

Male Speaker: Okay. We are rolling. Hard question first, please say your name and spell it.

Tommy Amalfitano: [laughter] Tommy Amalfitano, A-M-A-L-F-I-T-A-N-O.

MS: Great. Tommy, when were you born and where?

TA: Born on December 12th – December 10th, excuse me, [laughter] 1942 San Pedro Hospital.

MS: Good, we are the same age. Talk about when did your family come to San Pedro and why?

TA: My family originated in Ishchia, my grandparents. Mainly fishermen were what they were. So, they immigrated. Luckily, they came to San Pedro, found a nice place, and we've been here ever since.

MS: What brought them here? What were the reasons they came here?

TA: I believe it's had to do with fishing. Because they were fishermen over in Italy. So, they became fishermen over here. Probably all I know [laughter].

MS: Tell us about your father and your mother. What kind of people were – what did they do and the kind of people they were.

TA: Actually, my father was in the restaurant and bar business. My mother was a housewife. Both Italian. Both from right here in San Pedro. Just not too much I could tell you. They sent me to Catholic school, made sure I went to jail before I got in any trouble. They even jailed – "anything like this, I don't want to be in there." So, they did a good job raising me and my sister [laughter].

MS: We will get back to that later. What was the restaurant and the bar that your father ran? Tell me about that.

TA: He was in two or three of them. He was in the – what's the name of that place? Mirror Room on the Ninth and Gaffey. He was in the Three Pigs on the 20th and Pacific, Olson's on Ninth and Grand.

MS: And what did he do? Did he own them or manage them or –

TA: The two of them he owned part of. The last one he just worked in.

MS: Now you sort of quickly passed by this idea of going to jail. You have to fill that out for me. What was the story with all that [laughter]?

TA: Well, all good Italian kids, you're Catholic-born and everything else. So, they send you to Catholic school. So, you have the nuns. You have the priest. Everybody puts a hard drive on you, make sure you walk a straight line. Your parents make sure you walk a straight line. I was just joking about the jail part. [laughter] I got a great education there. A great education.

MS: What school was that?

TA: I went to Mary Star.

MS: Tell me about that school. Everyone mentions it. What is the importance of that school in this town to people?

TA: Well, the town was just a small, small town to begin with and which it still is. Everybody knew each other. Everybody went to school. It was like just one big happy family. So, it was a good school, but they taught you. They made sure you learned. If you didn't learn, you got told at home you weren't learning. So, it was no fooling around. You learned, but everybody was like one big family. It was pretty nice.

MS: You got any stories about how these lessons were applied? Some of them may be nuns that you remember.

TA: No, no. All great nuns, forceful. They knew how to use their knowledge to make sure you knew how to learn [laughter].

MS: When you were growing up as a kid in San Pedro, tell us about what it was like. What did you do for fun growing up? What was the town like?

TA: Like I said, the town is just a small town. Everybody knew each other. We went to the beach every summer. We had Peck's Park. We used to go to Peck Park every Sunday during the summer and have picnics with three or four or five different families. We'd be in the parks from, I don't know, 7:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. with the whole family. So, it was a really very family orientated town.

MS: And how did you relate to the harbor, to the docks, and the port? As a kid, did you do anything around there?

TA: I did nothing on the docks when I was a kid. No, no. What happened is that another family that I'm with now, the Ungaro family, the father Ungaro opened a fish market up on Ninth and Meyler. It was one block away from the school. So, his son and I, after school, would go to work at the fish market. That's actually how we got into the fish business. He treated me just like his own son, and I respect him just like my own father. Great, great man. His name was Mackey Ungaro. The fish market was maybe twice the size of this room here. From there we went to another fish market, which was down on Norm's Landing. It's called Norm's Landing, which we are right now. And that building was 40x40. We've kind of grown and grown. Now we're in a building that's 10,000 square feet. So, little by little, we've grown. We've crawled, and we've crawled. We've walked. Thank God we're still walking.

