Name of Interviewee: Kevin Blodger
Date of Interview: September 4, 2020
Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
Length of Interview: 01:11:38 minutes

Theresa McCulla: Okay. So, it's, September 4, 2020. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I'm interviewing Kevin Blodger, co-owner and director of brewing operations at Union Craft Brewing in Baltimore, Maryland. I'm at my home in Washington, D.C., and Kevin is at his home in Timonium, Maryland. This interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in the United States. Um, so, Kevin, uh, to start at the beginning, when and where were you born?

Kevin Blodger: Uh, I was born actually in, in Baltimore County, Maryland. Uh, and, uh, a long time ago. July 29th, uh, 1976.

TM: And what are your parents' names? And what did they do while you were growing up?

KB: Uh, so, my father and I share the same first name. My full name is John Kevin Blodger. He's John Dawson Blodger. Um, my mother's name is Arteria Blodger. Um, and my mother, when I was born, was a stay-at-home mother. Um, but she had worked, I think up until the point I was, I was born, Um, worked from [unintelligible] time at a time. Um, and, had done various other kinds of stuff. And then settled into a role of a homemaker when I was born. My father was in human relations, uh, for several companies. Uh, he, he started at, um, at Bendix at the time. And then moved through and finally retired, uh, as a vice president of human resources at National Geographic.

00:01:21 TM: And, uh, and so, where did you grow up?

KB: I grew up in Northern Virginia in, uh, Herndon, Virginia. It's now called, they call it Oak Hill now. But when I grew up, it was Herndon.

TM: And, uh, what would you, what would you describe the neighborhood where you grew up? And, um, your general experiences as a kid?

KB: I mean, we lived, I grew up in suburbia. Um, I lived on the end of a street with a cul-de-sac. Um, I didn't, my brothers and sisters are all older than me. My parents had married other people before they got married. So, that I technically have brothers and sisters, but they're all about twenty years older than me. So, I kind of grew up as an only child. Um. We lived a good life, you know? My dad traveled a lot for work. We got to travel with him a lot. Um, so I got to see all these cool places as a young man. Um, and, uh, my, my life was fun growing up. Uh, yeah, I went to Oakton High School. I ran track there for four years. And, uh, was a pretty straight kid. I didn't drink or smoke in high school or any of that kind of stuff. And, uh, just hung out with my friends and had a good time.

00:02:14 TM: And um, you mentioned your travel. What were some of the places where you were able to travel?

KB: Uh, we went to Hawaii. We went to Oahu one time for a work conference. Um, San Antonio, Texas, I remember going to as a little boy and getting some cowboy boots. Um, we, all over the, all over the country we got to go. My dad was president of the, uh, Society for Human Resource Management. At the time it was called ASPA, the American Society of Personnel Administrators. So, he was the first black president there in 1979, so I can remember being like a little boy and we would fly first class all these places. And I thought that's what life was gonna be like the rest of my life. [Chuckles] We would get to go to these things and kind of be catered to. So, he was president for about a year. And I just have these fond memories of going pretty much everywhere he went. ASPA had a meeting, and we had to travel to, we went with them. Um, and that kind of continued as he, you know, started working for, uh, he worked for the Administrative Association of America. So that they would have these conventions every year and we would get to travel to the conventions with them. And at some point when he worked for, uh, for Bendix, which became AlliedSignal, every year they would have these kind of work conferences that we would get to travel with. So, we went to so many cool places.

00:03:14 TM: And, um, would you say, did you feel like you were kind of learning lessons about business? Or, um, you know, seeing his career, did it have an impact on you in addition to the travel?

KB: I think indirectly it did now. When I was a kid, I wanted to be so different from my parents, than they were. I felt my parents were so straight laced and [coughs] and kind of like a, they didn't want to rock the boat. And I, and I felt I kinda grew up, uh, in the, you know, late eighties and the, and the early nineties, I was a kid. And the kids on my street listened to punk rock, so I started to listen to punk rock. And, uh, you know, you see Fugazi play these shows in D.C. and then you kinda, I felt that it was time for this revolution. It's kind of wild to see it now, it's really kind of happening, when in the eighties it was bands playing and people talking about it. But there was never this kind of mobilization. But I always thought that, like, my parents were too straight laced, and like, they grew up during the Civil Rights era. They had been, just, you know, my dad was born in 1933 and my mom 1935. So, they grew up through all of this. But they didn't. And then my dad was very proud of what he had achieved as a black man in America. But, and, and supported the Civil Rights cause fully. I'm not trying to say that at all. But, there was also this kind of, like, don't rock the boat and you'll, you'll succeed. You know? You gotta, you gotta play the game almost. You know? It was always, you know, kids my age, and, and when kids now [unintelligible] you gotta be twice as good to get the same thing. I mean, and that was definitely in my house a lot. And my dad lived that, that ethos. And he had to work as hard as he could to get where he was at, you know? And to me it always just kind of seemed like, I don't want to sit behind a desk and wear a suit every day, and, it's, I, that just never appealed to me.

00:04:51 TM: Um, did I read in an, in, uh, I believe in an article you wrote, did he work in the brewing industry in Detroit? Or?

KB: Yeah, he did for a summer in college, I think, to put himself through school. Uh, he went to Wayne State University and started as a chemistry major. And, uh, I think one, he would work in a, he worked in a morgue. And I think he worked in a brewery. And he worked at the post office. You know, he was one of those guys. And like, I was 16, and like, I was working eight hours a week at, at Pizza Hut. He was like, "When I was your age, I was!" You know. But he had all these jobs. Yeah, he worked at a brewery, he

worked at the morgue, he worked at the post office. Um, and I think he might've been a teacher's assistant as well in college.

TM: Do you remember which brewery it was?

KB: No. I don't. And he, and, we actually just moved him up here. Me and [unintelligible]. Him and my mom moved up here this week. Uh, so I'll have to ask him. I can't remember the name of the brewery now. But, it was kind of like in passing. "I worked on a bottling line at a brewery." And he never, he never really told stories about it. It's just something he'd done.

TM: Yeah. I'd be so curious to know more about, um.

KB: Yeah. 'Cause I remember he, he, the, one of the stories he told me that they could drink as much beer as they wanted, but you couldn't get drunk. That was the thing. That you can drink, but don't get drunk. And I don't know how that works, but. [Chuckles]

00:05:57 TM: Um, now when you were growing up, you mentioned your parents were straight laced. Um, was beer part of social life at home, would you say?

KB: Yeah, I mean, my parents drank alcohol. Um, you know. As my mom got older, she kinda stopped. And my dad kinda was, you know, he maintained for both of them. [Laughs] He, yeah he would drink beer. But never anything special. It was like, I think the first beer I ever had was like skunky Michelob that had probably been in our basement for like eight months. You know? And, um, so yeah, he drank, you know, beer or liquor. All that kind of stuff.

00:06:28 TM: And, um, what do you remember in general about what you ate and drank growing up? Um, thinking about, you know, perhaps your palate being shaped at an early age.

KB: We ate a lot of kind of southern food. My mom made gumbo all the time. I have a lot of memories of her making gumbo. She would make this like Muenster pie, which is my favorite thing on, on special occasions. It was just. [Chuckles] It's funny. It was just like a, a thing of Muenster cheese with sausage in it. And it was delicious. Um, but, you know, she made chitterlings. I would never eat any 'cause I thought they smelled too bad. Um, a lot of cornbread. Very southern. My mom was born in New Orleans. My father was born in Tennessee. They both moved to Michigan in their teen years. But they were both kind of very heavily influenced by southern cooking. So, um, we would have, you know, collard greens. Thanksgiving it was turkey. We would have collard greens. We would have yams. Um, we would have these. My mom was an amazing cook. Um, it's funny the things that, you know, my parents are getting older now. And, and, and it's kinda weird to see them fading away in some ways. And, and one of the things that I miss most is that my mom is such a great cook. But she's not physically able to cook like she used to back in the day. Um, and I, I miss that. And I've tried to take that mantle up in, in my house and try to cook a little bit more. I'm learning how to cook better, so that I could, that, that's such a strong memory and such a fond memory of holidays and like, we would, you know. At Christmas, my parents had a whole different set of silverware and dishes they would bring out. We would decorate the entire house. And I could remember, like, coming home from college one time one year for Christmas and my parents hadn't decorated the house. And I was just so crestfallen that like, man, that, this is like, everything, I mean, when I was a kid. And now they're not doing it. Um, and so, but

yeah, meals in my, at my house, like those, those big meals. 'Cause a lot of times it would just be the three of us. I mean, my mom would still make this elaborate meal. And it was, it was such a great time. It's something I miss a lot.

TM: Nice memories.

KB: Yeah.

00:08:17 TM: And, uh, and so, related to school, where did you go to school? And, uh, which subjects did you feel drawn to?

