, she did cook. She cooked. For twenty years. And, um, she—

AE: Professionally, you mean?

JB: Yes, she did.

AE: As a job. Okay.

JB: And, um, she retired from that. So, um—

AE: Where did she cook?

JB: Well, she cooked—well, when we was in Knoxville, uh, we—she had a little restaurant she ran for a long time.

AE: What was that?

JB: It was, um, Little Brown House.

AE: Little Brown House.

JB: Little Brown House.

AE: What kind of food was it?

JB: It was like, uh, more of a s—southern food, you know. And—chicken, a lot of vegetables, stuff like that. Pies. So—it was—did it for a while. And she ran—just—just retired from it.

AE: Did you spend a lot of time in there?

JB: A whole lot.

AE: Yeah?

JB: I did.

AE: Would you say that's where you learned to cook?

JB: [Short pause] Well, basically—pro—probably so. But I—I say that a lot. I watched—I watched—so, I believe so.

AE: Okay. Um, do expect your—do you expect any of your children—your boys will have cooking in their genes and follow your footsteps?

JB: Probably so. But I—I would tell them to, um—cooking is hard. It's—it's harder than it looks. It really is. It's not easy. But it—but—once you learn, it's fun. Because you can always create something different. So. But, uh, yeah. That'd be good if they did. You know? Be a chef.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Be pretty good.

AE: Well, good. Well, is there anything that you'd like to add to what we've discussed?

JB: Well, um—

AE: Something I've left out?

JB: No. I think it went—it went pretty good.

AE: Okay. Well, I certainly appreciate your time.

JB: Okay.

AE: And it's been a pleasure speaking with you.

JB: All right. Thank you. **[COUNTER: 13:25]**

[End]