

**Transcription: BV023.16.13**

**Interview with Jenny Siormanolakis**

**Audio Recording: 2023\_0016\_0013\_003.mp3**

**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jenny Siormanolakis (JS)**

**Date of Interview: July 26, 2023**

- 1 INTVWR: All right. I am sitting here at Proto Café in Burnaby. My name is James Binks. I am a  
2 researcher at the Burnaby Village Museum. Today is July 26, 2023, and I'm currently sitting  
3 down with...
- 4 JS: Jenny Siormanolakis
- 5 INTVWR: So, thanks for speaking with me today, Jenny. I'm excited to talk about your parents'  
6 restaurant on Hastings Street, where you also worked, about your involvement with the Greek  
7 community here in the city, and all about your life. But first, I wanted to ask about your parents,  
8 such as where they came from originally.
- 9 JS: Both my parents were born in Veria in Greece. Veria is a small city in the province of  
10 Imathias – very well-known for its agriculture. They were both born in Veria, and life brought  
11 them to Vancouver in the late '60s, my father immigrated here. **00:01:08** He then went back to  
12 Greece, met my mother, and brought him – or brought her – back in the early '70s. And they got  
13 married on Boxing Day because they had three weeks to get married from the moment that she  
14 entered Canada, and there was a Boxing Day wedding, and... A few months later...
- 15 INTVWR: So that was – sorry – Boxing Day, 1970...?
- 16 JS: 1973.
- 17 INTVWR: 1973.
- 18 JS: And Romanas had already opened the restaurant. The restaurant was opened April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1973.  
19 And my parents, you know, my mom raised us and my father worked. And they successfully  
20 went on with partners to open up four more restaurants named Romanas. **00:02:04**
- 21 INTVWR: Oh, okay. So, where was the first one located?
- 22 JS: The original one was in Burnaby Heights on Hastings: 4660 Hastings Street. I still remember  
23 the phone number. I will never forget the Romana phone number.
- 24 INTVWR: What was the phone number?
- 25 JS: 604-298-72525.
- 26 INTVWR: All right!
- 27 JS: Yeah.
- 28 INTVWR: Awesome. So, where were some of the other locations of the Romanas Restaurant?

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29 JS: We had Romana #2 at Hastings and Nanaimo, just in east Vancouver. Romano #3 was a fine  
30 dining establishment in Surrey. And #4 was – oh, it was in Mission and it was called The Old  
31 City Hall: Romana's Old City Hall. Right on the main street in Mission.

32 INTVWR: Right, and when were those ones opened up?

33 JS: They were opened up, again, around the same time: early '70s, and then by the time the  
34 interest rates hit in the '80s, they had to start... They sold one off, and then, you know, the  
35 interest rates get – and they just closed them. **00:03:09**

36 INTVWR: Right, and what were your parents...? What are your parents names?

37 JS: My father Eugene and my mother is Europe, but she would go by Poppy, and my father  
38 would go by the Nuli *[sic]*. So, everyone knows them as Poppy and Nuli.

39 INTVWR: And your mother's maiden name was...?

40 JS: *[inaudible 0:03:27]*.

41 INTVWR: Okay, and what did they do in Greece before they moved here?

42 JS: My father was raised by his family, as he was left an orphan. So, by the time he was done  
43 *[with]* his military, his uncle had already moved to Vancouver, and my uncle (his uncle, my great  
44 uncle), then sponsored him to come to Vancouver. And this great uncle that brought my father to  
45 Vancouver is Grandpa Jays.

46 INTVWR: Okay. **00:04:08** So, before we talk about Grandpa Jays, actually, so when did he  
47 originally come over in this direction?

48 JS: I'm going to have to say it was early '60s, early...

49 INTVWR: Was he the first one in your broader family to come to Canada?

50 JS: Yes, Grandpa Jimmy – Jim Voulides, who was an executive chef at Highs – he... He  
51 immigrated with some of his other first cousins. And because of these strong, courageous  
52 gentleman, our family from my father's side, there's about 150 of us in Vancouver. All related,  
53 all together at family reunions.

54 INTVWR: And from that same area.

55 JS: Yeah because they were all blood relatives, and I still see my cousins. I have fifth cousins  
56 that we're close with. And, you know, Facebook is to thanks for that. Right? We get to be a part  
57 of each other's lives. **00:05:06** But we're a very big family, but we just don't have the common  
58 last name to make it look like we're a big family.

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59 INTVWR: Right, right. And so, when your parents first moved here, then, to this area, which  
60 neighborhood were they living in?

61 JS: They were – they started off in Kitsilano because that's where all of the relatives were, and  
62 slowly, they headed into east Vancouver. And we remained in east Vancouver because it was  
63 close for Dad to commute to the restaurant. What was it, a seven-minute drive back then from,  
64 you know, 22<sup>nd</sup> and Boundary to, you know, Hastings. It was nothing. Yeah. So, we grew up in  
65 east Vancouver.

66 INTVWR: and so, why did they choose to open the restaurant in Hastings in Burnaby?

67 JS: Back then – now, remember, Romana's was opened at that time, with five partners. There  
68 were only three or four restaurants on Hastings Street at that time between almost Port Moody  
69 and the P&E. **00:06:10** There were very few restaurants, and it was just a great location. And  
70 what happened once it opened is it just took off. They were – it was open late. There were  
71 crowds coming in late hours, after the Legion would close, after the MBI. It became well-known  
72 as a place to come and enjoy after the bars had closed because we were open until four A.M. on  
73 the weekends.

74 INTVWR: Okay. So, what were some of the other restaurants that were there, if you remember?  
75 I mean, I guess you weren't there when it was first opened up, but...

76 JS: Dad – Dad would remember. I would, I couldn't recall.

77 INTVWR: Yeah. Because now, since then, it's exploded in terms of restaurants. Now, Hastings  
78 is one of our food streets. So, Romana's was one of the pioneers, then.

79 JS: Yeah, we were definitely one of the landmarks. **0:07:00** And even back then, it was always  
80 known that the businesses that were on the south side of the street always did better than the  
81 businesses on the north side of the street.

82 INTVWR: Why was that?

83 JS: The legend has it that because when the carriages were coming down – the horse and carriage  
84 – everyone would disembark on the south side.

85 INTVWR: Oh, okay. All right. So, yeah, it was on the south side – yeah, the Romana's  
86 restaurant. Today, I think there's a restaurant called Lulu there. I'm not sure if you know, but  
87 now it's in that spot – 4660 Hastings, something around there. Yeah.

88 JS: After we sold it, the establishment sold again and... So, two owners had it under Romanas  
89 after we sold it, and then the third selling of the businesses, Romanas no longer existed.

90 INTVWR: Right, and your family sold it in 2014. Is that right?

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91 JS: Yeah, I believe it was 2014.

92 INTVWR: And now it's been a few years since it's...

93 JS: Well, now it's almost 10 years, yeah.

94 INTVWR: Yup. All right. 0:08:06 So, when did you come into the picture, then? What year  
95 were you born in?

96 JS: I just – I have a lot of memories as a child playing in the restaurant at inappropriate times,  
97 getting in the way of servers' feet, you know, running down the restaurant dining room hall,  
98 but... Sleeping in the back on the counter when it got too late. Probably standing on the old  
99 Dairy Land yellow crates – standing on those to help dry dishes or, you know... I have lots of  
100 memories just playing in there as a young child. I think... I think I first got my job to work  
101 officially and earn a paycheck probably when I was between 12 and 13, and my shift was every  
102 Saturday from four 'til four, there with my dad, and Sundays from four 'til 12. So, Saturday and  
103 Sundays, that was my shift.

104 INTVWR: **00:09:09** Right, but you were probably there a lot more, like you said, when you  
105 were younger. Because if the restaurant was open until four A.M.... Right.

106 JS: Yeah, but at 12 years old, I was – fond memories of working the bar crowd. Right?

107 INTVWR: Right. What was it like when you first, first were there earning a paycheck? How did  
108 you feel in those days?

109 JS: You know, we didn't have that, that oh, I'm the boss' kid. You know, I was... There were a  
110 lot of very strong, powerful servers and waitresses who showed me the ropes and taught me the  
111 right way of doing things. So, I – there was no privilege. I would get yelled at like everybody  
112 else got yelled at. There was nothing to be special, and I had to do the grunt work. But the grunt  
113 work is what's paying off for our successes today. **00:10:01** Right? Because it just comes  
114 automatically.

115 INTVWR: Right, so that was sometime in the '80s or so?

116 JS: Yeah.

117 INTVWR: And you have one sister?

118 JS: I have a younger sister, Nora, who also worked in the restaurant. You know, but she went off  
119 and did other things, though. Just like I went off and did other things. But the restaurant always  
120 called us back!

121 INTVWR: So, was most of the staff from the Greek community working at the restaurant, or...?

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122 JS: No. Romana always hired everyone. Because my parents were immigrants, they knew what it  
123 was like, and they hired everyone. We had ever ethnicity! Delivery drivers from all over. My  
124 dad, instead of forcing some of the new immigrants to Canada to learn English, he would say,  
125 “How do you say ‘carrot’ in your language? Carrot – okay, go get me a bag!” **00:11:00** And Dad  
126 would just learn other languages just to interact with his staff. I’ll never forget that. He’d be  
127 yelling in Turkish or in Polish or whatever it was. Yeah, we had – we had a lot of variety in our  
128 staff.