MS: When you started off working in the fish market, a lot of people had never seen a fish market, never been there. Give me a sense when you were a kid, what was it like? What did you do? What was the atmosphere of the fish market when you were young starting out there?

TA: You know, the atmosphere was very nice because everybody that came into the fish market, we knew everybody. So, we knew nothing about fish at 15 or 16 years old, whatever we were when we first went in there. But we learned, and we learned. Summertime, Mackey would bring us down to the wholesale fish markets down here and show us everything. We couldn't tell one fish from another. He just had a lot of patience. He's just saying, "Don't worry, you just keep looking. You'll get it. Don't worry, you'll get it." We did. We got it.

MS: What was he trying to teach you? What was he trying to show?

TA: What he was really trying to teach us is, if you want to work hard the rest of your life, you stay in this business. What he was really trying to teach us is go to school. He gave us a choice. He says, "If you want to go to school, I'll send you to school. But if you don't want to go to school, you come to work. You go to work every day." So, we chose the work [laughter].

MS: What attracted you to it as a young kid?

TA: I don't know. I have no idea. What even attracted – I had no choice. It was school, go there. [laughter] Okay. There was no choice. There was no, "You can't go there. Okay, you could go home." No way. You went there after school and on Saturdays.

MS: When you went there, what did you do? What was your job?

TA: We did everything. We cleaned the floors. We cleaned the fish. We helped the people. He let us do everything. So, we learned.

MS: Well, I guess, again, if I was going to – it is a little late for me, since I am your age, to learn a new trade. But what were you learning? What are the inside things that you were finding out about marketing fish?

TA: At that age, 15 or 16-year-old, you didn't realize what you found out. Anything you found out later on that – I don't know, you get like fish veins. I don't know exactly the right word it is. But we work hard. We work long hours. You've got this in your veins, and for some reason, you keep doing it. Me especially, I love the people. I love to be around the people. Even today, people come down and say, "Hey, you've been here a long time. I know you." I say, "You do? It's nice to see you." You're 25 years, 30 years younger than I am. How do you know me?" He said, "When I was a kid, my father used to bring me here." Things like that, the same people come around. It's a joy. It's great. It's just –

MS: Every business has its own characters that you remember as a kid. I would bet the fish market has even more. Who are some of the characters that you remember?

TA: Boy, there's just a numerous bunch of them that come down there. There are some characters that still come down there. You need to come on a Sunday morning.

MS: We are going to do it.

TA: Okay. I told her that one [laughter]. There were people called Monterey Red. He was actually born and raised in Monterey. He had red hair. He worked with us. There was another guy, Chicago Joe, born and raised in Chicago. Joe, he worked with us. Freddy the Hat (Morato?) , he was from Pittsburgh. He worked with us. There was Mackey Ungaro, which I mentioned him. There's all of them different characters that were in my life that –

MS: Tell me about it. We will go through one at a time.

TA: No, no, no. You'd be here till tomorrow morning.

MS: That is okay. Give me a sense of who they were and everything.

TA: Like I said, they were just characters.

MS: Monterey Red, tell me about him.

TA: Monterey Red was actually born and raised in Monterey, came down here with the fishermen to begin with, worked on the tuna boats going down to Mexico. After that, started to die off and everything else. He got a little bit older in age. He decided that he would come and ask us if he can have a job with us. He was an excellent cook. So, Mackey, the old man, he was about your size. He loved to eat. He said, "Good. Come on. You're coming in with us. [laughter] You're coming to cook." So, he cooked. He waited on customers. He did everything. It's a mixture of everything you do there. So, that's one guy.

MS: Actually, the guy from –

TA: Chicago Joe.

MS: Tell me about Chicago Joe.

