

Q&A with Joe's Commissary owner Joe Bushfan

By Nicole Caporaso
The Durham VOICE

Joe Bushfan has lived in Durham for about 13 years, and he has nearly seen it all. The owner of Joe's Commissary and Commercial Kitchen, the Boston native also owns the now-closed Joe's Diner, located at 2100 Angier Ave. on the corner of Driver Street.

In addition to running the commissary, Bushfan sells hot dogs in a trailer behind the old diner a few times a month, plans the future of his businesses with his new partner, his sister Norma Francine Bushfan-Stamps, and works to bring the East Durham community together.

The Durham VOICE: What made you decide to close Joe's Diner?

Joe Bushfan: I opened the diner on Jan. 2, 2010, and I closed it mid-June of 2015. The area wasn't ready yet. The area is still being developed, and I was losing \$50,000 for five years, and I'm in it, but I'm in it to make a little bit of money for myself.

DV: With your sister as your new partner, what are your plans for the future?

JB: We're about to change a lot of things. She's interested in opening the diner back up, and after losing \$50,000, I'm thinking (in 2018), there's the possibility. Meanwhile, we're surviving on what we're doing with the commissary, so that's our major focus. We're also going to help the community get back on its feet and work hand in hand with the East Durham Children's Initiative, the A.J. Fletcher Foundation, Self-Help (Credit Union), all those. It's a collective effort for everybody to sit down and come together to build this community — not a hood but a community.

DV: What would a built community look like to you, and how would it be different from what it is now?

JB: You can't please everybody, but (a community would)

have everybody come together and have a good time. I've always tried to do that through food and music because those are the things people are drawn to, but my thing is to be able to not have one voice but collectively come together like a church. I see all these churches here, and everybody comes from different regions of North Carolina to come to these churches, but nobody wants to collectively all come together. There're about 100 churches around here, and if they all came together, I know the neighborhood makes up the community, and the community makes up the church. Why don't they all come together and say, "Love thy neighbor. Let's all try to do something positive in the community together."

I've tried, and I wanted to do a Woodstock through music with each church who had a choir sing two songs or have a potato sack race or have the banks come out and do a pre-approval on mortgages, ... see if people have high blood pressure or diabetes, have lawyers come out, stuff like that. Some of the things people in this community are plagued with are really minute to me and you, in terms of they might owe \$45 because they might need to get their license renewed, stuff like that, but there's stress behind that. All they need is a little help. It's not about the pastors, but it's about getting together the people that need help.

DV: How has Durham changed since you moved here?

JB: Slowly but surely, it's changing. It's very diversified, very multicultural. And it's a foodie town. It's been positive changes. But over here, they haven't done anything. They haven't changed the water pipes in this area in 100 years, and then they were wondering why people were having complications. The city is now beginning to step up a little more, but I think this is the last corridor they're coming down. I can't



Norma Francine Bushfan-Stamps and Joe Bushfan, siblings and business partners, are the owners of Joe's Commissary and Commercial Kitchen. (Photo by Nicole Caporaso.)

even tell you what a sigh of relief it is that help is coming. I didn't know where any of this was going to go, standing out here with a hot dog cart.

DV: In your opinion, is Durham a good place to own a business?

JB: It has its highs and lows. It all depends on location, but this area has seen steady growth with the East Durham Children's Initiative, Self-Help (Credit Union), the Maureen Joy Charter School, ... the widening of U.S. Highway 70 and the widening of U.S. Highway 55. It's growing, so basically they're going to need that expansion because it's like a bottleneck. There're about 265 families a month that move into the 27703 (ZIP) code.

Durham is growing in a good way. The hospitality here is very good. Forget the taboo ... other counties say about Durham. Everybody has a little bit of mishaps, but Durham is heavily concentrated on a multicultural facet of bringing everybody together, no matter what race, creed, color, gender, whatever they may be. Durham has been hitting the nail on the head in terms of making things work in people collectively

coming together.

DV: What would you say to people who think Durham has a negative reputation?

JB: They need to come down and experience it for themselves and stop listening to what everybody else says. Come see it firsthand, and walk downtown, and see the communities. Stop the media — they never report any of the good stuff. We'll take the good and the bad, but there's a lot of good stuff happening here. We have a new light rail coming in here. The police headquarters are moving up the street. There're so many good things happening.

DV: What has been your biggest accomplishment here?

JB: Seeing this all happen and lowering the crime rate. It dropped over 72 percent, and a lot of the illegal commerce that you see with the prostitution, gangs and drugs, that has subsided big time. You're seeing people start to take more interest. So much is going on right now, and all these new players are coming to the table. I guess they feel the threat has been eliminated, but we're not out of the woods yet. We've still got some quirks with people that aren't ready to catch up to the times.