129 INTVWR: Awesome. That was the main restaurant, though, that your parents were at even  
130 though they at some times owned other locations?

131 JS: Yeah. Yup.

132 INTVWR: And you mentioned there were four other partners.

133 JS: Yeah, there were five – yeah, four other partners. There may have even been a fifth one. All  
134 gone. By the time the mid-90s came... Yeah, it was around 1990, we had removed and/or the  
135 partners had left. So, from 1990 on, my mother and my father were in complete control of the  
136 business, and... Yeah.

137 INTVWR: **00:12:00** Nice. All right. Well, let’s talk about food a little bit then.

138 JS: Okay!

139 INTVWR: So, what were some of the first dishes that were served at that Romanas on Hastings?

140 JS: Well, Romana’s original name was Romana Pizza & Steakhouse. So, we were known,  
141 obviously, for our pizza and our pastas. The barbeque ribs, the steaks – all on the menu. Dinners  
142 like chicken parmesan or chicken cacciatore, steak and lobster – lots of that 1970s restaurant  
143 scene. Because, again, my father just didn’t know how to become a chef. He worked in another  
144 establishment. He worked in Kamloops. He worked in different restaurants around the city,  
145 learned what they were doing, and then they came and created a menu based off of what they  
146 knew. Right? So, Greek food, for us, wasn’t introduced until, I believe, around the late ‘80s we  
147 tried to introduce Greek food onto the menu. It didn’t quite work. **00:13:01** We didn’t try it again  
148 until almost the mid-‘90s, and from that point on, Greek food all was a staple on our menu.

149 INTVWR: Right. So, how did that introduction to Greek food go? Like, what was the rational  
150 about it? Did you guys even want to include it?

151 JS: Well, I think, you know, there were a couple of other successful Greek restaurants in town –  
152 be it Vancouver and in Burnaby – and my dad was like, “You know, we really need to try and  
153 push our food.” And so, we did. However, in Burnaby at that time, I remember trying to serve a  
154 Greek salad, and they’d be like, “What is this stinky cheese you’re putting on it?” And now feta

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155 cheese is on anything, even included on west coast dishes, for example. But back then, to try and  
156 push Greek food, you had to add a rice or a potato. You had to have had some sort of bread.  
157 **00:14:01** And hence why today's west coast or even western part of Canada, the chicken  
158 souvlaki is now a dinner that includes rice and potatoes and Greek salad and a Tzatziki and a pita  
159 bread, and it's because we had to try somehow to persuade people to try the cuisine. And that  
160 was the way we had to sell it because, you know, they would order a steak, and it would come  
161 with a potato, or it would come with French fries or rice. You know? And so, you needed – you  
162 couldn't just sell a chicken souvlaki with French fries. Like, it just wasn't going to work –  
163 especially with our type of kitchen. And so, it didn't quite take off in the late '80s. However, the  
164 second time we attempted it, Greek food was here to stay – and it became a good part of our  
165 menu.

166 INTVWR: Were they some of the most popular on the menu, would you say?

167 JS: Yeah. Like, the souvlakis, for sure. My father's roast lamb, Kleftiko. **00:15:02** And if it  
168 wasn't for Maria's Taverna on West Fourth, Maria – who taught my dad how to make the  
169 Kleftiko we wouldn't have had Kleftiko on the menu. So, we're always honored to have one of  
170 the great restaurateurs of Vancouver, Maria, take my dad into his kitchen and teach him.

171 INTVWR: And that was on West Fourth.

172 JS: Maria Taverna was on West Fourth. It's still there – it's still there. Unfortunately, Maria had  
173 sold the business.

174 INTVWR: Was that one of the first restaurants to include Greek food on their menu? Because  
175 you mentioned there were a few successful ones in Vancouver.

176 JS: There was a Rustys. There was Maria's. There was Athene's. There was another one on West  
177 Broadway; I just can't remember the name. Olympia. You know? And in Burnaby, there was  
178 also Little Billy's. there were, you know...

179 INTVWR: Where was Little Billy's?

180 JS: Little Billy's, one of the locations was by where the old Mountain Shadow Pub was – oh,  
181 Night and Day. Night and Day was also similar to us. You know, they were opening up  
182 restaurants and introducing more and more Greek dishes to the masses in the early, mid-to-late-  
183 '80s and '90s. Yeah.

184 INTVWR: Interesting.

185 JS: But even some of our pizzas took on Greek twists. And when we added feta cheese onto  
186 pizzas, that blew up. You know, the cook's special (beef, feta, onions, and tomato) – one of my  
187 most favorite pizzas to this date. But people were loving the feta cheese.

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188 INTVWR: I heard the pizzas were quite beloved from Romanas.

189 JS: Yeah, our pizzas were definitely legendary. Dad, for sure, hand pressed over a million pizzas  
190 in his time there. 41 years, dad's hands pressed a lot of pizza. **00:17:01** Yeah, but it was just our  
191 – it was also our sauce. It wasn't just a plain tomato sauce. Dad always used a variety of herbs  
192 and seasonings and always used two varieties of cheeses. It wasn't just mozzarella. I always  
193 remember him sourcing, and his mentality was to try and source from many suppliers so that  
194 everyone eats. It's not just a monopoly with one supplier. Yeah. And these are the business  
195 tactics that Nor and I still instill with our own company today. Right? Whatever we learned, we  
196 sort of try and instill... And now, I even try and teach my daughter. We don't just go and support  
197 one grocery store. We've got to spread it out. Right?

198 INTVWR: Right. So, do you remember some of those distributors from whom you purchased  
199 the ingredients?

200 JS: Yeah. Well, Neptune Foods – which then became Gordon Foods. We were one of their, one  
201 of their first customers. **00:18:02** And Gordon Foods is one of my vendors for Grandpa Jay's  
202 now. So, I have a long history of memories with Gordon Foods. Sometimes when I even meet up  
203 with the marketing people, I'm like, "Hey, did you know this and this about...?" And they were  
204 like, "How do you know this?" I'm like, "Well, because I was a customer. I'm now one of your  
205 vendors!" Yeah, but Gordon Foods. Dixon's Coffee, for some reason, just popped into my mind.  
206 Yeah, there were plenty of... LaRosa. LaRosa and... When Mr. LaRosa even brought in the  
207 owners of Saputo. Back then, they were trying to grow the cheese line. Right? And Saputo now  
208 is a behemoth and a conglomerate of dairy. Yeah, we've met a lot of interesting people with lots  
209 of memories.

210 INTVWR: Right. **00:19:03** Were any of them in the kind of Greek community, as well? Like,  
211 did you import any food from Greece or from Europe?

212 JS: We didn't really need to import any of the products. We would just... There were plenty of  
213 suppliers that could bring in what we needed.

214 INTVWR: Right. Okay. That's good to know, then, that you can get suppers locally here, right,  
215 and be better for the environment and supporting the local businesses here, as well. So, that's  
216 always good. Do you remember any other reactions to sort of changing menus or your own  
217 strategies at the restaurant? Like, if you guys were introducing more Greek food? Like, how else  
218 did people's diet and tastes change? Like, nowadays, there's a lot more vegetarian options. Like,  
219 a lot of places have a vegetarian moussaka for example. I don't know if Romanas had anything  
220 like that, but is there anything like that that comes to mind that maybe you started introducing?  
221 After souvlaki, maybe, was successful, you introduced the yemista, moussaka – I don't know?

222 JS: Well, our menu... I'm going to speak louder. Our menu always... **00:20:07** Our menu  
223 always changed every couple of years. Obviously, food costs, obviously the demographics of the

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224 neighborhood changing. You would always notice a drop in the pizzas January/February, you  
225 know. Maybe they'd spike during Super Bowl, but everybody was avoiding carbs. You know?  
226 Vegetarian – we always had vegetarian options. You know, we had one or two vegan options,  
227 but we always tried to be inclusive. We're very mindful of being inclusive – and hence why even  
228 our own grecko lemon potato seasoning is inclusive. We didn't want to have any animal products  
229 in that so it could be inclusive for all. Food trends, otherwise, you know, just people wanting  
230 more vegetables and a lot of salads. **00:21:03** One of our top-selling items was a Greek salad  
231 with a grilled chicken breast on it, and we were doing this in the early 2000s – and it was one of  
232 the best-selling lunch items. Right? People wanted that nice, cold Greek salad. And then as soon  
233 as you would place that fresh off the grill chicken, the way it would melt the feta, and then that  
234 melting would almost bring those tomatoes to room temperature – it was like French kiss. It was  
235 delicious. Like, I'm craving one now! Yeah, we always changed the menu. And then, in the early  
236 2000s, as Dad is getting older, we're getting tired... We looked and examined the menu, and I  
237 said, "We don't need a four-page menu. We need to look at what we really excel at, and what is  
238 it that we really excel at?" And for us, it was anything that had red sauces on it. Our pizzas, our  
239 pastas. So, we cut out making a fettuccine with white sauce or a rose sauce. We cut out making  
240 the dolmades, even though the dolmades were very popular. **00:22:11** But at that point, you  
241 know, Dad's getting tired, our chefs are getting tired. Is it easier to roll dolmades, or is it better to  
242 roll the spanakopitas? You're going to make a decision. We're going to roll the spanakopitas  
243 because the spanakopitas is where we're excelling at. And our calamari, though, the seasonings  
244 that Dad would use for the calamari every Friday on Twitter, we'd be posting, "It's Friday!  
245 Come and have the calamari." Right? And Twitter – and we were one of the first to use social  
246 media to our advantages. And we were just doing it right. In fact, I believe one year in 2011, the  
247 Burnaby now may have nominated myself as one of the top three influential social media people  
248 of the year because I was doing things right on social media for Romanas. **00:23:01** So, we just  
249 used the tools that we had available.