TA: Chicago is just a nickname for a guy. He was a car salesman, car business. He did that for many years in Chicago. He came out here. I don't know how he landed in our lap somehow, a good old guy. His last name was Tomasello. Then there was Freddie (Morato?). He was another fellow that was a character in town here that used to come down and help us. He didn't want to wait on customers, but he liked to clean. He was a clean freak, which was terrific because he was cleaning all the time. So, there's just those things like that.

MS: Okay. Typical day in the fish market, take us through, when does it start? What do you do?

TA: It depends on what comes in, what doesn't come in, and what time of the year it is and stuff like that. Let's say summertime, that's the busiest time of the year. We'd go to the wholesale market in the morning, at 6:00 a.m.. One of us would go to the wholesale market. One of us would be putting the showcases in. We'd go and pick out the fish we needed for the day or two days, whatever we thought when it was coming in and this and that. Then we'd work the rest of

the day in the fish market. But then if in the afternoon a lot of the boats would bring fish in, such as barracuda, sea bass, perch, all that fish had to be cleaned, iced, and packed. Whether we send it out to be wholesaled or we use it there in the fish market, you couldn't go home until all that was done. So, in between waiting on customers and that fish coming in and doing all this, sometimes it was 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. when you got out of there, doesn't matter on the time of the year. Sometimes it was earlier because nothing came in. Sometimes it was later. Sometimes we'd have boats that would come in and have like – they'd go out fishing for four or five, six days, and they have 5 tons of rock cod. We'd have to unload the rock cod. We'd bring it to the fish market. We didn't have a boom that boomed it off the boat at that time. We'd bring it with like trash barrels, put them in trash barrels, walk them up a ramp, wham, pack them up. Either we wholesaled them, or we sold them there in the market. We did all that kind of stuff. So, sometimes our days were short. Sometimes our days were very long. Doesn't matter the time of the year.

MS: What –

Female Speaker: Can I ask about how would you know when a boat was coming in? But talk to him. I am not here. Yes, just talk to him.

MS: Yes. How would you know a boat was coming in?

TA: Well, usually they would have like a certain time of year you have a – like barracuda season starts usually around in May through about July. So, every day, you're going to get some barracuda come in. Or you knew that you had a fishing boat that went rock cod hunting. You know that he's going to go out on a certain day, and he only has ice enough for five or six days. So, within one day or two days, you know exactly when he's coming back because he only has that much ice, that much time, that much fuel, that much everything. So, they come right back again. So, it's kind of like on a working schedule. Unless the wind comes up, or it's stormy. They can't get back in, and they hide. But normally, you know the schedule, what's going on all the time.

MS: Now, would you do any of the grading of the fish when you are looking at them? Or how would you tell whether – you are going to have to sell them later. So, would you just basically – on a weight and what kind it was? How would you evaluate the fish to sell?

TA: Well, we would look at the fish. The fish looks bright. The eyes are clear. The gills are red. Everything that's – you've got a beautiful fresh fish. That would determine how long the life the fish would have before you would have to discard it. So, we learned all that. That's something in the process that we learned when we were little kids to learn all this. It worked out pretty good.

MS: So, what were the kind of the prime fish that you would get the most money for from this port?

TA: Probably red snapper at the time. Not now, I'm not talking now. I'm talking in the [19]60s and [19]70s, probably red snapper was the prime fish that we got the most money for, that and

white seabass and halibut, of course. But the amount we would sell, like 3, 4 tons of rock cod where you'd only sell 400 or 500 pounds of seabass or halibut. So, rock cod and red snapper were the main fish that we sold the most of.

MS: Now who were your big customers? Who were you selling to? I assume the regulars.

TA: We had regulars come in. We had a very large ethnic people. We still do today. We had Caucasians, Hawaiians, Samoans, Filipinos, Latinos. We still have it today. So, it's –

MS: You were selling to them wholesale. They would then pass it on to customers. How would it work?