KB: So, I, you know, for high school I went to Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia. Um, and then there I was, I was, I, and still am, as a politics and kind of government geek in a lot of ways. Um, but, you know, as I got older I started to think, like, what's my, my plan? And I didn't really know what I wanted to do. Right? I liked government and history, but I didn't want that to be a job. I didn't see what I could do with that. But, as my dad got into, worked, started working at the Newspaper Association, started getting exposed to the NABJ Convention every year. And, going to, and I was just like, man, this is a cool life. And I was always a, an avid reader of the *Washington Post*. It got delivered to our house every day. And I read it every day. At least the sports section and some of the front page every day. Um, and so it, it was kind of appealing to me to try and go and like cover, and again, change the world maybe, by being a reporter and, and, and writing about government. And like, and growing up in D.C. [Unintelligible] D.C. kids have this weird perspective of the government, of that lifestyle. And so, I, you know, I really thought maybe I can write and effect change and this, and what it, and this system that I don't think is fair to everybody.

00:09:23 TM: And, great. And so, um, is that what you studied in college then?

KB: So, I started as a journalism major. Uh, but quickly got into college and got more into the lifestyle of college and the antics of college. And the Maryland journalism program was a really prestigious one. And I got to the point where, they were, kept saying to me, like, "You've gotta, you've gotta work harder if you want to stay in this program." And I didn't know if I wanted to work harder at that time. Um, and so, I switched my major to English, kind of thinking, I can still be a writer, um, but I'll just be an English major now without this pressure of the J school.

TM: And so, um, what years were those? When you were?

KB: I was at Maryland from, I should be a doctor by now, I was at Maryland from like '94 to 2000. Um, I never finished my degree. Um, I just got to a point where, uh, I was taking this money out every year to pay for school, and, uh, and now that I'm still paying back. And, uh. [Chuckles] I got to a semester, I was like, man, I just don't feel this anymore. And I think I had two semesters left. I was like, I'm gonna take a semester off and see what happens. And I just never ended up going back.

00:10:20 TM: And then, so, what was your early career path like? And when did you first become interested in beer and brewing?

KB: So, I kinda drifted for a while. I worked at a liquor store in College Park. Um, and, I had an internship for this, I don't remember the name of the company, but they made

these tech pamphlets. So, you would get these, you know, it was like [unintelligible] like DSL Direct. And my, you know, it was like all these industry pamphlets. So, I got an internship there for six months. And worked there and didn't enjoy it. I had to wear a suit every day. And it was really just kinda like, ugh. I don't wanna do this. And so, I just kinda floated around and did odd jobs. Didn't work for a period of time. Just kinda scraped by. Uh, and then I took a job at a liquor store, uh, still in College Park, called Cherry Hill Liquors. Um, and that's kinda where I discovered. Well, no, I, I should, I should go back just a second. That's not where I discovered craft beer. I discovered craft beer kinda in college. We would drink crappy beer all the time, you know. We would, you could go to the liquor store down the street, Town Hall, and get a, a, a fifteen pack of forty's for fifteen bucks. So, you get everybody to throw a dollar in and you get a forty. And we did that for a long time. But I never really liked it. I didn't like the beer. We just drank it to get drunk, right? And then, I remember my roommates, Scott Stringer, who I'm still friends with. I lived with him for four years in college. We, his sister was older, and she had gotten into good beer. And I remember him saying, "We should stop doing this. Like, let's save our money and buy good beer. There's good beer out there that we can buy." And good beer first became like Heineken. And then it was Guinness. And then, I don't know what happened after that. I can't think. The only brand I can specifically think to that I remember drinking and really looking forward to was, uh, Pete's Wicked Christmas Ale. Every year when that would come out I was really excited that that beer would come out. But I do have these snatches of memory of, like, the Village Pump, which is like a store in Greenbelt. We would get Firestone Walker and then they would get 3 Floyds. Uh, 3 Floyds used to come to Maryland back then. And I remember getting like Alpha King and getting Victory Beers and like, Brimstone from Baltimore. Their Big Ale, uh, which is this really, if you think about it now, it was this really disgusting beer. I didn't know anything at the time, but this is beer they would just, they would brew it, and they would, just, they would turn the temperature off and just let it ferment [unintelligible]. It's got all these really, nasty fusel alcohols, and, and, but, but I loved it because it was strong and it got me drunk. But it, and it tasted interesting. Um, so, that's kind of what brought me into like drinking good beer. Um, but I would, I drank good beer. But I was never that passionate about it. I would buy Sierra, I'd buy whatever. Um, and then I started working at this liquor store called Cherry Hill Liquors. And the guy there had all these homebrew kits. Um, but nobody was buying them. So, I asked him one day, "Hey, could I, can I get an employee discount on one of these." And then he just let me take it. And so, I brought it home. I got Charlie Papazian's book, uh, *The New Complete Joy of Home Brewing*. Which he had at the store, too. And I read it. And I was like, man, this is really interesting. Well, I'm gonna try this. Uh, so, I drove to Maryland Homebrew in Columbia. Um, bought a, bought a homebrew kit. It was a Porter. Um, and I brought it back and I, and I made this Porter, you know. It was at, an extract kit. Um, made it in the kitchen in my apartment where I lived in Greenbelt. And I made labels. I got little "Hello, my name is" stickers and I, I had dreads at the time, so I drew this little stick figure dread guy and called it Greenbelt Porter. And I bottled it. And my, my roommate, Matt, uh, still lives in the DC area, and, and I tried it. And it wasn't bad. We had some friends come over and they tried it. And they, it wasn't bad. You know. It wasn't great. But it wasn't bad. And so, we were gonna throw a big Christmas party that year. So, I brewed another beer, Christmas Ale. Um, where I think I spiced it. And we served it at the party and everybody liked it. And I was real, I just remember being really jazzed that, like, I don't know, I made this beer, I mean, and people are actually digging it. You know? And like, people drank the beer. I think we drank that all that night. Um, and at that same time, one of my best friends from college started working at Rock Bottom in Bethesda. I'm sorry this is such a long meandering [unintelligible].

TM: No, it is [unintelligible].

00:14:02 KB: But, uh, but she started working in, at Rock Bottom in Bethesda. So, I would go there every Monday 'cause it was dollar pints. And then she'd just give me a bunch of free beers, too. She was a bartender there. Um, and so, I remember going there and you'd see the brewhouse. And I met the brewer, who's still the brewer there, Geoff Lively. And, uh, I would talk to him occasionally. And they just, I was like, wow, this guy's job is making beer. This can really be a job. And, uh, so, I would, kept going to Rock Bottom. And I would talk to Geoff. And I was homebrewing. And I was starting to read anything I could get my hands on about beer. I was, started to read at that time. This is probably about 2001, when I, this happened. So, I'm, you know, I'm reading all these, you know, all the brewers publication books. The, and all, you know, about different beer styles and just going to Maryland Homebrew all the time. And, and getting recipe kits and trying to make stuff. Um, I met my wife in 2002. And around that same time, my parents bought me an All-Grain Homebrew Kit for Christmas or my birthday one year. And so, I started doing all grain brews. And I was hooked. Um, and I loved it. Uh, at that same time, my friend, Robin, said, "Hey, they just, the Chop House in D.C., they're looking for an assistant brewer. Why don't you apply for the job? I'm pretty sure, you know, you talk to Geoff, and Geoff will talk to the brewer there." His name was Jason [unintelligible]. "He'll, uh, he can get you a job." So, I applied for the job and I got it. Um, and I loved, I loved every aspect of it, except working with the brewer. He was a very, he was a good brewer. But he wasn't a good teacher. And he had very high expectations. And I came in super green, and I couldn't live up to his expectations. I made mistakes. I made dumb mistakes that I see every new brewer that I bring into the industry now make. But he didn't have the patience for it. Um, so I lasted there I think about five to six months, and then he let me go. He was just like, "It's just not working out." And I just remember being devastated. Like, crying, "Please don't fire me." Um, but he had made his mind up. And, uh, so I left there. And I remember, I went to every brewery in D.C. that day. Every brewpub, which was probably two of them. Uh, Gordon Biersch and, can't remember what else was there. There was, there might have been one other brewpub in D.C., or, Tap City. And, uh, neither one of them were hiring. So, I kinda like floated into it, you know, scrounge around for about six, seven months. Um, and another friend of mine from college, her sister said, "Hey, I work at this school for kids in emotional disabilities that can't go to public school. We're looking for Crisis Specialists. You need a job. You get health insurance. Like, you should take this job." And so, I went and applied for that job. It was called Pathway Schools and they operated out of, in Montgomery County, and they were run by a church. Um, and I worked there for two years. Um, and that's when I, that's where I met my wife. She was a teacher there. Um, but in the back of my mind, I was like, this is cool and all. But I really wanna be a brewer. That's all I wanted to do. That's all I could think about, was like, how do I get back into this industry? Um, so I worked one year. I started there in like, in April, or, or May. It was, it must have been, no, I started there in like March, because I remember I had to ask permission to take off to go to the Final Four to see the Terps play in 2002. And so, we, uh, I worked there for that year. Worked summer school. And then I worked there the whole next school year. But it got to the end of the school year, and there was a lot of weird stuff with the school that they were doing. Um, these were kids were from broken homes. Very poor kids. And that, like, fringes of society. Their parents were drug addicts. And not all of them. Some of them had great parents and these were just kids that had these emotional problems. But a lot of them had way deeper issues than the school could really address. And the school got paid on the number of kids that they could get back into the public school. Um, and