250 INTVWR: Right. There was also – Romanas was known for your election, your elections.

251 JS: Yeah. The many pizza polls that we would do – and we would have fun with all of the  
252 candidates. We always supported all the parties, whether it was the greens, the conservatives, the  
253 NPD, or the liberals, whether it was federal or provincial. We always tried to do a pizza poll.  
254 We'd always have some laughs. The candidates loved it. To this day, our family is very  
255 politically active. We're respectful of the candidates in Burnaby – and we may not have believed  
256 in all of their policies, but you know, hey, we know that it was building community. And there  
257 were nights at the restaurant where the mayor would be dining in one corner, the MP would be in  
258 the other corner. There would be, you know, a losing component sitting somewhere else.  
259 **00:24:00** It was just a happy place, and everybody was just respectful. But the pizza polls were  
260 fun because it would just engage the community, and it would engage young people. I loved  
261 seeing all the little kids picking out, you know, who they thought was going to win.

262 INTVWR: So, how did it work? Do you mind explaining?



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263 JS: I believe it would just be everybody who came into the restaurant could vote one of the four  
264 pizzas, and each candidate would choose their pizza. For example, I remember Bill Cunningham  
265 – he was running, I believe, for federal liberals. He just said, “Oh, ham pineapple, of course!”  
266 because his name had the Bill Cunningham & Pineapple. And so, that was his pizza.

267 INTVWR: So, the candidates would actually kind of say what type of pizza they wanted to  
268 represent them in this poll?

269 JS: I believe it was something like that, or I would give them an option. They would just have  
270 fun with it. I mean, the greens always chose the vegetarian – so, that was an easy one.

271 INTVWR: And then people, like, they would vote?

272 JS: They would just put a ballot in. At the end, right before the election, we’d just pull and say,  
273 “Okay, our pizza poll is showing that so-and-so would win.” **00:25:09** Sometimes it was on, and  
274 sometimes it was dead off – but it was just about having fun. Right?

275 INTVWR: Yeah, the news would even report on it. I found some old, old news reporting. Like,  
276 “Oh, you know, conservatives are leading... People really like the ham pizza there...” You don’t  
277 know if it’s for the candidate or the pizza!

278 JS: It would also ensure that all of the volunteers from all of the parties would come and have a  
279 pizza. A little bit a strategy on our end, but you know... Just having fun.

280 INTVWR: It’s a great way to get involved with the community there. So, we’ve sort of touched  
281 on what you did at the restaurant there a little bit, but you weren’t... Were you working there  
282 full-time? I mean, there’s, like, a 40-year period. You weren’t there for the beginning, and then  
283 you worked there as a kid... How did your relationship to this restaurant change as you  
284 developed your own career?

285 JS: Oh, Mom and Dad would always suck us back in. **00:26:00** They’d always suck us back  
286 in. I mean, there was a point both sisters Nora and myself were pregnant and working, and we  
287 even had a poll of guess the weight of the babies, or guess the due dates, or guess the sex or  
288 whatever. And there’d be two other daughters pregnant. Like, I worked until I was 37 weeks.  
289 Right? I was waitressing full-on. Right? The restaurant would just call us back. It didn’t matter.  
290 It did not matter.

291 INTVWR: The restaurant – you mean your mother would call you back in?

292 JS: yes, pretty much. I would work nine to five, and then I’d get home, and she’d be like, “Get  
293 down here! It’s super busy!” And I’d be like, “Oh, my god...” No trauma there.

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294 INTVWR: Right. I don't know if this is true, but I don't know where I even heard this, but did  
295 you get married at the restaurant? Is this something that happened?

296 JS: Oh, my god. Yes, I did my – I did a civil wedding in the restaurant. Yeah. I brought my  
297 husband from Greece, and we... **00:27:07** I wanted to start the application process for  
298 citizenship, and I knew that we just wanted, you know, to get on with our lives. So, I said, "You  
299 know what? Let's just do a civil wedding. Start the process, and then we'll go back and get  
300 married in Greece." Which we did. So, I did have a very small – like, very small, small – civil  
301 wedding.

302 INTVWR: So, what about the food at home that you would cook, or that your parents made?  
303 Was it very different from what you would eat at the restaurant?

304 JS: Honestly, we would eat so much food just at the restaurant. Occasionally, Dad would make  
305 something Greek. Okay, as a young child, my mom cooked at home. I remember her making  
306 makaronia me kima, like the spaghetti with meat sauce. Not really meat sauce but just meat, as  
307 they say – the ground meat. We ate well at home. **0:28:03** A lot of Greek dishes. But then as I  
308 went off to go and work at the restaurant and, you know, our whole lives was the restaurant. So,  
309 from the time I was a teenager onward, everything was at Romanas. And any time we would try  
310 and make something Greek to sit down, well, then the phones would start going off the hook.  
311 Like, we couldn't even sit down and have a normal family discussion because the phone would  
312 ring, a supplier would come in, we forgot about a meeting that we had. Right? So, there was no  
313 normal, sit-down dinner time.

314 INTVWR: Is that what led to deciding to sell the business?

315 JS: No. Selling the business came because Dad was exhausted, and... The lease, you know, and  
316 working so hard for a lease. Right? **00:29:00** But most of all, Dad was tired. Now, if my dad had  
317 had a son before me or even a son after me, and we had a son, maybe Romanas would've  
318 continued. But we were, we were tired as a family. Dad was tired. Mom was tired. You know,  
319 yeah. It was... It all came to a decision that, you know, we're not doing this anymore.

320 INTVWR: I can imagine. Yeah.

321 JS: And it was big news when we sent out the update on Facebook. Like, we stood there as a  
322 family. Two moments that we stood – me, my sister, my mom and dad – as a family: when I hit  
323 send on the email release saying that the restaurant was for sale (a very hard decision to do), and  
324 on the day that we sold the restaurant when we were going to turn over the keys the next day. My  
325 sister, myself, my mom and dad, we all locked the door together and turned our backs, and that  
326 was it. **00:30:11**

327 INTVWR: Wow. Now, that must've been bittersweet. I'm not sure. A very difficult, in a way,  
328 for your, your family – especially your parents after more than forty years.

**Transcription: BV023.16.13**

**Interview with Jenny Siormanolakis**

**Audio Recording: 2023\_0016\_0013\_003.mp3**

**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jenny Siormanolakis (JS)**

**Date of Interview: July 26, 2023**

329 JS: Yeah, I'm tearing up thinking about it. The... From the moment that we announced we were  
330 going to sell, when that news broke and most of the media were contacting us, and the  
331 customers... The amount of work we had in three months – the people that were running in  
332 through the doors, and the busyness that we had had us exhausted. I mean, the night before the  
333 final night, I saw my dad in the dish pit with water up to here. Like, just washing dishes. And we  
334 snapped a picture of him, and we said, "If we ever get the idea to open another restaurant again,  
335 we want to remember the photo of dad standing at the dish pit at 11:30 at night, almost like, you  
336 know, exhausted, falling over to remind ourselves that's what the restaurant business is.  
337 **00:31:15** That's the blood, sweat, and tears."

338 INTVWR: Right.

339 JS: You know? So, yeah. Yeah, it's hard. It was bittersweet, but in the end, we made the  
340 decision, and we moved on and healed and took care of ourselves.

341 INTVWR: And you could have a proper family dinner, I hope.

342 JS: Yeah, proper family dinner and, and discussions., and proper fighting without relatives  
343 around or staff around!

344 INTVWR: Yeah, that's awesome. I want to draw attention to our time.

345 JS: I'm good – don't... If you're good, I'm good.

346 INTVWR: I'm good. Okay. Because I know we have a lot more to...

347 JS: Yeah, let's keep going. I'm on a roll.

348 INTVWR: Okay, that's good.

349 JS: Yeah.

350 INTVWR: All right, so that's... **00:32:04** I think that kind of closes the restaurant a little bit  
351 there.

352 JS: Yeah.

353 INTVWR: I'm sure we'll keep mentioning it as we go on, but I guess we can talk a bit about...  
354 There's a lot of directions. Well, let's go to Grandpa Jays. You mentioned it a bit, and then we'll  
355 kind of go back in time. Can you continue this food theme, if that makes sense to you?

356 JS: Sure, yeah.

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357 INTVWR: I don't know if this happened after 2014, but you can correct me, but maybe it was  
358 after 2014, something happened with this other business...? I don't know. It's meant for you to  
359 explain.