TA: No, no, no, no. That was just retail customers. Wholesale customers, we would sell – actually we would sell some of the fish to the wholesale markets down the street from us because we couldn't use all the fish. We sometimes – we had fish that they needed. So, we would wholesale it to them, and they would sell it to somebody else. Because we didn't have any trucks that went out or anything like that. We were just strictly in-house sales.

MS: Now, there was a time when you started selling fish off a truck. Tell me that story. How did that happen? What did you do? What was that?

TA: A friend of mine had a route. We had just started in the business where we're at down in Ports O' Call right now. It wasn't real, real busy. It was kind of slow. A friend of mine had a route he was going to sell in La Palma, Cyprus, that area. There were all dairy farms out there, all Portuguese people. So, he says, "Take this over Tommy. You can make a few bucks." So, I went to Mackey. I say, "What do you think?" He says, "Well, you've got to learn everything. So, try it." We got the fish here. So, we got the fish. I used to go out a couple times a week and go out and hustle fish out into the dairy farmers. It was terrific, fun.

MS: Well, tell me more about it. You had, what was it, a pickup truck loaded with ice? What was it like?

TA: No, it was a panel truck that was all insulated and everything else. We'd throw ice in there and throw the fish in there and go out and go house to house. Funny thing, in today's market, everybody has wax paper, plastic bags, the vacuum-packed bags, all this stuff. Portuguese ladies would come out of the house with a pan. They'd put the pan on the scale. They said, "Fill it up." "With what?" "Well, anything. Put that – fill it up. How much do I owe you?" They'd pay me, walk back in. I didn't have to have a plastic bag. I didn't have to – nothing. I didn't have to clean the fish. [laughter] I had to do nothing. Off they went. Best business there ever was [laughter].

MS: That is a great story.

TA: It's a true story. I did that for about three years. Then we got busy back over here. I sold that truck to a fellow by the name of Pete (Yancich?). He did it for four or five years. Then he got into the wholesale business. Now he sells real estate [laughter].

MS: Not unconnected.

TA: No.

MS: The famous Fishermen's Fiesta, for people who do not know what that is, talk about what is that? What is the Fishermen's Fiesta?

TA: Well, Fishermen's Fiesta was a celebration occasion that the fishermen were catching fish for many years and making a great, great living. It was church related. They would have a mass. They would have a procession that they would bring – I don't even know which statue. I can't remember [laughter]. They would march it down, all the way down to the boats. The priests, the monsignors, the cardinals from LA, they would come. They would have a blessing of the fleet down there. They would have a carnival, food, rides. They would have admirals, generals, Army marching bands, Navy marching bands. It was really a big, big celebration. They would invite all their families on the boat. It was a Sunday occasion, I believe it was. Then they would have everybody go for a ride in the boat, the whole family and everything. It was just a big party, fun, festival thing. It was really, really nice.

MS: There would be like a parade of boats through the channel.

TA: Yes, there was. There was a parade of boats. They would decorate the boats. They would've a theme every year. Sometimes it would be like a Disney theme where they have Disney characters, Pluto, Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse. They would decorate their boats in all these flower things. Some boats, with flags, some boats would just parade. It was just whatever you felt like you wanted to do. They would've prizes for the best boat and all that. It was really, really a great experience to be around. I was a lucky person.

MS: A story that Nancy said you told her was about a great white shark.

FS: I got that from the newspaper.

MS: Oh, you got that from the newspaper?

FS: Yes.

TA: The newspaper, not from me.

MS: You know about that story, 1988?

TA: I've seen the great white shark.

FS: Tell us the story.

MS: Tell me that story.

TA: [laughter] That story is, I went – I'd seen it when it was coming off the boat.

FS: You have to start.

MS: You have to start again. Somebody caught a great white shark.

TA: Okay. Somebody caught a great white shark. It came in at the wholesale markets. I went down there where I actually –

MS: Just start again.