so, kids were kinda forced through the program in a way that never made me comfortable. Uh, but my wife, who was a teacher, became very passionate about the students. Couldn't accept anymore. So, she said, "I'm, I'm not coming back next year." At the same time, the school came to me and said, "Hey, we really like you. And we'll give you the money to go back to college, finish your degree, and we want you to become a principal on our school system." Um, at the same time, I called a brewery, Frederick Brewing in Frederick, Maryland, which is now, uh, [unintelligible], uh, now, now Flying Dog. And I said, "Hey, are you guys hiring?" They had just fired a guy that week. And they were hiring. So, I went up for an interview and it was weird. I don't think they thought I was, I don't think they knew I was black. Um, I got there and you could tell everybody was kinda surprised. Said, hey this black guy is here applying for a job. Um, and, and, and in retrospect I think it made them hesitant, 'cause I think I had two more interviews before I got hired. And I saw several people come through there and have a fifteen minute interview and get hired right away. Um, but I had to go, come back. And the guy that was running the place at the time, and had, and, and I can kinda get into this in a second, but I'll go, so anyways, so I told the school, "Hey, I'm not gonna do this." Me and my wife both left the school at the same time. Um, she got a job working, I can't even remember, she, oh, working for the, uh, American Academy of HIV Medicine. Um, and

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I took this job working at Frederick Brewing, where I was making nine dollars an hour. Um, when I went to Frederick, they were in a lot of trouble. They were in receivership. Um, a husband and wife had opened, and, uh, opened Frederick Brewing, you know, six years earlier I believe. And they had come up with this beer called Hempen Ale that became this huge success overnight. Everyone around the country was talking about it. They had put pot leaves on it, and then the TTB came out and said, "Hey, you can't advertise with that. You can't make this look like this. It's gotta completely change." And it killed the brand. They had invested so much money in doing this new brewery in downtown Frederick. Uh, or, or not in downtown Frederick, in an industrial park in Frederick. And they couldn't keep up with any, anymore. And they went into bankruptcy. Um, a guy named, uh, Jim Snyder, I believe, then bought the brewery. He was from Cleveland, Ohio. And he was gonna turn our brewery into the next Sam Adams. So, he brought in all these Vice Presidents and put all this money into it, and ran it into the ground even more. He went into bankruptcy, and they were put into receivership. The receivers then, from what I've been told, said, this is just hearsay from me, um, ended up siphoning a lot of the money that should've gone to the company, into their own kind of bank accounts or whatever. Um, I'll never forget being there one day, and a guy whose wife had gotten approved for, um [unknown] I can't remember the word. She had gotten approved by insurance. The receivers cancelled everybody’s insurance and didn't tell anyone. She went through with the surgery, and I remember on Valentine's Day of like 2005, him and his wife having to go to court to file for bankruptcy. Um, because they couldn't afford to pay for [unknown]. Um, but Frederick Brewing was kind of where I got my true introduction into brewing. They were so broke, they would brew anybody's beer that could pay them. So, we were brewing Terrapin Rye Pale Ale at the time. We were brewing Penn Pilsner. We were brewing Thirsty Dog out of Ohio. We brewed this company from San Francisco came out, and they were gonna look at caffeinated beer. And I can remember rolling kegs of powdered caffeine mixed with beer down the hall to pump into a tank of, uh, of beer. Uh, Little Kings out of Ohio. We were brewing all that beer. Uh, [unintelligible], another Cincinnati beer. So, we were doing all of these different beers and all these different brewers were coming in. And I'm seeing all these different techniques. Um, and one of the things that I made sure I did was that if a brewer came and he was hanging out in the brewmaster's office, I tried to hang out around here and kinda just hear what they were talking about and get a feel for, like, what being in the

industry was like. And how people talked to each other. And how people interact with each other. And it, it was just, it was like, it was heaven for me. It sucked, the job was hot, and it was steamy, and I'd be there sometimes 'til four in the morning. Other times I had to get up at 4:45 in the morning to get to work. But I loved everything about it. Um, except the pay. The pay sucked. [Chuckles] We weren't, I wasn't making much money at all. But it was just a fun time. And, I learned so much about beer and about production brewing. Um, I had gotten married in 2005. And in 2006, it was 2006 I knew I needed to make more money. I started to look around to see if I could find a job someplace else. Um, through a buddy of mine, um, from college, hooked me up with another guy that was working at Cap City. They needed a brewer in Baltimore, Maryland. So, I took that job in early 2006. Um, and started working in, in Baltimore. Um, I was there for about a year. Caught wind that that location was gonna go under. They had been kind of badly
00:22:00 mismanaged financially. Um, and so I needed another job. And so, I called Jason Oliver, who's now the brewmaster at Devil's Backbone, but at the time was a regional brewer for Gordon Biersch, he worked for the D.C. location. Said, "Hey man, I need a job. Can you help me out?" And he said, "Uh, well I got two Gordon Biersch's opening. One in Rockville, Maryland, and one in Bolling Brook, Illinois. I just hired Jim Sobczak yesterday to be the head brewer in Rockville. But if you wanna go to Illinois, I can probably get you that job." Um, my wife's parents had just split up around that time. Um, after, you know, twenty, thirty something years of marriage. She was pretty devastated by it. She was happy to get out of the area and take a break for a while. Uh, so we moved to, uh, Illinois in April of 2007. Um, I opened that brewpub, uh, from, you know I was there from the time construction was almost finished, installation of the brewery, and we started brewing the beer. Um, and I was there until October of 2010. Um, I came back
00:22:54 home because we started talking about Union. Uh, Adam Benesch, is one of my partners at Union, one of my best friends from college. Uh, we kept in touch, you know, this whole, the whole time. And, when I was in Illinois, we would send beer that he could get in Maryland and I couldn't get here, and vice versa. Back and forth to each other. And I think in about 2008, he was like, "Hey, I think it's time for a brewery to open in Baltimore." I think we'd just read maybe about DC Brau when it started to open. Or there was talk of something. And, and nothing was happening in, in Baltimore. And in fact, we didn't even say Baltimore at the time. We talked about maybe Catonsville. Let's open a brewery in Catonsville. And, uh, he met John Zerivitz, our third partner around that time. Or reconnected with him. And I think they knew each other from the Jewish community in Baltimore. Uh, John was very interested in, in being a part of it as well. So, the three of us kind of came together and we wrote a business plan. And in 2010, I believe, we flew out to San Francisco for the Craft Brewers Conference, uh, out there, to kinda see, can we really do this? It was weird for me because I was there officially as a Gordon Biersch employee, but I'm also trying to plan to open a new brewery. And at the other time, I had, a guy in Baltimore, I'd been advertising for a brewmaster. So, I was like, I said, let me meet with this guy, too, just in case Union doesn't work out, I had this other option. Um, and so, I met with those guys, uh, I'm still friends with those guys. I see them at the brewery all the time. But their plan kind of blew up. I think was a, with two partners, had a difference of opinion on how things should be run. And they ended up splitting up and that didn't happen. But we left that conference that year feeling pretty confident that, hey, we can raise this money and we can do this. Um, so Adam kind of comes from the financial world. He, he's a CPA. Uh, he always gets mad when I say that. But he was a CPA. He's, and then worked for a venture capital firm called, um, JMI. And so had learned kind of the business world. They knew how to do these dealings and raise money and this kind of stuff. John kind of came, which is a very creative guy, he's always been in the art and poster scene and, and the music scene. And was working at T. Rowe Price

and feeling very unsatisfied. And so, John kind of came as our marketing role, and then I was kind of the beer end. So, the three of us wrote this plan. We raised eight-hundred-thousand dollars initially. Um, and we found this spot in Maryland. John and Adam had looked all over the city for places and couldn't find the right place. They found this place and immediately they thought it had the right feel. I came up, took a look at it, um, it was seventy-two-hundred square feet at the time. And I figured, hey, that, that'll work for us. It was, we should try to pursue this. So, we signed a lease. We still hadn't raised all the money we thought we needed. So, we signed the lease there. Uh, we were moving in. We did some demolition. They [unintelligible] knocked down. There was a, a mezzanine kind of level. We knocked that down and did that ourselves. And then we brought people in one day. So, I brought a jockey box up from work. I brought some of my beer from Gordon Biersch and served that. And [unintelligible] growlers. So, that people could see that, like, hey, I knew what I was doing. I knew how to make these beers. I had won my first Great American Beer Festival medal in 2007. Um, and then won another one in 2009. So, you kinda had that to talk about as well. Um.

00:25:43 TM: What were the beers? What were the styles of the beers you won?