360 JS: So, Grandpa Jimmy, who we mentioned earlier, he had his own seasoning salt brand. He was  
361 a manufacturer, and he was selling primarily wholesale food service. He created his own  
362 seasoning salt that was with no MSG, and that was pivotal back in the '90s. No MSG was  
363 important to many chefs. **00:33:01** And so, he had this secret seasoning spice of his, and it was  
364 being used by many restaurants in the lower mainland and in the Okanagan. Nonetheless,  
365 Grandpa Jimmy passes away to cancer in 2003, and in 2004 Nor and I were approached to buy  
366 the company. And it was a good opportunity, A.) because we had the restaurant; we could do it  
367 in a facility. And it had existing customers. It was a very simple operation to run. So, my sister  
368 and I went out as two women – young women – eager to take on a new business in a very male-  
369 dominated industry, and we got the financing (which was almost impossible), and we bought this  
370 little business from our uncle's estate. And we kept it running out of Romanas until the time,  
371 well, we sold Romanas. **00:34:02** Then, but it was very difficult to grow our business A.)  
372 because it's Grandpa Jay's. Everyone assumes that it's Uncle Jimmy. We didn't want to come in  
373 and ruffle feathers and say the recipe's changed, or it's new ownership because A.) we're two  
374 women, and we need to tread carefully in this food industry business. We have the receipts of  
375 everywhere that we tried. I found those notes because sometimes go, "Oh, you didn't try hard  
376 enough." It's like, no, here are the receipts. I tried pretty hard. It just – it didn't... It wasn't the  
377 timing. We also then got married. Each one of us got married, we had kids to raise. So, Grandpa  
378 Jay's was always on the backburner of our lives. It was a very simple, small business that could  
379 just be run a couple of times a week. Orders would come in off a fax machine at the time. You  
380 know? Now it's email, and... We then found that, after we sold Romanas, we had – we found a  
381 manufacturer. We signed the obvious NDAs, and they manufacture it for us and, you know,  
382 Gordon Food Service Canada, Saputo, another distributor (a Greek distributor out in Abbotsford)  
383 – they're our three biggest customers for our wholesale. And with this manufacturer, it's just  
384 easier. **00:35:21** They mix and make it, so it's no longer myself running to a supplier to go buy a  
385 ton – a pallet – of salt and then go and mix it myself in our machine. You know? Like, those  
386 days are long gone. And it's easier with a manufacturer. Cut to a pandemic, and us losing 75% of  
387 our sales across Canada for wholesale food service. And at that time, one of our biggest  
388 customers is Fat Burger Canada, and they're using us across the nation with our seasoning.

389 INTVWR: And you had – sorry, I want to kind of cover this. So, there was one main flavor of  
390 seasoning. **00:36:00**

391 JS: There was one main product called Grandpa Jay's All Purpose Seasoning, no MSG added.

392 INTVWR: And that's what was used at Fat Burger?

393 JS: And that's what's being used with Fat Burger, and many other restaurants in the province.  
394 But, you know, this was being shipped across Canada for their chains. So, pandemic starts and,

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395 you know, obviously, the numbers are dwindling, and we're losing our sales. And so, we had  
396 already had the one shaker in about eight stores in the lower mainland because our friends  
397 wanted to buy it, and they loved Grandpa Jay's. And it was just there so that I wouldn't have to  
398 keep it in the truck, or my sister wouldn't have to keep it in her car, to sell to people. Like, if you  
399 want to go buy it, go support a little store and go buy it. And it was in eight stores at the start of  
400 the pandemic because it had always been in eight stores.

401 INTVWR: Were any of those stores in Burnaby?

402 JS: Cioffi's.

403 INTVWR: Oh, okay.

404 JS: Cioffi's and Rocky's had it. **00:37:00** And then, basically, I took that one shaker when I  
405 noticed that oh now's the time because everybody's cooking at home and stocks – and shelves  
406 are being emptied. So, I did what any smart, strong individual does. They lace their boots, and  
407 they go pound the street, and they get the job done. And that's what we did. I walked into stores  
408 that I knew would suit us. I did a lot of Google research. I would look at the storefronts. I would  
409 look to see what they were carrying, and I would go and pitch it. And within six months, we got  
410 into, like, 30 stores – and the feedback was we need more SKUs. I just don't want to buy one  
411 thing from you because, again, I don't have a distributor. I'm manufacturer. I've never done  
412 retail, and it's not like they can buy it from somebody else and just cut a check to that one  
413 distributor. They now have... The small businesses are now thinking I have to cut another check.  
414 **00:38:03** So, make it worth my while, so give us more SKUs. So, Nor and I were thinking – we  
415 said, "We need more SKUs." She said, "You really need to do Greek potatoes." I go, "Yeah, I  
416 know, but to make the Greek potatoes, you really need to make the juice, the broth!" And then, I  
417 was thinking about that, and then I looked up in my head – in my head, you know, all these  
418 jigsaw puzzles came together, and it laid flat. And I said, "Oh, my god. Let's make this thing  
419 dissolve into water and olive oil and have them pour it over the potatoes." And then I quickly  
420 jotted down on a piece of paper what I wanted this to look like, whether it was the color, whether  
421 it was the tang. What are the elements that were going to make this? And I sat down with Nor,  
422 my sister, and I said, "Nor, this is it. Like, I have – I have a good feeling about this." So, we went  
423 with our... We went to the manufacturer, and I said, "I want this, this, this, and this. Let's make  
424 it happen." **0:39:04** And I took it home, and I tested it, and with no rhyme or reason, I just said,  
425 "I'm going to do three pounds of potatoes. I'm going to use this amount of water, this amount of  
426 oil, and this amount of seasoning." And we nailed it on the first run. Okay? Like – this could've  
427 gone sideways a million times until we got it right. I tweaked one thing with the manufacturer,  
428 and this thing was ready for sale. Even the manufacturer, our manufacturer, when they tested it,  
429 they're like, "Girls, you have a winner." And I said, "I think we – I think we're onto something."  
430 And so, the moment that we released Grecko Lemon and the Van City Grind at the same time in,  
431 I believe it was in '21, 2021... June of 2021, we launch Grecko Lemon and Van City Grind. First  
432 places to carry it were Chioffi's and Heritage Meats out in Langley, and I believe Windsor Meats  
433 because there are about six stores. And the crowd went wild! Like, it just flew. We were

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434 unprepared for the volume that we were about to sell because my sister and I are very  
435 conservative. A.) because we're small business and, you know, we're just cautious. And we want  
436 to be able to deliver. So, when I say something, we want to be able to deliver on that word. And  
437 we got that out to market, and we instantly went out to another 60 stores, and... A year later, the  
438 summer of – last summer, August 5<sup>th</sup> – Ryan Reynolds tweets about the Van City Grind and  
439 writes, "If this wasn't so good, I'd be upset about the name." And two weeks later, Grecko  
440 Lemon is nominated for Product of the Year, Top 10 Finalist. To have your two SKUs blow up  
441 within two weeks apart from another, and you've only got three products, yet two of them got  
442 massive publicity... **00:41:11** It sort of launched us now to where we are and to 145 stores – and  
443 still without a distributor.

444 INTVWR: Wow.

445 JS: So, but again, the Grecko Lemon... That Greek Lemon Roast Potato seasoning that... It's  
446 like gold dust. It's like people love it. It can be used not just for Greek potatoes. Right? Italians  
447 are using it for their linguini and scallops. It's great as a crème. Yeah, but that's dad's Greek  
448 lemon roast potato recipe that I then altered to make it dry. So, that's still a Romanas. And we  
449 still want to take dad's original recipes. We're going to take his calamari recipe – that's next. So,  
450 that's going to be released hopefully soon. **00:42:02** We're going to do dad's meat sauce from  
451 Romanas. We're going to do the barbeque sauce. You know, there's lots of up coming Romanas  
452 being put into Grandpa Jay's. I don't know if, per se, we'll call them something about Romana,  
453 but you know, our parents – we're going to always honor them. Maybe we come out with a  
454 Romana line, but you know, many customers in Burnaby, when they find out that we've now  
455 created the seasonings, they're running to Cioffi's or Rocky's, and they're definitely picking it  
456 up and supporting us.

457 INTVWR: That's awesome. Well, a little sneak peek here and there.

458 JS: Yeah.

459 INTVWR: Historical interview about what the products are next. And just to explain a little bit  
460 about the Ryan Reynolds connection – Ryan Reynolds is a very famous actor and successful  
461 businessman in his handle. Like, his nickname is Van...?

462 JS: Van City Reynolds.

463 INTVWR: Van City Reynolds, so that's why he made the comment about Van City Grind.  
464 Right? Because Van City is kind of his nickname. Just explain that. Yeah.

465 JS: Yeah. His nickname's Van City, and my sister was on vacation in Osoyoos when she just  
466 happened to check the Instagram. **00:43:09** And she was like, "Oh, my god." She went into  
467 shock. She was in a grocery store (that didn't want to sell Grandpa Jays, but anyway...). And  
468 people are like, "Oh, my god, are you okay?" because she went white, and she was, like, shaking.