TA: Okay. Somebody caught a great white shark. It had come in down at the wholesale markets. I didn't get to see it at the wholesale markets. But from there, they shipped the shark to a freezer plant, Fiesta del Mar in Wilmington. So, I knew the family, (Sigiona?) family, that owned that freezer plant. So, I got to go in and see it. They brought me into a room. The shark was laying on the floor. They had a 2x4 between about – it must have been 2, 2.5 feet in the jaws to hold it up. I was in this freezer. They opened the door. When they [laughter] let me in the door, shut the door, and put the lights off. [laughter] You don't think I had some fun in there, huh? Anyways, I come running out of there. That's my experience with the great white shark.

MS: That is a great story.

TA: Yes.

FS: There was another story I ran across –

MS: There is another story of a giant, orange Pacific octopus. Tell me that story.

TA: That octopus, one fisherman that fishes – still fishes for us – brought this octopus down. We donated the octopus. I kept it alive in our live lobster and crab tanks. I donated the lobster – the octopus to the museum down at Cabrillo Beach. They had a big story on it. They had all these children that got to come down and see it. It was really, really – it was in the news and all kinds of stuff. Then one day, there was an agency that comes from Washington D.C. They tell me, "You the guy that that gave the octopus to the museum." I said, "Yes, I am. What's the problem?" "Well, your cruelty to animals – what happened, excuse me, let me go back a minute. The octopus had died. The octopus actually killed himself. He got himself over the top. They had a water flow that goes over the top and recirculates the water. He got on top of that thing. So, he stopped the water from circulating in the tank. He actually grounded himself or killed himself. He didn't have any air. So, anyway, they wanted to cite me for not – I said, "You know, there's something wrong with you people. Because I only got this thing for education for little kids to see this animal. So, if you have a problem, you need to go someplace else and don't bother me." That's my story about the octopus. But that was a beautiful octopus. I should get you some ice.

MS: You have got to take me back to the beginning. When you first saw this octopus, what was special about it?



TA: Well, most people just see octopus that they stored in a showcase.

MS: Let us just start again.

TA: Yes. Most people see octopus stored in a showcase, and they're kind of a grayish color. But before they're in there, in their live status, they turn all different colors, oranges, blues, purples. I think it's a protective thing in the wildlife for themselves. So, when this thing comes out of the water – not out of the water, the guy had it actually brought in a crash barrel with water in it. This thing was just gorgeous, gorgeous, had all these colors because it was trying to protect itself. It was scared, where it was going to go, and what was going to happen to it. Like I said, we put it in our tanks. We kept him alive in the tanks. Did not wait too long, the museum came real fast and picked him up. So, it was pretty neat.

MS: Who caught him? Tell me sort of how he got to you. Who caught him? Where did you catch him?

TA: The people that caught him was a French family is their last name. They're fishing off of Newport Beach. They actually are crab fishermen. The octopus actually went into the crab trap and got caught in the crab trap. They pulled him up. They brought him to me off of Newport Beach.

MS: What happened to the fish market when Ports O' Call came along? Tell me about that transition. What was going on?

TA: Well, we were there before Ports O' Call.

MS: I mean, how did that change?

TA: Well, we just had that small market, 40x40. There was a lot that came up for a lease. We were lucky enough to get the lease on that lot. We built the facility that we have right now. We watched Ports O' Call grow. Everything just blends and works pretty nice with us.

MS: For people who do not know what Ports O' Call is, you have to tell them. What is Ports O' Call? How does that fit into the harbor?

TA: Ports O' Call is a public attraction in – I think what it is – I think that the harbor needs to have a public space for people to enjoy, other than looking at cranes and looking at warehouses and stuff like that. So, Ports O' Call, they designated that area as part of the public space for people to go and have fun, relax, enjoy, and have a good time. So that's how that came about.

MS: What was the impact on your business when that came in? What effect did that have on you?

TA: Well, that was in effect from day one, before I was even there. That was part of the program. But as far as Ports O' Call, it helped us immensely. Yes, it made it much better for us.