KB: I think both those years it was, both 2007, 2009, are from my Altbier. Um, and so, I won a bronze. I think I won two bronzes. A bronze and a bronze. Or a bronze and a silver, maybe. Um. But I hadn't gotten that gold yet, which is really frustrating. Um, and so, I brought, put, brought these beers up. These people came through and, like, you know, we kinda got to hand sell them what we were trying to do and talk about our brand. And we, we got [unintelligible] allowed us to raise the final amount of money that we. We thought 800k would have us, would be great for a year. We wouldn't need any more money. Um, Adam's father-in-law is a, uh, he remodels homes. So, he kind of operated as our general contractor. Um, and then we started bidding out everything, and, every, every estimate that we had was double or triple what we thought it was gonna be. So, we ended up spending that eight-hundred-thousand initially just kind of on our build out. And, and getting the brewery up and running. Um, and then when we started buying ingredients and stuff like that, Adam had to foot the brewery a decent amount of money to keep us going at the time. Which I'm glad we had Adam for that, because if it had been up to me, I wouldn't have any money to foot the brewery, you know? I'm just a simple artisan. But. [Laughs] So, we, uh, we, we were able to that. And then he was like, we need to take a loan out. So, we took out like a hundred and forty thousand dollar line of credit. And that kinda helped us maintain. And so, we bought kegs with that. We did other stuff. And then we paid that off. We didn't have to borrow any more money for a really long time, until we started the new project. Um, that's kind of how everything started. Yeah.

00:27:11 TM: But, so, when you secured that big loan, um, was it, was it at a point during the brewing, during this, the kind of wave of craft beer where you felt like it was, um, challenging to secure that big of a loan? Or did, did the investors immediately say, "Okay, I see what you're doing. You got this, you know, microbrewing, craft brewing operation. We're happy to invest."

KB: It was, it was relatively easy because of Adam's connections in the business world. And family connections, as well. Um, you know, so, he knew three or four people that were willing to give us a hundred and fifty thousand dollars like it was nothing, you know? Like, it was, it was really interesting to me. And it's always kind of shocked me, by like, this is just how I look at money different than people that really have money, is that, like, our investors have never been like, "When are you gonna pay us back?" There's

never been any pressure on. In fact, we paid back, you know, the first fourth of it about a year ago before all this stuff happened. And people weren't as excited as I thought they would be. Like, I thought they would be like, "Yeah, we're getting our money back!" They were just kinda like, "Eh." Like, alright. You know? And so, I, it, it kinda just speaks I guess to the, like, you know. I grew up well off. My parents were definitely upper middle class. But, I never felt rich in my life. And, to, to interact with rich people and see how they kinda, money doesn't matter to them, is very interesting in a, in a lot of ways. Um, but, [unintelligible] to answer your question, yes, it was very, it was very kind of easy to get the money. It was easier than I ever in my life thought it would be to raise almost a million dollars, you know?

00:28:31 TM: Um, and, if you don't mind, I wanted to ask that, um, a few basic questions kind of leading up to the founding of Union Craft. Like, when you were [unintelligible] to brew in the industry, I mean, you, you mentioned this just kind of consuming excitement about being in a brewery and, you know, what, what specifically excited you? Was it the whole process of brewing? Or, um, you know, how would you describe your excitement?

KB: It, it was kind of just everything. It was just that I'm in this industry, and like I'm using my hands, and like, you know, I had always been told as a kid that you're smart, you're smart, you're smart. But like, when it came time to, like, do it, I just could never motivate myself to, like, care about school, or, you know, care about college. Like, and this was something that, like, I cared about. And it, it mattered to me. And then, and that's what I think was so exhilarating. I, I had this, like, ah ha moment. And like I found what I want to do. You know? And, uh, so, it was just, you know, being in there and smelling the mash, and seeing the process, and, you know, what I, what was weird about Frederick Brewing, even more than when the Chop House, was that there was a lot of guys there that, like, they didn't care about beer. This was just their factory job that they came to, and they worked the bottling line, um. Even, you know, the guy that was this, this brewmaster, this guy Mike Atkins, who I've lost touch with, he didn't really care about beer. But he cared about working hard and doing a good job. And because of that, he was a very good brewer. And he was, he was somebody really to look up. And Dan Maerzluft, he was a brewmaster there, he was like me. He was a beer geek. He had gone to the Siebel Academy. And he loved beer. But not many people that worked at Frederick loved beer. But a lot of them cared about working hard. And that was what kind of motivated me and made me, like, not wanna slack off, is because I didn't want to disappoint these guys, 'cause these guys worked hard for not that much money. They were working class people that didn't live great lives. But, they cared about the level of their work and the quality of their work. You know, it was that, it was very important to them. And so, that, it made it important to me. Um, and so, when I started at Frederick, I started as a cellarman. I was cleaning tanks and, and, you know, doing crap stuff. And, um, then I progressed to working in the centrifuge and had to learn how to run the centrifuge before you could brew. And, uh, so, Frederick had a centrifuge before it was cool to have one. I re-, I remember there was a centrifuge. Frederick had one, you know, this is in 2004? I was working there. And so, they had this big loud centrifuge. You had to wear headphones around. It was huge. And you could filter, you know, two hundred barrels of beer you could filter in, in about, about four hours. And you had to run this machine, and. The one we have now is kind of set it and forget it with some tweaking. But this one you had to tweak all the time. You had to be going in there and spraying down the drain. And so, it was, that, it was just cool. Everything in the process was cool to me. Um, I had a couple of like, you know, bad times at Frederick where, like, once I blew a tank up on the [unintelligible]. Superbowl Sunday. And, uh, what we used to do at Frederick, which was

so unsafe, but this is what everybody did so I did, too, is we would carb the tank until the PRV blew, until the pressure relief valve blew, which is like the last line of defense, and the tank blowing up. And so, it was really dumb that we would let the tank get to that point. But we did it. And, uh, I remember I'd gone in for weekend duty on a Sunday. And I, I had been in, just a bad day in general. And I remember, like, I couldn't get the grain, that truck was coming that day, and I couldn't get the silo to open. Um, and, uh, I had banged my head on something. And I, I called Mike to be, like, "Hey Mike, I'm having all these issues." And he kind of walked me through everything. And I remember I was carbing a tank and I'd gone back into the laboratory to call Mike to kind of thank him for helping me with everything. And all a sudden I heard this big boom! And I ran out into the hallway. Um, and in the hallway was a tidal wave of beer coming down the hall. I was like, what the fuck happened? So, I ran into the, the, the brite tank room, and you could see where the beer, the pressure of the beer had. I ripped the door open, pushed the tank back into the drywall, and knocked the drywall down in front of the tank. And so, I remember being, you know, uh, I called, I called Mike back, told him what happened. I called Dan, the brewmaster. And then I called [unintelligible] the guy that kind of ran the plant. He was this tough ex-Navy Polish guy. Didn't take any bullshit. And he was a real dick. He would, he'll tell you this himself. But, uh, I remember having to call [unintelligible] and being like, "[Unintelligible], this just happened." He just hung up on me. I was like, god dammit. And so, I wait, I'm sitting at work, everybody comes to work, you know. And, and, as it turned out, it wasn't my fault. The guy that had cleaned the tank before hadn't checked the PRV. Um, but it, and hadn't, and had signed off that he had checked. But there was a way they could tell that that hadn't been checked. So, he ended up losing his job. I didn't. But it kinda taught me and everybody that worked there a valuable lesson that what we were doing was dumb. Um, but yeah, I just, I loved being there. I loved every aspect of Frederick. It was just such a great time in my life. It was like, you know, I'd just gotten married and I just fell in love with this girl. And like, it was so, it was just a great time in my life.

00:33:19 TM: And, uh, and so, also in your early career, you, you were in, you know, the metro D.C. area, but then also metro Chicago. Uh, did you, were there differences or similarities between the brewing cultures at that time would you say?

KB: Yeah, there was a ton of differences. I actually, you know, that's another great happenstance in my life, to go to Illinois. At the time, they had this very mature craft beer scene. Um, and becoming involved with these guys, who I'm still really close with to this day. Phil Wymore at Perennial. Uh, Davin Bartosch at, at Wiseacre in Memphis, Tennessee. John Loeffler at Off Color in Chicago. Um, I, I met all these people there. Tracy and Doug Hurst from, from Metro Brewing. And it was just that, it was a, a better scene. The Midwest, they knew craft beer and they did it right. Whereas D.C. had a lot of experienced beer drinkers. Um, you know, they had all the old RFD and Brickskellar events that you would go to. And there'd be the same fifty people at every event. Um, Chicago, it was, it was just part of the culture there. And craft beer was part of the culturing, you know. And it's because of Goose Island and Bell's and all these kind of founders, all these very Midwest breweries that were out there that, like, they had this scene. You go to the Great Taste of the Midwest every year in, in Madison, which is better than the Great American Beer Festival, on mine, like, it's, I think it's the best beer festival in the world. I cannot, haven't been to any other in other countries, but. [Chuckles] That I've been to. I think it's amazing. So, it was just, I, I learned a lot, I learned more about the industry when I was out there. And I made these friends with these really good brewers who I can still rely on to this day when I have a question about

something. I know I have a rolodex of like ten guys that I know from my time in Chicago that I can call that will have experience and, and, and whatever I need experience in.