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469 And people are like, “Are you okay?” She’s like – they’re like, “What, did you win the lottery?”  
470 She’s like, “Yeah, I did. Ryan Reynolds just shared my product!” And they’re like, “Oh, my  
471 god! You did win the lottery!” Cut to me being in Greece in the dead of the night because, you  
472 know, I’m 10 hours ahead. And I was dead asleep, and something told me to look at my phone.  
473 And I sort of leaned over to look at what time it was, and I wake up, and I see, like, five missed  
474 calls from my sister. When it’s five missed calls, you know it’s something – and I’m trying to  
475 call her, and I’m like, “What’s up?” Like, I message her, and she’s like, “Check Instagram.” So, I  
476 went into Instagram, and then I just see that one – and I screenshot everything. **00:44:00** I just  
477 saw Van City Reynolds, and then what he did – and I was like, “Oh, my god.” And I jumped out  
478 of bed, stubbed my toe, woke up the whole house. My mom and dad were almost in tears. My  
479 daughter was like, “Oh, my god!” Yeah, that’s the Ryan effect. Ryan is... We’re very  
480 appreciative of what he did because what he did was he sent all his fans into a hundred-and-  
481 whatever. We were in 90 stores at the time. He sent them into 90 small businesses and sold them  
482 out. You know? He didn’t go into the big boy’s grocers – because we’re not there. Sent them into  
483 small stores that... People went to our website to go see what was near them, maybe even  
484 something close to their work – a store they’ve never even been in. Well, they went in there  
485 because of him – and we’re always grateful that he helped all those small businesses sell out.

486 INTVWR: Yeah, and to place this in our context now, too, I mean... **00:45:01** When we say  
487 pandemic, we’re talking about the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019-2020. You know,  
488 that really hurt a lot of small businesses. So, it’s great to have that support for the smaller  
489 businesses. Just to really place that in context to anyone who’s listening to this in the future.  
490 Small businesses are struggling.

491 JS: And in Ryan we trust. That’s our joke now with my sister. “In Ryan we trust.” We’re just  
492 grateful. You know? Some people are like, “Oh, I’m going to start a business. I’m going to make  
493 sure it goes viral.” That doesn’t happen. And to think that we had that happen is still mind-  
494 blowing. And yes, we’re going to definitely use that as part of our marketing, but I can’t rely on,  
495 on that. Right? It’s just a moment that really brought some joy and encourages us to keep going  
496 and keep going after those wins and sharing it with our fans and our customers. Yeah. And the  
497 Greeks of Burnaby and Vancouver and Surrey and Langley and the west side and north Van and  
498 west Van! **00:46:08** We didn’t create Grecko Lemon for them. You know, this wasn’t something  
499 that I’m going to go and push a Greek restaurant to switch to. Right? Like, this was created for  
500 everyone else, but the Greeks have completely embraced this product and are so proud of us.  
501 And that’s heartwarming because we weren’t... We’re not expecting it, for them to go out and  
502 buy it, but they are because it’s making their life easier. Right? So, it’s heartwarming for us, and  
503 it’s humbling.

504 INTVWR: Well, speaking of the Greek community, I know you’re also involved. I mean, you  
505 have all these networks. So, I know you’ve been involved with other Greek community groups,  
506 if you want to speak about one of those. Let’s say the Greek Day on Broadway.

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507 JS: Greek Day on Broadway will always be something very important to me. Going back in  
508 history, Greek Day was one of the first street festivals – I believe, maybe, '78. **00:47:03** I can't  
509 remember the first year. And we had special permission from the attorney general to have an  
510 event where alcohol could be served on a Sunday on a closed street, nonetheless, in a prohibition  
511 era of no alcohol on Sundays. You know, for us to have that – Greek Day was something  
512 extremely important. Later on, Greek Day became into a little bit of a political issue, and the  
513 event ceased to happen.

514 INTVWR: That was in the late-'80s, I think.

515 JS: In the late-'80s. In 2004, a committee began to form about bringing back Greek Day because  
516 the Olympics were also going to be held in 2004 in Athens. So, we were gaining on this  
517 momentum of let's push our heritage. And I, with my experience of being with the Heights  
518 Merchants Association, of which my restaurant was member of the Business Improvement  
519 Association...

520 INTVWR: The Burnaby Heights...?

521 JS: BIA. **00:48:06** And because I had the experience of organizing Hats Off Day, which is a 13-  
522 city block festival, I went to the committee and I said, "I think I might be able to offer some  
523 expertise as to how to put this event on and leverage the community support, but also, you know,  
524 work with the city officials because I'm used to it from what I go through in Burnaby." And I  
525 became a pat – a central figure – with that Greek Day Committee in 2004. We lobbied the city of  
526 Vancouver to bring the event back. They would counterargue. I would be like a lawyer, and I  
527 would fight back. Lots of reasons as to how we got this event back. But everything that I learned  
528 was because of Burnaby! I learned so much from Hats Off Day, and I was able to take that and  
529 bring, with my expertise, help bring back Greek Day to the streets of Vancouver for 2005.  
530 **00:49:05** And that was monumental. And then, from then on, I then became the production  
531 manager and event coordinator of Greek Day until I couldn't do it anymore in 2012 where,  
532 again... That was a long run, and a festival like that takes a lot of hours.

533 INTVWR: I imagine, yeah. And you were pregnant during part of that, and then a young baby...

534 JS: Yeah, one year I was pregnant. Yeah. Yeah, but they're all good memories. They're all good  
535 memories. You know, our Greek culture is very important to us. It's very important to, you  
536 know, my children, or my child, my nieces, my nephews. It's important to all of us. You don't  
537 just have 150 relatives here and not be immersed in where you come from. And I've been blessed  
538 to listen to the stories and the struggles of, you know, my great grandmother named Eugenia  
539 walking from In Asia Minor to Greece to settle in as refugees, even though they were Greek, in a  
540 new country, because of the population exchanges of Turkey and Greece. **00:50:11**

541 INTVWR: Right. Is that where most of your family is from?



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542 JS: My dad's mother's side was from a small Greek fishing village that then was in the Asia  
543 Minor, or, you know, modern day Turkey on both region or my mother's side comes from  
544 fondos. But my father's mother's side is from the.

545 INTVWR: [Pontus] region or...?

546 JS: My mother's side comes from [Pontus], but my father's mother's side is from... They walked  
547 from Asia Minor into, into Greece. And hence why we... You have to learn, you have to know  
548 where your family comes from, and where their family came from, and their family came from,  
549 to understand what kind of Canada needs to be formed. Right? We're all immigrants here.  
550 **00:51:00** Right?

551 INTVWR: Right, and that's why there's – you've worked on these networks within the Greek  
552 community. But like you said, between the communities, as well, we're all Canadian. Beyond  
553 that, you know – that's one of our identities. Right? But beyond that, that connection...

554 JS: Or even our vow – my vow with Greek Day – even when we were talking to politicians and  
555 city leaders to bring back Greek Day in a no-fun Vancouver era (because that's really what it  
556 was – it was us battling bureaucracy that was making Vancouver to be absolutely boring). And I  
557 said to them, I said, “You help us get Greek Day back, and I vow and our committee vows to  
558 help the Italians bring back Italian Day.” And I did. I did help them. For any of the other  
559 ethnicities or communities that want help, come talk to us; we'll gladly tell you what we did. I  
560 remember festivals where we recycled all our signage from Greek Day, where we would have  
561 \$20,000 worth of signage, and we would donate it to the Japanese event, where they would just  
562 use paper and cover the signage and make their own signs. **00:52:09** Right? Like, the whole  
563 point was this big, circular.... This place started off really great.

564 INTVWR: Yeah. Yeah, we started this interview, it was a quiet café and then a party has started  
565 here...

566 JS: Nonetheless, yeah, our goal with Greek Day was to always give back. And that's the heart of  
567 the Greek. You know? The soul food that we get as a Greek person must be expressed out in  
568 other ways. Right? And not just food, but in hospitality and, you know, manners.

569 INTVWR: Right. Of course. Well, that's good to hear. And then there's also the Greek Fest in...  
570 So, there's a few main communities kind of centered around churches, mainly. Right? There's  
571 the one in Kitsilano, and there's a church there on Arbutus and then there is one on – one in  
572 Surrey. And then there's the one on Boundary, which is just on the boarder of Burnaby and  
573 Vancouver, and there they have the Greek Fest every year. Were you involved with, or how were  
574 you involved within that festival?

575 JS: **00:53:23** I've helped out with that festival. Obviously, as a, as a paid contractor for Greek  
576 Day, my number one event was looking after and being, being responsible for the protection of

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577 Greek Day. But that doesn't mean that, you know, I wouldn't get a call from the east community  
578 to be like, "Hey, how did you maneuver past this with the, you know, the rules on this and this."  
579 Always helpful. But as I had my own family, and my daughter would go to the Greek school at  
580 the east, east school, you know, the community needed help... **00:54:00** Okay, yeah, you need a  
581 few bartenders, or you need somebody to fill in, or you need a volunteer, by all means. But the  
582 east festival was always a fun one because for so many years, we didn't have Greek Day. And  
583 that festival really flourished when there was no Greek Day. But now, you know, all the festivals  
584 seem to come back. Surrey also has their festival, and the other festival will be the food festival  
585 that St. George's will probably bring back. You always try and help. That's it. If you're asked for  
586 your expertise, you try and give back. And I can't always just volunteer, but my social media can  
587 definitely lend a hand. You know, me re-sharing something on Facebook is 9,000 times more  
588 important than me going and spending a couple of hours volunteering. Right? Because you use  
589 your, your strengths to your advantage. And if my social media can send those messages out and  
590 remind even 10 people to go to the festival then I've done my job. Right?