MS: Beacon Street, what was Beacon Street? What do you remember about Beacon Street?

TA: Well, I was too young when I was on Beacon Street. I didn't know too much about it, but I knew that it was a fun place. We got treated very nice on Beacon Street. I don't know. I know they have a lot of stories about how bad it was and everybody having a lot of trouble and everything else. But myself and Henry, which was Mackey's son, like my brother actually, we actually had a lot of fun on Beacon Street. It was –

MS: When you moved to your new location in the wharf in 1960, give us a sense of when you moved then. Tell me that story of the move and what happened next.

TA: Well, we were in that building that was 40x40. In the transaction, we had bought a truck, a fish truck. We parked it on an empty lot right next door to the building we were building. We sold fish for people to take home to cook fish. So, we never lost any of our clientele, none of our customers. We kept working. At the end of the day, my crew, after the carpenters were done, or the electrician, my crew would go in. They would clean all the floors. They would clean everything out. So, the next day, everything would be nice and clean when they came. They did all the insulation in the building. We built the deck. I was fortunate enough to have another friend of mine that was in the marine construction business. He was too busy to do the work. He said, "But I'll guide you guys." So, every day he would come in the morning. He'd come back in the afternoon. He would guide us. We helped build the thing. The deck that's there right now is a deck that came out of the Catalina terminal. The wood is over 100 years old. It was 100 years old when I got the wood. They happened to be tearing the wood out at the Catalina terminal. Today, the wood is still there. It's about 125, 130 years old, still used on the deck.

MS: Wow. Talk about some of the traditions, Italian traditions that families and your family go through here. What are those traditions and festivals and annual events that go on?

TA: I don't think I remember all the annual events outside of Christmas, Easter, and all of the big holidays everybody celebrates. But there is an event that we do personally. We still have a family dinner. We work on Saturday and Sundays. So, every Monday night, we have a family dinner. My mother's been doing this from day one. We've been doing it since – at least 60 years that I know of. Our families still come. Our extended families come. There's anywhere from 20 to 30 people that come every Monday night to this dinner. That's really something that –

MS: What happens at that dinner? Are there any traditions? I understand there is a special kind of ravioli that – tell me about that.

TA: No. The ravioli making is, once a year, we make raviolis.

MS: Okay. Tell me about that.

TA: That's the first Tuesday or Wednesday after Thanksgiving. There are about 8 or 10 people that come down. We all pitch in. Everybody has their own job. I'm the dough maker. Somebody else is the dough roller. Somebody else is the stuffing person. The other one is the

person that actually rolls the rolling pin that has the notches cut out for the ravioli. Somebody else cuts them. Somebody else boxes them. It's almost like an assembly line. We've been doing this once a year for many, many years. Then everybody gets to take – whoever came and participated gets to take ravioli. We do about 100 dozen in a day. Everybody gets to take raviolis home with them. Of course we take the lion's share because my mother does all the cooking all the time. We freeze them. We have them on Christmas day and hopefully once or twice more during the year [laughter].

MS: What do you stuff them with?

TA: Actually, I have no idea [laughter]. My mother makes the stuffing. She comes down here. She's 84 years old. She still works like a horse, [laughter] unbelievable.

MS: A lot of what this is about is trying to get a sense of what this San Pedro – growing up here, knowing this place, people want to know what this place is. What is it to you? What does San Pedro – what does the harbor mean to you?

TA: San Pedro, like I said before, is a very tight, close, warm community. Everybody knows each other. Everybody knows everybody. If you need help, you could raise your hand. You get help in a hot minute. I don't know other communities that have that, but I know this one does. There isn't much more I can say about it. It's just a great place to be.

MS: Perfect. That was great.

TA: But it's the truth though. It really is.

FS: Well, there is no reason to –

MS: So, I got your picture. That is good. All right.

[end of transcript]