00:34:54 TM: Why do you think there has been, uh, kind of smaller and slower start to craft beer in the greater D.C. area compared to other major cities?

KB: I think one is cost of living, not that Chicago's that cheap. But it's expensive to live in D.C. And, brewers don't make much money, you know? Um, my best paying job was at Gordon Biersch and that was a kind of a corporate job in a lot of ways. But it [unintelligible] you know? Like, if you wanna be a pro brewer, you've gotta be able to work for little money for a decent amount of time. That's only expanding as there's more and more people in the industry. And as the industry kind of contracts a little bit and, and brewers don't have as much jobs, there's gonna be more experienced brewers that are willing to work for less money. Um, and so I think that's a big part of it. I don't know. It's just. D.C.'s a weird animal. I used to have this friend in college from Miami, and she'd be like, "You think D.C. is such a cool. It's not cool!" But I always thought it was cool because it's the seat of government and it's, it's concerned more about a white collar lifestyle that I think than it is kind of a blue collar place. I, I don't know if that's the real reason, but that's kind of what I think about it. When I think of Chicago is very blue collar and very kind of working class. And beer's a working class thing. And I, it's also a lot of academics. You know? In both places. But in Chicago there's a lot of academics, too. And I think it's kind of just lends itself to drinking more and kind of hanging out and that. And it's not a button-down town. Let’s get a vodka and make a deal kind of town where D.C. isn't a lot of that.

00:36:21 TM: Yeah. Well, that's good. Those are good points. And I think a related question is, um, to what, how, how much would you say Baltimore, does Baltimore see itself as, as completely separate from D.C.? Or, or tied to D.C.? You know, at least in terms of beer? I mean, Baltimore has its own brewing [unintelligible]. Uh.

KB: I think in the beer community, I think there's a connection. I think if you were to ask your average Baltimorean, are they part of D.C. or vice versa, they would say no. I think there's this kind of rivalry, um, that, of attitudes that people in Baltimore think that we're so much cooler than D.C. You know? Where I think people look at D.C. and they think it's a [unintelligible]. You know? I mean, that people in D.C. look at Baltimore and think it's a [unintelligible]. Um, and so, and, and I think people in Baltimore like that. That they think that they have this edge that D.C. doesn't have. But I think the beer scene, we're all kind of very interconnected. You know. Jeff and Mari and Brandon at DC Brau are some of our closest friends. Um, you know Barrett Lauer, who actually lives up here but works down in D.C. Or worked down in D.C., I should say. Or still does. I can't remember where he's at [unintelligible]. Um, Right Proper now. Uh, so still in D.C. But, yeah, so, you, we're all kind of friends and interconnected and kind of feel connected. So, yeah, I think there's a, in the industry, yeah, there's a ton, true connection.

00:37:32 TM: So, when you were planning to open Union Craft, um, and you had these, you know, potential investors coming through, how did you describe your vision for the brewery to them? You know, how, what was your pitch? How did you, who'd you?

KB: You know our.

TM: [unintelligible] to be?

KB: Our pitch was kind of that we were gonna be this community focused brewery that would make approachable beers that a novice could drink, but a beer g-, a beer geek could appreciate. Um, and that we were gonna, and just kind of focused on being Baltimore's brewery. That's kind of what we set out to be and hope to achieve one day. Like, when you think Baltimore, you don't think Natty Boh, you think about Union. You know? The same way, I was very influenced by, by two breweries in Chicago. Um, Goose Island, um, [unintelligible], was Chicago, and probably still is in a lot of ways, Chicago's brewery. Four times a year they would have these dock parties where they would just open the dock up and they would just serve beer off the back of the dock. And they were powerful enough to, that they felt like a big guy, even before Bud bought them. But they still felt homey. It still felt like when you're drinking a Goose Island, you're drinking Chicago, you know? It, and, and that always kind of stood out in my mind. And Half Acre in Chicago was another brewery that I loved. When they first opened, they were in like, I'd say like Lincoln, I can't remember what neighborhood they're in now. But, they were just this brewery that you walked into off the street. I always loved that. There was a Jewel Osco, which is like a Giant out there, across the street from it. There was a couple of restaurants near there. But it was just in a neighborhood. And you could just walk into the brewery. At the time they didn't even have a taproom. You could go in there and get beer to go, get your growler filled. Um, but it just had this community feel to it. And I always wanted our brewery to be able in some location where foot traffic could just walk up to the brewery. And it, and, and was just part of the neighborhood. Um, and, and, and they had [unintelligible] beer called Daisy Cutter, uh, which really influenced what Duckpin became, um, because I loved Daisy Cutter. It was, it was drinkable, it was approachable, but it was still very hoppy. Um, but it just, it felt special to me. And I wanted Duckpin to kind of feel that same way.

00:39:30 TM: Great. Um, and so, what styles of beer does Union Craft brew? Uh, or, and or what is your current lineup? However you wanna answer that?

KB: So, we make, uh, we make five year-round beers. Uh, we make Duckpin Pale Ale. Um, Skipjack Pilsner, Anthem Golden Ale, uh, Blackwing Lager, and Divine IPA. Um, and when we first started, we didn't want to do a year-round IPA. So, Duckpin was kind of our answer there. It was gonna be hoppy enough to be, you know, a, a beer, a [unintelligible] beer, a super hoppy pale ale kind of thing. Um, and then, uh, we also made an Altbier called Balt Alt that we since discontinued. Um, people don't like the word "Altbier." They don't, they don't get Altbiers. Uh, yet. Uh, I think it's such a good style, but, uh, it just didn't sell well for us. And it felt like, you know, why hold on to something. So, we, my plan is, we just brought my old ten barrel system that I brewed on in [unknown] Rockville. Um, [unintelligible] installed that at the brewery as our pilot system. So, I brewed Balt probably just for the taproom. Um, but, so we started with those two beers. An Altbier and a Pale Ale. Then our third beer was Blackwing. Our black lager that we still make. And our fourth beer was Old Pro, which is our summer seasonal, which is a German style Gose. So, I think all of our beers are kind of, they're complex. I hope they're flavorful to people. But they're all pretty approachable. All our core beers. And that's kind of our mission. I wanted to make good, approachable, drinkable beer.

00:40:55 TM: And, uh, you mentioned wanting a location that had foot traffic. Um, what is the neighborhood like where your brewery is? And, and what's your [unintelligible].

KB: So, with our original location, we're kind of at the, in the neighborhood of Hampden. Um, and we're kind of in between the avenue, which is kind of a little, 36th Street, which is the, bunch of shops and restaurants. Um, and not really within walking distance of the avenue, but, kind of. If you're up to it. Um, but, and then down the street from us is Woodberry Kitchen. Um, and there's some art, artist's studios and some galleries down there. So that, the original brewery was kind of in that neighborhood. So, it wasn't a ton of foot traffic to say. People most, mostly drove. But, if you were going to, you know, Birroteca, let's say, which is a pizza place down the street from us, you could kind of walk. Like, everything was kind of spaced out. But, it had the feel close enough. The light rail was right there. So, you could take the light rail and walk home from right, walk [unintelligible]. That was really important. Um, where we're at now, uh, we've kind of moved over to a neighborhood called Medfield, which is a block and a half over from the old brewery. So, kind of in the same location. Um, and we're down in kind of a valley now. So, you kind of walk down into the brewery. Drive down, down this hill and into the brewery. Um, but the neighborhood is a very kind of, uh, it's part of the white [unintelligible] in Baltimore. Uh, but a very kind of working class part of that. So, um, you know, I believe a lot of people from Appalachia came up to Hampden, uh, to work at the mills, uh, back. And London Fog used to have a, a textile mill there. And, uh, so, it's very kind of a, it's a majority white area of, uh, poverty. At least it seems to me. Um, that's trying to gentrify. Um, but hasn't gotten there a hundred percent yet.

00:42:31 TM: And so, um, in terms of the process of recipe formulation, uh, at Union Craft, how does that work? And, um, how have your beers evolved over time since you've, uh, since Union Craft has been open?