591 INTVWR: Right. **00:55:00** And because you've lived most of your life in east Vancouver – is  
592 that right?

593 JS: Yeah. In east Vancouver, however, being... Being an individual who also was a writer for  
594 the Greek newspaper and being involved in Greek Day, you know, I was a member on the west  
595 side, as well. You know, and then I was a member on the east side. And at one time, I had two  
596 memberships. But as my family settled, we were in east Vancouver and primarily in east  
597 Vancouver – member at large. Right?

598 INTVWR: You've mentioned the newspaper. So, I think that was called [Gnome]. Is that right?

599 JS: Gnome.

600 INTVWR: Do you want to speak a bit about that? Because I think you were a writer, and I think  
601 they were headquartered in Burnaby as well.

602 JS: Yes. So, the Gnome newspaper is one of the longest-running Greek newspapers and possibly  
603 one of the largest ethnic community newspaper, I believe, in Kostas the editor who passed away  
604 last summer...

605 INTVWR: Kosta?

606 JS: Karatsikis. He, I think he had his newspaper archived at UBC because of its longevity.  
607 **00:56:17** And he approached me, again, while I was working for the Burnaby Heights BIA. He  
608 just happened to meet me at Sfnaki, the Greek restaurant, because he was business partners with  
609 Tom from Sfnaki Restaurant. And I just happened to go pick up lunch one day, and I walked in,  
610 and I knew who he was but I had no formal introduction. I said, "Oh, hi. I'm Jenny. I'm just  
611 working upstairs. My family owned Romanas." And he's like, "Jenny, tell me a little about

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**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jenny Siormanolakis (JS)**

**Date of Interview: July 26, 2023**

612 yourself.” And I was telling Kostas and he's like, “Jenny, I think you need to come write for me.”  
613 And I was like, you know, I don't know. And he's like, “No, no, you can't fail. I know it.” He's  
614 like, “I want you to go write an article and just send it to me.” So, I went and wrote something.  
615 And he's like, “That's it. You're done. You're staying with me.” **00:57:01** And I ran, I ran quite a  
616 few articles every month. I mean, I even sent articles back when I was volunteering in Athens  
617 during the Olympics. I think even *The Burnaby Now* took a couple of those articles. Because  
618 they just found it so funny what I was writing live from, like inside [Oaka], which was where all  
619 the volunteers were. And Kostas believed in me, and I just, he knew that I was blunt, and I would  
620 just tell it the way that it is. And many people in the Greek community were like, “I really liked  
621 your article, bravo, just don't stop, keep going.” And then, you get the family. And then there's  
622 how am I supposed to raise a child and write a weekly thing? Like, I barely have time to, you  
623 know, sit alone and watch a movie on TV. Like, I need my brain to decompress. And again, in  
624 the family gets in the way, and I stopped writing, always stayed in touch Kostas. And every once  
625 in a while, if there was something that I was annoyed at, I would definitely write, and  
626 automatically, he would insert it. And yeah, he, he took a chance. And I enjoyed that. I really  
627 enjoyed writing. I wasn't the greatest writer, I definitely needed an editor to check the grammar  
628 and spelling. That's not my highlight at all. You can read my tweets, you'll see how horrific my  
629 spelling is.

630 INTVWR: What were the years that you were involved with that?

631 JS: I'm going to say maybe 2003, 2004 until, until.... I don't know when the last article was that  
632 I wrote for Kostas. Probably right before the pandemic.

633 INTVWR: Yeah, it was quite recent.

634 JS: Maybe February 2020, I think, because that was one of the last events that I attended – or  
635 was going to attend and then our world changed after that.

636 INTVWR: Yeah, and then he passed away very recently.

637 JS: He passed away while I was in Greece last summer. Yeah, and that hurt. And his memorial is  
638 coming up on August 6<sup>th</sup>. I'm definitely going to have to go to church because I wasn't here.  
639 **0:59:03** I was in Greece.

640 INTVWR: Got it. Sorry to hear that.

641 JS: Yeah, yeah, but...

642 INTVWR: So, what would you write about for this, this paper? Well, I guess, let's talk about the  
643 paper first. So, what kind of media did it cover?

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644 JS: It was just a community newspaper where we would talk about some political issues –  
645 church, community, you know.

646 INTVWR: The community, like, in Vancouver or across Canada?

647 JS: More of BC, but more, obviously, the communities... The four communities are Vancouver  
648 Island – right, Victoria – Fraser Valley Surrey, east Vancouver, and then Vancouver. And that  
649 means there's four churches. That means there's four groups that are, you know, vying for  
650 power. Power meaning what? Not vying for power to be the best, but they're trying to... How do  
651 I put this nicely and politely? Well, they're vying for fundraising dollars because these churches  
652 need to pay the bills. Okay? Let's just say it like that. **01:00:09** So, the newspaper would focus  
653 on recipes from Greece. Kostas loved to cook. He'd always have, like, his favorite recipes listed.  
654 He would have jokes. He would have the community news. He was definitely one to cause  
655 controversy with some of his writings – which was fine. You either loved him or hate him, and  
656 he would just... He would have articles submitted also from Greece, but it was also a place  
657 where the Greek government would be able to insert their information on how to change land  
658 claims or stuff that was pertinent for Greeks of the diaspora. Right? As for me, it was always  
659 about community or some community even that would be coming up or interviewing a famous  
660 singer from Greece or... You know.

661 INTVWR: So, like a culture and opinion section. **01:01:03** Sort of like a column.

662 JS: Yeah, an opinion. Sometimes it was just, you know, something that happened to me. Like I  
663 said, during the Olympics, or when the Olympic... You know, something even mention with  
664 Romanas is we hosted the Greek Olympic Committee during the Olympics, and we – I think I  
665 wrote about that.

666 INTVWR: The 2010 Olympics or the 2004 Olympics?

667 JS: 2010 Olympics, we, we invited the entire Greek team. And so I had separated the restaurant,  
668 we only allowed like, 10 tables for regular customers, and the rest was all the team and anybody  
669 that we wanted to, plus anybody else that wanted to come like. I'll never forget working in  
670 Romanas. The restaurant was jam packed. And in comes the leader, the [chef de maison] as  
671 they're called. **01:02:01** He's the chief leader of the squad, and they walked in. And every single  
672 person in the restaurant stood up. Even non-Greeks. Even people that are like, "There's an  
673 Olympic team in here?" They stood up and they started clapping. Again, goosebumps. I've got  
674 little tears backing up right now. And they... Yeah, they cheered on that Olympic team.

675 INTVWR: Wow, that's awesome.

676 JS: Yeah. They cheered them on, and... That's the Romana legacy of just hospitality. Right?

677 INTVWR: Yeah.

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678 JS: Even the Olympic team was like, “We can’t believe this.” I’m like, “Well, that’s Vancouver.  
679 That’s us.”

680 INTVWR: Yeah, I mean, to host the Greek Olympic team for an Olympics hosted in this area –  
681 and Olympics, of course, being an ancient Greek tradition – all kind of tying together there at the  
682 restaurant there in Burnaby. It’s coming together. Yeah. Do you remember what they wanted to  
683 eat or what was served at that event?

684 JS: **01:03:01** I think we just did whatever we... It was just like, “You’re just going to come.  
685 You’re going to eat. You’re going to drink. You’re going to meet us as a Vancouver community,  
686 and take pictures, and have some fun.” And yeah. I don’t remember. Pizza, probably some pasta.  
687 Just simple food because, at that time, it’s like, okay, what’s the kitchen going to be able to  
688 handle? We’re going to do pizzas, obviously. Yeah. And I love when those memories pop up on  
689 Facebook, and I was blessed, actually. As such a contributing member of the Greek team, you  
690 know, just in Vancouver... I actually had the Olympic Flame come to my house.

691 INTVWR: Wow, really?

692 JS: Yeah. I had – you know how the Olympic Flames goes in those little, those little lanterns? I  
693 had the one that was actually lit in Athens, and the girl came and brought it to my house, and I  
694 had it there sitting on my kitchen table. Not very many people can say that they had that come  
695 into their home, but that’s what – I was received, I guess, a little appreciation for everything that  
696 we do. And that’s all because of my Greek roots! **01:04:17** Yeah, so.

697 INTVWR: Wow.

698 JS: Right? Once in a lifetime.

699 INTVWR: No, definitely, yeah. And it seems like you’ve lived a few lives in one. I can’t believe  
700 you’ve had time to do all of this – all of what you mentioned.

701 JS: So never had imposter syndrome. Never. Never.

702 INTVWR: Yeah. That’s amazing. All right. Well, that’s actually most of the main topics I have  
703 here. I know... We could go deeper into all of these.

704 JS: Let me just see off my notes if there was any thing. Okay. ’86 was... Okay, 1986 was pivotal  
705 for us as a restaurant in general because Expo was taking place. **01:05:01** And we had just  
706 gone... We had closed the restaurant for a few days to paint it, and the... We had just painted,  
707 and it was around 2 o’clock, and so we weren’t going to open until the next day. And all of a  
708 sudden, these people started banging on the doors holding a newspaper, and they’re like, “When  
709 are you opening?” And we’re like, “We’re not going to open for a few days.” And it turns out  
710 that the *Vancouver Sun* had done Best Pizzas in Vancouver, and we were number two.

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711 INTVWR: And you were closed for three days.

712 JS: Do you think we closed for three days/ No. That restaurant door – it was open, and people  
713 didn't care about the smell of the paint. Back then, it was, like, oil-based. You know? I think we  
714 painted it, like, green or something. Who knows what? Anyway, yeah. And so that was pivotal,  
715 being named one of Vancouver's best pizzas that was not thin crust. And that really took Ramans  
716 Pizza to, like... You know, because at that point, the restaurant had been open for 13 years. And  
717 it was only then that a *Vancouver Sun* article during Expo, which meant tourists got a hold of  
718 this, and we're like, "Oh, we're staying in Burnaby, or they're coming." And so that was pivotal.  
719 And then for Romanas as a whole, we were one of the first restaurants, I can't say number one  
720 first, but maybe top three in Burnaby to have a website in the '90s. Like, like, or whatever it was.  
721 Maybe early – no, it had to have been around that time. And we always had a website. Like, we  
722 were the first to use it. My dad, you know, even though with a grade two education, he was like,  
723 "We need a website. This is the way of the future." So, we always had a website that worked to  
724 our advantage, because most of the corporate executives making those catering decisions were  
725 able to quickly direct to our website and be like, "Okay, I need this pizza, this pizza, this pizza,  
726 this, this pizza, you know, and I need it for 11:30 in the training room of the Chevron, you  
727 know..." **01:07:17** Because Chevron was a huge corporate catering clients of ours. When  
728 Chevron would lock down for their safety and security... Two weeks always in March, they  
729 locked down and they shut down the refinery, and they clean, and they do safety precautions.  
730 There would be four or five catering orders for Chevron. But it was that website, and we're proud  
731 of the fact that we're one of the first restaurants in Burnaby to have a website and grow our  
732 business like this. And, and not have to rely on Yellow Pages at that time. Right? We didn't do  
733 everything right, but having a website and growing on the backs of the corporate catering is what  
734 one of our strengths was, and that's mom and dad. **01:08:08** Right? And us encouraging them.  
735 And my mom having a Blackberry. Like, how many Greek parents had a Blackberry back in the  
736 day? Not many.

737 INTVWR: Right. So, who put together the website? Was it...?

738 JS: We, we had a couple of different contractors do a variety of different things with it. I  
739 honestly I can't remember who but I always remember being like no, this is...

740 INTVWR: Because back in the '90s, it was quite more difficult than today to build a website.

741 JS: Oh, very, very difficult. Yeah. I mean, some of our work wasn't always the best website. If I  
742 could look back at it now, it'd be like, "We actually thought this was good?" You know, cringe-  
743 worthy moments. Right? But it worked.

744 INTVWR: Most restaurants, you need a probably basic website. People just want to know what  
745 food, for the most part, is there, and how they can order from you. So.

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746 JS: And taking that, then, in the mid-2000s when we all got Facebook accounts in 2006 – the  
747 majority of us got Facebook accounts in 2006. Using that, and then be like, “Okay, we’re going  
748 to use this now for the restaurant,” and having that Facebook page, helping the Twitter grow, and  
749 just pushing food content really, really helped. **01:09:22** And again, that eludes us to some of the  
750 pivotal moments being broadcast on that Facebook page, and us having to send out the release on  
751 Facebook saying, you know, the restaurant is now for sale. You know, that was like, like my  
752 hand was shaking. Do we do this? Are you sure? Is now the time? Like, we wanted a sign from  
753 God to be like, is this okay, done? Then you hit it, and then 10 minutes later the phone's ringing  
754 with requests for media. Right?

755 INTVWR: Right. Yeah, did you have anything else you wanted to mention? Because I know  
756 you have a list there. That’s why I’m asking.

757 JS: yeah, the Canucks in Romana #2 and in #1 because we were so close to the P&E and to the  
758 Colosseum. We would actually host Canucks press conferences – many press conferences. They  
759 loved Romana #2. Romana #1, though... When we sold Romana #2....

760 INTVWR: Sorry. So, Romana #1 is the one in Burnaby, and the Romana #2 was in...?

761 JS: Was on Nanaimo and Hastings. So, it was also even closer to the Colosseum. So, that’s why  
762 a lot of the press conferences for the team were held there. **01:10:36** And with Romana #1,  
763 though, when we sold off the second one, Romana, being so close to the Colosseum, I didn’t  
764 know how many Canucks would come in. Like, I have pages and pages of autographs as a little  
765 girl. You know?

766 INTVWR: Wow, the Pacific Colosseum, which is at the P&E area.

767 JS: Yeah, which is I don’t know how many blocks away. 15 blocks away from the restaurant?  
768 Well, most of the Canucks at that time, they lived in Burnaby Heights. They lived right behind  
769 Brentwood, a lot of the homes were. So, we would always, always have the guys with their  
770 wives coming in, having a late-night dinner after a game. **01:11:14** Win or loss, it didn’t matter;  
771 you could approach them and be like, “Hey, could I get an autograph?” You know? They’d be  
772 like, “Yeah.” So, we have lots of fond memories with the Canucks and them ordering Greek  
773 food or their steak – or sometimes they just wanted pizza.

774 INTVWR: Do you remember any particular...? We’re talking about – when we mention  
775 Canucks, of course Vancouver Canucks hockey team.

776 JS: Okay. First number one: Greg Adams. Well, he was Greek. Him and his dad, him and his  
777 wife would come in. Oh, Garth Butcher, Cliff Ronning, Linden would come in. Babich would  
778 come in, Melnick would come in. Oh, so, so many So many. And then, of course, you know, the  
779 team then moved to Rogers or the garage, as it was called back then, and we lost that little bit of  
780 fun.

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781 INTVWR: Right. So, that was more in the '90s. I can't remember when they moved to the,  
782 yeah, GM arena or Rogers Arena.

783 JS: **01:12:12** Mid-90s. Somewhere there. Yeah. Somewhere around that time. I don't remember,  
784 either. Maybe '92 they moved there.

785 INTVWR: Is that also – that's where the Vancouver Grizzlies played, I think. Is that right? Did  
786 any of them, do you remember any of the...?

787 JS: No, the Grizzlies played downtown.

788 INTVWR: Oh, okay.

789 JS: They built that stadium specifically to have that NBA and the NHL combined.

790 INTVWR: So, it was more of a hockey place.

791 JS: It was more the hockey.

792 INTVWR: Do you have any of those autographs still up in the restaurant? Did you have them  
793 up? Like, let's say the décor now of the restaurant. Actually, we didn't really talk about that.

794 JS: Oh, yeah.

795 INTVWR: Did you have any of those on the wall or anything like that?

796 JS: No.

797 INTVWR: I guess it's kind of weird because they're coming in, and they're like, "Oh, there's  
798 my signature."

799 JS: Yeah. No. What we did do near in the middle, like in the late-'90s or early-2000s, is we  
800 would always put... **01:13:01** We'd take photos of our customers, and we'd put them up, and  
801 then we had photo albums, and then people could go through and find pictures of, you know, a  
802 family moment that they had. But the décor always changed. You can't just keep looking at the  
803 same color of the wall for, like, 41 years. Like, no. The last time we renovated, though, my  
804 parents were away in Greece, and they didn't know, but I said, I said, "We're painting the wall  
805 again in here!" I closed the restaurant for a day, and I called all my friends, and I said, "We're  
806 painting this!" And then my parents came, and they're like, "Oh, my god!" It's like, "Surprise!"  
807 But it stayed that way for a long time. I think we had done like a dark, burgundy red wall. That's  
808 because red makes you hungry, and we wanted something cozy, right? And we had just  
809 transitioned to a menu where we were sticking to what we were really well-known for, which  
810 were a lot of red sauces and tomato sauces. **01:14:04** So, it sort of you know, it meshes and  
811 comes together. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know if there was anything else we could touch on.



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812 INTVWR: Well, I think there's... That covers it pretty well. I mean, firstly, the food, which is  
813 kind of a theme more of this interview, I think I read though that you're accounts manager for  
814 Kolonaki Group, or your wholesale distribution now as well. I don't know how far back that  
815 goes.