KB: Yeah, so my process when I'm making a beer, um, is to, one, study the style of the beer. See historically what can I find about the beer. Uh, the history of a beer is very important to me. And kind of, like, what guides me in my process to, to making a beer. So, I wanna look back and see historically what did people think this beer was? Or, or what, what's written about it? It, it's, it's really weird that there's so much history written down, and there's so much stuff. But when it comes to the history of beer, especially, you know, pre-, uh, pre-1700, a lot of those records are gone. And you can't find, like, what was really a Porter like? It might've been sour. We don't know if it was sour, but we think it. It's weird that that's not written down somewhere. That, that people don't know that. Um, so, there's a lot of, uh, and that maybe it is and, and people haven't looked in[unintelligible] places, but I feel like there's been so much history written on beer now that, that people would see that. So, it, it's kind of, you know, historically what was the beer like? Or what did people, what was it perceived as? What is it now? And then kind of, what do I want my take on that beer to be? If I wanna make a Porter, do I want it to be a robust Porter? Or do I want it to be a brown Porter? Uh, what kind of flavors am I looking for in this beer? And then I kind of, well then, sometimes just write a recipe from that. Other times, then I'll go and research what grains do I want to use? What malt? What are other people doing? I'll look at homebrew logs. I'll go on websites and see what are other people doing for these recipes? And what's their take on it? Um, and then typically I procrastinate a lot on my recipes. Uh, if I need a beer that we're brewing next Tuesday, you know, my guys now are like, I need the recipe a couple weeks before. But it used to be like, if we were brewing the beer on, on Tuesday, I'd, maybe I'll have the recipe done by Saturday. Um, and, uh, unless we needed to order something weird for it. Um, and so, then I'll write a recipe, um, and then I'll look at it a lot on my computer. And I'll just stare at it for a little bit, and, 'cause it makes sense to me. And then I, I have this program that I use called Beer Tools where I'll then program that recipe into Beer Tools

that'll spit out the actual numbers for me, I mean. If the numbers don't jive with what I'm looking for, I'll kind of tweak it from there. Um, to kind of finalize it. But I only use Beer Tools just for the malt. Never for the hops. I like to do all my hop calculations by hand. Um, and so then it just kind of comes out of what flavors I'm looking for in the beer. How am I gonna use the hops? Um, and as, as everybody has, when we've been influenced kind of by this modern New England trend where we're not getting as bitter in our beer. We're kind of pushing all those bittering hops a little bit forward. Um, I still like some bitterness in my beer. Um, and so, then I'll kind of work out what might, what I think the hops should be. I'll see what's available. And then me working on getting time to brew this beer. And then we'll kind of move forward from there.

00:45:14 TM: Um, in terms of, uh, where you source your ingredients, um, your hops and your malt. Are you working with any, um, local suppliers or, or any suppliers you have, uh, you know, more interesting stories?

KB: You know, the closet local [unintelligible] supplier that we work with [unintelligible] Proximity Malt, and they, they grow some of their barley in Delmarva. Um, but, for the most part, I'm more concerned about the quality of the malt. Um, we use a lot of Weyermann products from Bamberg, Germany. Um, I, I just like the Wyermann family. I think they're just good people. Uh, Sabine Weyermann, the woman that owns the company. And her husband Thomas Kraus-Weyermann. Um, he took her last name, which I really loved to hear about that. Um, is that, uh, I just think they make the best malt in the world. I love their story. I, I'm, you know, I'm really a [unintelligible] for like German brewing and German brewing techniques and, and, and so I, I like using their products. And I think they make some of the best malt in the world. So, for the longest time, Union pretty much used all Weyermann. And we would sprinkle in some other stuff, [unintelligible] grains that we needed that maybe Weyermann didn't make. Um, and very recently, Weyermann's prices went up. Um, to a point that didn't, it's still the best malt in the world, I think. But for what we were doing it didn't make sense to continue, to import that malt with a ten-week lead time, and, and so we switched our pale ale malt to Proximity. Um, and, uh, we're still kinda playing around with that. Just get that final place we mail ordered, we used something else. Um, and there's, in terms of hops, we get most of our hops from the Pacific Northwest. Um, we use some Australian hops. Like Galaxy is a hop that we use in, um, Duckpin. And then we're getting some hops, uh, for our, our Pilsner from Michigan, from a farm called Hop Head Farms. Um, but, you know, we'd love to work local more, um, but the margins on local malt and local hops just so expensive, it's, it's hard to justify them. We wanna take care of our team, that's our biggest thing. We wanna be the, we wanna be the best payers in the industry. And, uh, so, we have to sacrifice some cool stuff that we'd like to do in terms to do that. So, that's one of the [unintelligible] that, I haven't worked with as much local malt and hops. Like, Dark Cloud Malt, I really like their malt. And I hope one day to be able to use their malt. And there's some local hop growers that I'd love to work with. But we just gotta figure it all out. And, and, and it's that, figure out how they can scale up to make their costs, yeah. That.

00:47:29 TM: Makes sense. Um, to shift topic a bit. Um, we're speaking at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has really had a profound impact on the American brewing industry. Um, it's been almost six months since the pandemic has really dra-, drastically changed American social life and how we spend our money, spend our time. Um, could you talk a bit about what, what did your brewery look like in February 2020 versus today? And what kinds of modifications have you had to make to your operations?

KB: So, I mean, we were rolling in, in late January, February. It was looking like it was gonna be a better year than it was last year. Um, and then it kind of, talk of the pandemic happened. And I remember when I first heard about it thinking like, yeah, it's no big deal. This will go away in a little bit. And I, you know, I'm on the Board of Directors for the Brewers Association. And one of my fellow board members said that, you know what happens. Pretty doom and gloom. Um, and in retrospect it was a hundred percent right, and pretty much everything he wrote in that email. But I remember being like, man, this guy is paranoid. Like, what is he talking about? We're not gonna shut down. [Unintelligible] cancel CBC and cancel [unknown] and. It's something in the delivery, and da da da da da. And like, pretty much every point he hit in that email has happened now. And, uh.

TM: When was that sent?

00:48:34 KB: That was sent in, like, I wanna say like late February. Just as it was starting to ramp up. And just as there was talk about maybe it was in the U.S. now. And I remember it was St. Patrick's Day weekend where the Governor of Maryland finally came out and said, look, things are gonna have to shut down soon. And, and, but it hadn't, hadn't shut down anything yet. But we're saying things might happen. And I remember that weekend we appointed one of our guys with like the, the Chief of Sanitation. And say, he was to go around and sanitize everything and make sure things were good. We put some signs up, you know, please wash your hands and da da da da da. And then the next thing the governor said, you know, everything shut down. Tap, brewery, you know, bars, restaurants have to close. But he, could he, deem breweries essential businesses. So, we were still able to produce beer. And so, we very quickly started to do a to-go and delivery service. Um, so we served, would do dockside from Wednesday through Sunday. And when at first [unintelligible] delivery, every day, Wednesday through Sunday as well. Um, to kind of sustain things, um. And it, it helped that we were already set up to can and package beer. But we had kept our old brewery, and we were brewing beers out there and calling it the rough drafts [unintelligible] and bringing those over and, and serving them in the tap [unintelligible]. So, we had three beers over there that we were planning on selling. That we had to then keg, bring over, pump into the brite tank, and then can them. I remember we used the beers that way. And that's kind of been our business model ever since, is that we're just canning pretty much everything. Some kegs are going out, now that bars and restaurants are opening back up. Um, so we've been sending out some kegs. But a majority of our product is in package right now. And there's been an aluminum shortage. There's been a can shortage. So, it's been tough to, to keep it going.

00:50:03 TM: Right. Um, and so, would you say that, has your production declined then since things?

KB: Uh, definitely. Definitely. We did thirteen thousand barrels last year. Which is our busiest year ever. And I, we were on, pulling I think to do about fifteen this year. I'll be shocked if we do over ten thousand barrels of beer this year. Yeah.

00:50:21 TM: Um, and, what have your reactions been like with your customers, uh, you know? What, what have you heard from them? Or, or, you know, to what extent do you feel supported by them?

KB: We feel very supported, you know? Every, every statement that we've put out publicly about why we're doing this, and doing that, has been like, "Thank you for being safe." You know? There hasn't been much pushback, um, you know, I just kind of that you see online in general from, you know, sheep and da da da da da. Like, and so I haven't seen much of that. It's been much more kind of supportive and people understanding and, and getting what we're doing.

00:50:54 TM: Um, and then, I, I wouldn't, I don't wanna say silver linings, but have you, have there been any kind of surprises or things that, um, you know, fall more into the realm of, of, of a positive or something that you've learned, um, you know, about, about the brewing operations through this experience?

KB: You know, we've been able to crank out really quality beer. And there hasn't, no other pressure to get the beer out. Like, we brewed a beer. Here's a perfect example. We brewed a beer with Port City called Port to Port. Um, we brewed it in February. And we were planning on lagering it for a long time. About six weeks. To release in April at, uh, the Craft Brewer's Conference. The Czech Embassy was gonna do this thing. And then they were gonna invite us to come to Czechoslovakia in the fall to tour breweries there. Um, so, we brewed this, uh, Polotmave. And I'm probably saying that wrong. It's a Czech half dark. Um, kind of an interesting style that I read about and talked to John [unintelligible]. John wanted to do a golden beer at first. And I talked to him about that. And he was on board. So, we brewed this beer. And we ended up lagering it for almost three months. And it just came out so fantastic. And it just, it, it led me to see the, like, hey, anytime we have time to brew a lager, let's get it in earlier than later and give it as much time to lager as possible, because, it, you know, I, this beer is just fantastic. And I was shocked by how bright and clean it was after that three month lager. We didn't have to filter it. We didn't have to do anything to it. We just racked it over, um, and it, it, was really, and it kind of really inspiring to see that. And to think we need to put more time into our lager beer. Yeah.

00:52:17 TM: And so, perhaps on that front, um, you know, how, how have, how has the current situation changed your, um, plans for the immediate future for the brewery? You know, in terms of styles you're brewing? Or, um, just, you know, looking three months [unintelligible] ahead?