816 JS: So, Kolonaki, we start... They asked me to be an Accounts Manager for their Vancouver. So  
817 we call ourselves Kolonaki Group West, you know. And from that though, of course, all great  
818 ideas started and then a pandemic hits. We are nonetheless... I'm still involved with Kolonaki,  
819 but it's more turned into Euro Fine Foods, where we are a distributor now, and we work with  
820 Kolonaki Fine Foods out of Toronto, and we sort of run their Vancouver operation. **01:15:05** So,  
821 I am still definitely a foodie. Pushing what I know of the best boutique items from Greece,  
822 obviously, on my own social media as well. I sort of use the hashtag Greek Foodie West. And I  
823 like to promote Greek food, or Italian food, or any food, actually. But obviously, I know the  
824 stories on a lot of Greek products. I lived in Greece for a little bit as well. And in Greece in the  
825 winter, when I couldn't take a siesta, I just couldn't sleep during the day when everybody else is  
826 sleeping, I would watch a lot of Greek cooking shows, and I would learn about so many different  
827 regions of Greece. And I'm also blessed to have traveled extensively throughout Greece. I just  
828 didn't stick to my [inaudible 1:15:57], the place where I'm from. **01:16:00** Like, I've traveled  
829 north, east, south, west, like, and I've been there in all four seasons. So I've seen the food. And I  
830 understand the spice and the trade routes because I've understood the history. And I've been  
831 blessed to sort of have particular bits of food knowledge. I'm not an expert, but I've seen enough  
832 and I've read enough to sort of say, hey, they're doing this traditionally. And I've said, I've also  
833 tasted quite a bit of the different flavors. So, I go by Greek Foodie West as a little hashtag. And I  
834 sort of explore Greek food, Greek ticking techniques. Like, I know how to roll out my own  
835 Philo. You know, I do it every Easter and every Christmas. I'm there making Philo from scratch,  
836 you know, with the butter, the whole technique making a 90 layer of Philo.

837 INTVWR: Just for your own, just for yourself or for family?

838 JS: Just for family. Sometimes, I go on, and I broadcast it on social media and, you know, the  
839 whole rolling of the Philo takes up the whole table, and it's hours' labor work. But this is a  
840 technique that has been in my family for 140 years. Like, we're talking it's almost like how to  
841 learn how to make a croissant. The layering of the dough and the butter, right? And so, because  
842 of me pushing this knowledge, all of this accumulated into the success of helping grow Grandpa  
843 Jay's and giving me the confidence to walk into 180 stores to try and get 145 stores. Right?  
844 Grandpa Jay's was not an overnight success. You know, we've, we've owned the company for 19  
845 years. And it's only now become a brand name that is definitely on the rise. But it's all these little  
846 things that I took that accumulated to make it look now that it's an overnight success. **01:18:04**  
847 And same goes with my sister, right. When I speak for Grandpa Jay's, I speak on behalf of me  
848 and my sister and the foodies that we are, that we were grown to be. Even though we ate a lot of  
849 Italian food too!

850 INTVWR: Well, that's how you learn from other cuisines, as well, of course.

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851 JS: For sure.

852 INTVWR: Get new ideas and merge them together...

853 JS: And then you realize, like, oh, that Sicilian Easter bread is very similar to, like, the Greek  
854 Easter bread. Oh, I wonder why? Well, you know, Magna Grecia is what that part of Cicely is  
855 called. Right? Yeah. So, mad respect for Italian cuisine. Mad respect for Greek cuisine.

856 INTVWR: And I'm sure that's what, I mean... Because the Greek food that was served at  
857 Romanas, you know, it's not like it's exactly like the food that was in Greece. Right? It's  
858 authentic, but it's – it's localized, too, right, for here. So, I'm sure that you all drew on those  
859 influences, too, of what other customs you're interested in. You know you're learning from  
860 Italian food and any kind of food, I'm sure, right, and seeing what the customers like. There's a  
861 little bit of adaptation that would go into the creation of food.

862 JS: Well, yeah, and I mean, doing different twists on it. Like, taking a traditional Trahana which  
863 is a fermented Greek pasta, and Dad making it into a soup and adding feta soup and calling it  
864 "cream of feta soup," and customers loving it. You know? And Trahana is a very rare treat to  
865 find. There are no [inaudible 1:19:30] (background sound of a wheeled cart)... Or, like, you, you  
866 mentioned earlier with the Fakes, the lentil soup, we would push Greek food in the soups  
867 because it was so easy. We would have Fakes. Our Fasolada was so popular! Our Avgolemono!  
868 Everybody knows what Avgolemono is now, and that's because it's because of the early risk  
869 takers – of us, you know? – experimenting and pushing the Avgolemono and the Fasolada and  
870 making it an easy soup that they could just eat with a pita bread at lunch hour. Right? But now, if  
871 I were to open a restaurant... **01:20:16** There, with my mad respect to the Romana legacy,  
872 there's no way that I would do a restaurant with that same menu. Impossible. Right?

873 INTVWR: Why do you say that?

874 JS: Well, I just think that Romana was only able to do so much given with the constraints of a  
875 kitchen that was open in 1973. It had a pizza oven, four burners, a place to grill, and two deep  
876 fryers – and then all fridge. You know? There's no way that I'd be doing rice every day. There's  
877 no way that I'd be doing, you know... Very hard to do moussaka daily. Like, you, you need to  
878 come up with a menu that's fresh, less freezer spaces, more fresh food, smaller menu. **01:21:12**  
879 Doing the best that you can, picking menu items that you excel at. Not something that is just  
880 going to sell, and you're not going to put the love of your hands working on it. Right? In Greek,  
881 what's that word called? In Greek, there's a specific word: [inaudible 1:21:30]. Right?

882 INTVWR: Like, working with your hands?

883 JS: No, [inaudible 1:21:36] is just like this, to me, I believe, the, the translation would be just like  
884 a half, half... No love into what you've just done. And working in restaurants, if I'm at a  
885 restaurant, and the plate comes out, and I'm looking at a plate, I can just tell that the chef who

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886 gave me this had [inaudible 1:21:58] in it or didn't. You know? You just know. And whenever  
887 you want to present food, you want to make it look good. **01:22:08** Right? You want to know  
888 that your hands had love in that. That's all you want. Even when you want to eat, you want to eat  
889 something that has love in it. And if I were to open a restaurant, it would definitely have a  
890 smaller menu and just focus probably on an homage to Romanas with some of the flavors, and  
891 then, of course, some of what I've researched on my own.

892 INTVWR: Right. Yeah, always adapting and thinking about the future.

893 JS: Yup.

894 INTVWR: That kind of brings me to my last question or topic, actually, which would be about  
895 the future of the Greek community. Thinking about the youth and the children, our younger  
896 adults today, within the broader Greek community. There's not really a card-defined Greek  
897 community necessarily, but what kind of future do you see for the community, or what advice  
898 would you have for, for Greece? **01:23:10** Whether it's Burnaby or Vancouver.

899 JS: Well, the Greek community with four churches... We've just built a Greek school on the  
900 property in Burnaby. No, sorry, on the Vancouver side.

901 INTVWR: On the, at the church site?

902 JS: At the church site, in between the parking lot they've just put up a brand-new school  
903 building. We're hoping to go into that building in September. So, I... I think that the community,  
904 at least in Vancouver, which services Burnaby, is going to be strong. I think if they can... If we  
905 can all just remind our kids of the roots because I had an aunt in Greece who instilled the roots in  
906 me. And having little things like the festival... This year, you were a guest at the festival.  
907 **01:24:02** You saw the amount of kids volunteering; the amount of kids volunteering was unreal.  
908 And, and even though half the families were in Greece this summer, those that stayed behind  
909 were volunteering, and even my own daughter was volunteering. I think if the community wants  
910 to exist, the parents need to step up and volunteer so that their kids see it and instill it in them to  
911 volunteer. If the kids aren't there watching their parents do it, there's no... It diminishes. And I  
912 know as a member of the Greek community at large, I know I am now being approached more  
913 and more to give back because they know now that my daughter's a little older, but they also  
914 know that I am savvy enough to offer advice as to how to keep our communities going stronger  
915 and engage those kids. Because engagement is critical at this point. **01:25:03** So yes, I even have  
916 emails in my inbox right now asking me about what we can do to engage the young ones, and  
917 food is a part of it. But in the engagement, teach them how to make that food. Teach them about  
918 the Greek history, teach them about what happened in Constantinople under the Ottomans. Teach  
919 them. It's not just the Ancient Greek and the heroes. There are everyday heroes all over Greece  
920 that are worth having their stories heard. And there's also Greek heroes here in Vancouver, like  
921 what's Kostas Karatsikis said – that documented it all. My advice to the Greek community would  
922 be to... And I actually wrote this in my last article commemorating Kosta, was to forgive the

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**Interview with Jenny Siormanolakis**

**Audio Recording: 2023\_0016\_0013\_003.mp3**

**Interviewer: James Binks (INTVWR)**

**Interviewee: Jenny Siormanolakis (JS)**

**Date of Interview: July 26, 2023**

923 mistakes of the past, let it go, and realize that we are all equals. **01:26:07** No one's name is more  
924 important than the other person's name. And the amount of money you gave to a church to a  
925 community doesn't mean that you get more say. Just like it is in any political of any sort of  
926 community. They all have the same problems, I'm sure. And just teach the kids. That's all you  
927 can do is teach the kids. That's what it comes down to. It's all it comes down to is teach the  
928 youth. Yeah.

929 INTVWR: All right. Well, on, on that note, we'll end our excellent interview.

930 JS: Thank you.

931 INTVWR: Thank you so much, Jenny Siormanolakis for joining me for this interview today.

932 JS: Thanks.

933 INTVWR: It's been a great pleasure, and yeah. That's it, really. Thank you for joining me today.

934 JS: Thank you. **01:26:51**