KB: You know, financially it seems [unintelligible] where we thought we'd be able to pay off our investors sooner than later. And then, you know, [unintelligible] started to read some of the financial benefits of the brewery. I think that's gonna take more time now. Um, in terms of what we're doing at the brewery, like, we bought this brewhouse right as the pandemic was starting, in like, in March. We bought, you know, I, I brewed, when I came back to the D.C. area from Chicago, I brewed the [unintelligible] for, uh, about a year and a half, I guess, from, from, you know, late 2010 to mid-2012. And, uh, so, they were, they'd closed that brewery, um, and were looking to get, offer the brewing equipment they, but they had two days and they couldn't sell it. They had to pack it up and ship it to Boston. So, I got a call from a guy that was like, "We're, we're willing to sell it for whatever you're willing to offer." So, we got this small brewhouse and, you know, we haven't installed it yet, but I'm glad we were able to get that and we're gonna be able to do some fun projects. And, uh, you know, the pandemic just in general has made me kind of more, it's, it's kinda shown me a couple of things. I, I really believed in the American Dream. And, and all this and that you can, anybody can make it. And the pandemic's kinda made me realize that's all kind of bs in a lot of ways of like, for rich

people the pandemic's over. You know? I mean, you read these headlines about the stock market's up and all that. And then there's still inconveniences like everybody else's. But, for, for working class people it's been a struggle. And I work with a lot of working class people. And people that work in our taproom and, and artisans and, and people like that are really affected by this. And this is gonna be devastating. Um, for a long time to come. I think the effects are gonna be felt by my kids when they're my age. You know? Because like, you know, the president kind of like screwed up. The government screwed up in general. And, like, I look at Europe where, you know, they are starting to see a rise again, but they're for the most part got to go back to normal for a little bit. Everybody still had to wear masks, and you know. I, I watch a lot of soccer. The games had to [unintelligible] fans and that kind of stuff. But, they felt more normal than we have. And it still feels weird. Like, what's gonna happen? You see this coming up, and like, it's really just kinda like, you know, one side of the world, one side of the government is saying, well let's just ignore it and act like everything's normal. And the other side is, you know, my side in a lot of ways, is [sighs] trying to promote the dangers of the virus which I think are there. But I think it's also kind of hard, it's hard for people to just have been like this. I mean, they're not giving them help anymore. You know? So, it's, it's gonna be interesting to see how our country turns out. So, you know, it's been a weird, weird time in my life. And, and it's really shattered what I thought about America and American Exceptionalism. I always felt American Exceptionalism was bullshit, but like, it's been proved now. You know? And, uh, it's weird. It's weird to see people not really care about this thing that's killed almost two-hundred-thousand people, you know? Where four thousand people or three thousand people died in 9/11 and we gave up our privacy rights and a lot other stuff. Uh, two-hundred-thousand people died and people are, there's a whole lot of those same people that were pro giving up our rights to defeat the brown people over there, to like now be like, you know, who cares about this? You know. Like, most of them were old or whatever. Now, my parents are 86 and 85, and I want them around as long as I can have them. And it just seems kind of a cold attitude for, for part of the country to have. And so that, that's been what's really kind of change my mindset about just America in general, you know?

00:55:47 TM: Um, change to a slightly different topic. Um, another major focus of conversation within the brewing industry, especially in the last, um, several months especially, following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, um, has been the largely homogenous demographics of American beer. As we all know well, among producers and consumers, um most American involved in beer have been and continue to be white men. Um, many people, including yourself, um, have been working for a long time to help diversify the industry and make it more inclusive and equitable. So, you referenced this earlier, but, um, could you please speak a bit about your experiences as an African American, um, in, in craft beer?

KB: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. I've never been, I've never thought that, like, uh, experienced racism in craft beer. Right? I've never, there's been some weird instances. Like, when I worked at Frederick I had some bosses, you know, I had the typical old white guy. "I'm not racist, but, why do you people do this?" That kind of stuff. You know? And everybody gets that. Um, but I've never had anybody say anything kind of disparaging. I've had some weird questions. I was at a festival, used to be like a, a Bull Run Festival in, in Leesburg back in the day. And I remember somebody coming up to me and ask me if I was Garrett Oliver's son. You know, just like weird stuff like that. You know? Um, but, uh, for the most part the industry is kind of cool. It seems very liberal. It felt very liberal until kind of a lot of this stuff started happening. It's, it's still

[unintelligible]. But, uh, it was, I just felt like the unicorn, right? I always felt weird. Like I was the only one. One of the black people that [unintelligible] I knew about when I first started brewing was Garrett Oliver. Um, you know, and since then the industry has become better. But it's still, it's still not where it should be. Um, and I think there was a couple of reasons why people should embrace diversity in craft beer. Um, it's because, one, I think it's just an awesome industry and I want more people to love it. And, two, our, our base is, is shrinking. Hard seltzer, liquor, health [unintelligible] wanting to be healthy, is taking away from people drinking beer. So, we need to bring more people into the fold. Um, and there's this whole group that's kind of getting ignored, not on purpose, but they're out there. So, let's embrace them and bring them in. Um, you know, and so, if I as Chair of the Diversity Committee can get more people to love beer and, and, and get more people to outreach to people that look like me. Um, or Asian people or, or gay people, or women, or whoever, into the industry. I think it's just a win win for everybody. You, hopefully you make more money and more people get to find out about this freaking awesome thing that we all love so much, you know?

00:58:21 TM: I mean, what would you say are, are currently, um, the most prominent or obvious barriers to a fully inclusive industry?

KB: Access to capital is a big thing, right? Even when I started, when we started Union, I had screwed my credit up in college. And, like, had to write letters to explain to people, and, you know, like, I had Adam and John, who had excellent credit there. And um, we were able to get loans and stuff. But it's, it's definitely an, an issue, you know? Like, that, that black people and people of color, um, largely don't have the access to capital that people, that white people have. Um, you know, like, not as much homeownership. There's not as much, you know, there's not as much equity and, and in the industry. So, I think that's a big barrier. And I also think that, like, people don't know, you don't have to know about craft beer to some extent to, to know about craft beer, right? So, like, you, you gotta be exposed to it. In craft beer there's not a lot of advertisement. It's kind of a word of mouth thing. So, you're telling your friends and the people you hang out with. And white people tend to hang out with white people, and black people tend to hang out with black people. So, I think that that's why black people and brown people don't know as much about craft beer as white people do. Um, but I think that it's a, money is the biggest issue. Craft beer's an affordable luxury, but it's still a luxury, right? And, um, and so people have to have that, that, that access to, to access wealth to be able to buy our beer and, and support our products.

00:59:38 TM: Um, you are currently Chair of the Diversity Committee for the Brewers Association. Um, what work is the committee doing to, uh, to help make the industry more inclusive?

KB: We are, we started, um, kind of with some internal stuff. So, posters, “Everyone is Welcome Here.” Just kind of stuff that, to comfort people. We did a demographic study of the industry that the results released last year. We're working on, we do an, a diversity event grant every year where events that are trying to promote more diversity in our industry, from Fresh Fest in Pittsburgh to Beer without Beards in New York. Uh, Raices Festival, which is a Latina festival, or Latino festival at, in Denver. Um, Harpoon one year did a job fair with a particular outreach to minority people. We'll up the fund now. We have fifty thousand, a fifty-thousand-dollar pot that we'll split up between events to help them get over the hump, or get them the money they need to make sure that their event goes successfully. Um, we're currently working on two things right now, which is a

mentorship program. Just kind of been put on hold by the pandemic because we can't, we wanted to be a taproom mentorship program, 'cause we looked at the taproom as kind of an easy and obvious way to get people into the industry. And then coming and learn about beer, you know, while serving beer. Um, and we found that Union, that a lot of people that've come into our taproom become in-, interested in getting into the back [unintelligible]. Um, and the second thing that's a, becoming more of a priority, and I think will be done by year's end, is a, uh, equity scorecard that we hope will be used, one, internally by the B.A., um, and also with vendors that they work with. And then become a model for the industry for breweries that want to look at their diversity. Well then this template will be there for them to use as scorecard for their, for their own company.

01:01:15 TM: Great. Great. Um, and, and one more question about this topic. Um, you know, I think about all the, the kind of links in the chain of, of the production and consumption of beer. All the way from, you know, growers and suppliers and, you know, people teaching how to brew, you know, all the way through brewing and distributing and, you know, retailers and consumers. And, I mean, in your work and your experience, do you feel like there are particular links in that chain that, you know, are, are most critical to, to focus on? Or is it kind of, you know, an effort that really needs to look at every single link in the chain?

KB: I think it's a little bit every single link because most people get into craft beer because they like the product. Right? So, that's where you first gotta start. You gotta get people to like your beer and want to drink your beer and think it's cool and, and drink craft beer as, as a whole. Um, and then once people get into that industry, then they can start to look at more in depth. Like, like if I, I think about my journey. I started drinking this beer, and then I was, hey, I can have a career in this. Um, and, and so, I think that's kind of where it's gotten. You gotta start there. You've gotta look at the companies that surround craft beer. The malt suppliers, the brokers. Whose working for them? And what are their, you know, because it, it's awfully hard to be the only one of something in a room. Right? I mean, if you're a woman, black, gay, whatever. It's, it's weird and it can be scary sometimes to be the only person. So, it, our, our, the business is bringing in people that look different than what the business owners look like and things like that. Um, you know I read an interview with Garrett Oliver the other day where he said thirty years ago, I mean, in a brewery no African American person was coming to apply for a job. And I believe it. I've had one black brewer at my brewery since we opened. And it was a guy I knew that brewed at Sierra, I mean, at, um, Anchor Brewing in San Francisco. And, and moved to Baltimore and hit me up. And, you know, was more than happy to hire him 'cause he's a good guy. Um, and now he's left and he's working as a distiller in [unintelligible] 'cause that's what he wanted to really get into. But, black people don't apply for brewing jobs like that. If I post a job on Pro Brewer or Brewbound, I'll get a hundred resumes and, you know, I can't say for sure, because nobody puts their color on there, but basing it from what I feel, not many of my applicants are African American or Hispanic or anything else besides white people, you know? Um, and so I think it's just that there's so many different ways to bring people into the fold that you have to look at everything and, and try and figure out how to make it happen. That's why it [unintelligible] so happy that the B.A. has really invested a lot of time and money into this effort, uh, to make themselves more diverse and to make our industry more diverse.

01:03:36 TM: Great. Alright, so, I have just a couple big questions to wrap up.

KB: Yeah.

TM: With kind of big picture questions. Um, this term "craft beer," um, do you feel like that describes best what you do? Um, how might you, how might you define craft beer? Is there another, is that the right term? Or is there another term that you, uh?

KB: No. It, it, it did. It's, it did define what I did, you know, ten years ago maybe. Uh, twelve years ago. But now, craft is just like, everybody uses craft. Craft soda, craft, you know? It, it, you know, as a, as a side note, I've been trying to find a natural deodorant to use. Right? And I've, I, so, I've been, like, looking at all these brands, and you see all these brands on the store, and it's the same thing with like, you talk about beer all the time, like, uh, an illusion of choice. And so, I've been trying all these different deodorants and none of them really seem to work and, you know, like, the big guys do. But, I, I'll Google who owns them, and it's like, S.C. Johnson, Unilever. And I'm like, man, I thought I was supporting these small, independent brands. And you see the same thing in beer. Um, so, [unintelligible]. Yeah. It's so, so to go back to your term, does craft define it? I don't think that's right. I think that the industry needs to start defining itself as independent. Um, and I, in that, and we always talk in America that small business is the backbone of the, of the country. Um, until something like this happens and then small businesses kind of get screwed over. But, uh, I think that it's, it's more fitting to call ourselves independent breweries. Um, craft to me has kind of lost its oomph.

01:05:05 TM: Um, so, uh, I also, you know, I always like to ask people, um, what they see for the future. I mean, you know, this, this question has very different answers now than it did even several months ago. But, um, you know, in looking at the future of, of independent beer, um, five, ten years down the line, um, what do you see in terms of style, in terms of, uh, you know, um, business model. Um, what do you think might be coming?

KB: You know, I'm not sure. I'm not sure, I thought that when this thing happened, and we're getting to the six month mark, right? Or we, we're, or, or we're almost there. Are a bunch of breweries gonna fail? Like, that's what I don't know. You know? Adam handles our finances for the most part. And I get to kind of live blindly and, like, not worry about it like he does. You know? He, he kinda wears that under his hat. And well, we talk about it. But, like, in, you know, and probably to my detriment sometimes, I should know more about our financials than I do. Um, I like to just rely on him. "Hey, are we okay?" "Yeah, we're, we're good for right now." You know? And he, he's been saying this whole time, "We're good." If things change, like, you know, he's worked out deals with the banks, our loans and all that stuff, he's like, "When that changes, I don't know if we'll be good. But we're good for right now." And it feels like we will be good. Um, and so, that's good enough for me that he says that. But, I, I wonder about how many breweries aren't good right now. And like, especially there's been this kind of shift in the model of the industry. These taproom breweries, and that's all they were doing was they were serving beer at their taprooms, and making a ton of money doing it. Um, what's gonna happen to those breweries in another couple of months. You know? When landlords stop forgiving the rent. And, we still don't clearly know. Hopefully, there's a vaccine sooner than later. Um, but, who knows what that vaccine does, right? There's a flu vaccine but I still, I got the flu shot last year, I still got the flu this year. So, like, it's, what's it, I, I just wonder what that's gonna do to the industry. I have a feeling that the peak of nine thousand breweries that we were at a year or two ago was already starting to shrink. I think there could be a much larger contraction. Um, which worries me because the big brewers, the big multi-national companies, they invested in smaller independent-appearing breweries, um, will have the leg up. And what will that do to the competition and, and. So, I don't know. I, I

feel like it's a scary time. But it, it doesn't feel as scary as it should be right now. Everybody seems to still be doing okay. Um, you hear about some breweries closing, but, the ones that have a little bit of size to them seem to be holding on, and hopefully that maintains.

01:07:40 TM: And what about, um, consumer's tastes. I mean, how, how would you describe what, what people want now, um, in terms of beer? You know, what do you think they will want?

KB: It's so weird. I don't, it's such a good question because that's the fifty-million-dollar question. Right? For so long, for five years now, it's been New England IPA's. And for fifteen years now it's been IPA. Right? It's been nothing but IPA. IPA. IPA. IPA. So, like, what is going to happen when. I don't know. Is it still gonna be IPA? Probably. But I also feel like consumers are also getting away from these big heavy beers. Seltzer is having this moment right now that can't be stopped. I mean, they're just every month you read something in the trades about how they've grown again. Um, and it doesn't feel like, for a while I thought maybe it's gonna be like Zima or Smirnoff Ice. It's gonna go away. And it might. 'Cause it seems trendy right now. And trends never seem to last. But, I don't know where beer is gonna go. I, I think it's gonna go back to what Union's backbone is. Easy, drinkable beers. Um, I think price point is gonna become an issue with beer, uh, sooner than later. I think that you're seeing it already from the larger, the larger craft breweries. They're starting to put out these, you know, golden ales or these, or golden lagers at $9.99, you know, it's a dollar a beer again in their fifteen-pack or whatever. And so, I think price point's gonna become an issue. And I think there's gonna be a, a battle to see where the industry goes. And I think consumers are still gonna drink most of the same stuff they drink now. But price point's gonna become an issue, I think. You know? You hear all these transportation workers and hospitality workers about to get furloughed in October, um, I don't know man. It's, it's a scary time, but I'm, I'm praying that people still wanna drink beer and, and, and drink good beer.

TM: Maybe Altbier will have its moment.

KB: Yes. Yeah, yeah, I hope so. Maybe it'll come back.

01:09:30 TM: Right. Alright, last, last question. Um, and it's a, a simple one but kind of a big one. And that is, um, what would you say you value most about what you do?

KB: It's, you know. [Sighs] [Unintelligible] In Cleveland, Ohio. And he, uh, he used to always say, you know, "What we're doing, man, we're not doctors. We just make beer." And that's kind of always kind of lived with me. When people are stressed out at work or something bad happened or we have to dump a batch of beer because it's not up to our standard. It, it's just beer. Um, and I value that a lot. I mean, just making beer. But, at the same time, you know, my wife doesn't work anymore. She's home with our kids, which is invaluable to us. And, uh, you know, we're not rich by any means. We're paycheck to paycheck. Like every, you know, a lot of people are. But we're able to live this life because of beer. Right? Because of this dumb drink with these four ingredients and that the people love, that I love. It keeps my lights on and it keeps my cable on and my kids, you know, think that we're rich. You know? My kids have this illusion that I'm as rich as Shaquille O'Neal, as my son said the other day. [Laughs] Like, no, we're not. Um, but, uh, I love the fact that I can take care of my family through beer. And I'm taking care of other people's families now, through beer. And that's been really kind of awesome to me.

Um, that I had this kind of impact on the world. I always think of my dad. And he was very kind of influential in human resources. Um, and he made this mark and, like, I remember one time being in a college course and, like, not showing up for something and the teacher was, like, "You know, I know your dad. I see him every two weeks when we go to this such and such meeting. And, you know, he's, he's very respected. Don't make me tell him that you're not coming to my class." You know? And so, like, I always thought, like, how am I gonna live up to be as good as my dad? And, uh, I don't know if I'm there yet. But, like, I love that I, doing something and having an impact and, and kind of making my way in the world. And, I run into people and they say, "Oh, and, and you run this brewery." And that's really cool. And, so I, I value the fact that, like, I'm in this industry. I can take care of myself and, like, here we are. You know?

TM: Alright. Well, thank you so much. Thanks a lot.

KB: No, thanks for talking to me. Sorry for rambling so much.

TM: No! This was wonderful. Alright, I'll stop the recording now.