



APRIL 5, 2024
SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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SUBJECT: TOM KOHLER



Tom Kohler

15:27:52:19 [Eric Darling]: Got it. Got it, got it. I'll take it. There you go, sir. Hang on my finger. Oh yeah, I won't take that. And we're off and running. Whenever you're ready.

15:28:03:11 [Mickey Youmans]: Okay. Don't forget to look me right in the eye. Yeah. Okay. Your full name or spelling?

15:28:13:22 [Tom Kohler]: My name is Tom Kohler and that's T-O-M-K-O-H-L-E-R.

15:28:19:18 [Mickey Youmans]: This next question is hard to ask, but who are you? What are you, and how do you identify yourself?

15:28:26:06 [Tom Kohler]: I identify myself as a he.

15:28:29:19 [Mickey Youmans]: Okay. When, when, when, when, when were you born and when?

15:28:33:09 [Tom Kohler]: I was born in 1952 and I am a savannahian.

15:28:37:14 [Mickey Youmans]: Okay. So I guess you know what the first question is, what role has your religious faith played in your civic and community life? And you just have to begin, however you want to say that.

15:28:53:10 [Tom Kohler]: Sure. Well, you know, my family was a member of Mickve Israel temple downtown, and I was in the temple youth group and we were asked to visit a young person who needed some help, and I went out and did that and visited and spent about a year and a half going each week to his home to help with a physical therapy pattern that was being done. And his name was Tommy Broussard. And up until that time, I had imagined that I

15:29:29:01 would be an advertising executive in New York City. 'cause my uncle had had a, a firm. But meeting Tommy Broussard and then doing that for about a year and a half took me in a completely different direction, and which did become my career,

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if you will, and which got, which turned out to be involved, you know, knowing a lot of people who had disabilities of all

15:29:53:18 sorts and, and getting people connected up with lots of other people. So, so really my entire career has comes from a volunteer experience at Mickve Israel temple.

15:30:05:18 [Mickey Youmans]: That's, that's wonderful. The, the, this next question is, you know, describe the, the Temple and what role you have played in it. Did you, is there, maybe, is there any other things that you did through the just a, maybe another activity that you did at the, from the Temple that, or, or just carry forward what the, the next, the next thing, like you said, your whole career. What would be the, what would be

15:30:33:13 the, the next thing in your career? Right. That was Faith-based,

15:30:38:14 [Tom Kohler]: Very little quote, faith-based, specifically Faith-based. But I would say that when I started to work for Chat... For Georgia Advocacy Office, then Chatham Savannah Citizen Advocacy, that took me into many houses of faith over a many year period to talk to people about the idea that we had, which was citizen advocacy. The idea that one individual person who lives on what we call thick ice could be invited to get to know individual person who lived on thin ice. And we could invite

15:31:12:11 those two people to meet each other and discover ways that they could be mutually beneficial to each other. And so I could, as I say, spent over 40 years partially, you know, visiting congregations and, and, and engaging people in that, in that mission. I'll give you one example. Becky Cheatham

15:31:39:17 was our chairman of our first little advisory board. And I had known Becky previously. We had worked at Georgia Regional Hospital together. And when we worked there, we realized that what we saw there was not right. It didn't, it didn't, didn't feel good to us. I left after six months and she had left fairly soon after that. But she had then married Frank Cheatham by that time. And I asked her if she would chair this little advisory board, this little idea called Citizen Advocacy that we were gonna start. And she

15:32:11:03 agreed. And so she was active at Christ Church at the time. And so I went and did a presentation at Christ Church and talked about this idea. A man named Kevin Fox came up afterward and said that interesting presentation, maybe we could have lunch. And so I got to know Kevin, he was with Branigar who developed The Landings, and he was a marketing guy and, and he said he could be interested in being an advocate.

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- 15:32:37:19 [Tom Kohler]: I called him six months later after I had met a man named Jim Burke. And Jim had moved up from Jacksonville where he lived with his mother, and his mother had become aged. And so they had moved up together and so they could be closer to her sister. She had since passed away and now he lived with his aunt. The problem was that he used a wheelchair and he couldn't get into the bathroom in his aunt's house. So that was the kind of the problem, if you will. So I called Kevin and asked if we could have lunch again. And we did. And I explained the situation and
- 15:33:11:17 I said, Kevin, the reason I've asked you is 'cause I figure, you know, a lot of the contractors out at Branigar, and this is gonna be a grass, probably gonna have to be a grassroots effort to figure this thing out. And Kevin thought about it and met Jim and decided that he would try to figure this out. How do we build a bathroom? The phrase became, how do we build a bathroom for Burke? And Jim was very clear, adamant, very difficult
- 15:33:43:12 speech. I mean, listening to Jim Burke was a challenge. You really had to listen to Jim Burke because it really had a hard time with his language. So he really had to listen. But Jim was really clear that if you call Terry Parker Baptist Church in Jacksonville, call them, Kevin did. And it turned out that yes, the several church members came up several weekends in a row. Kevin organized the effort, organized the local supplies and all
- 15:34:11:02 that. And over a several weekend period, the bathroom was built for Burke at his aunt's house, a barrier-free accessible bathroom. So there are two congregations involved there.
- 15:34:22:14 [Tom Kohler]: One in Jacksonville, Kevin from Christ Church. Now, just to add to that story a little bit, after a couple of years, Jim decided to live with his aunt, was not exactly what he wanted to do as a grown man. And so he talked to Kevin about figuring out a way for him to leave his aunt's home. And he moved into a, an apartment called Williams Court apartments. He moved into Williams Court apartments when he was 62 years old. And for the first time in his life, he lived as a freestanding adult man. And Kevin was influential in all that. And when Mr. Burke passed
- 15:34:56:19 away, Kevin was influential in arranging the funeral and influential in selling his affairs. So that would be an example of going to Christ Church and sharing this idea with people and one person raising their hand and say, I I hear you, and could, could I learn more? And, and the rest is, is that story.

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15:35:20:17 [Mickey Youmans]: Right, that, that's amazing. So with regard to, to citizen advocacy, let me see what it says. Are there ways that you were personally have been involved with the people from other That's one right there. You know, I mean that's, that's is one. Let's see. Well, you've got examples of faith in action. How about some, do you have other things maybe from the citizen advocacy, like some other examples of faith based stuff

15:35:57:01 that go through that? That

15:35:58:11 [Tom Kohler]: Yes. Yeah, that, that would be a, some, yeah,

15:36:00:22 [Mickey Youmans]: Some, some of the examples that you'd like to share?

15:36:04:15 [Tom Kohler]: Well, lemme say that, that citizen advocacy was developed by a man named Wolf Wolfensberger. And Wolf was a very interesting guy. He had been born and raised in Germany. He immigrated right after World War ii. He had seen what happens when society collapses. And he had seen how society does collapse. And he had seen the camps when they were liberated. And he had come to believe that if individual people were not willing to help other individual people, it didn't, the rest of it didn't matter. That that was the absolute core of a, a civil society was

15:36:40:00 the willingness of individual people to be responsible and responsive to other individual people. So that was his core belief. When he came to the United States, he was getting a double PhD at George Peabody. Now Vanderbilt in Psychology and Education Wolf did not have strong command of the English language yet. And so at Clover Bottom State School and Hospital, which was the big mental retardation to use the language of the day, and he was a janitor, he was

15:37:09:18 not one of the counselors or the therapists like the other PhD students. He worked as a night janitor. And I've heard him say that what he saw there, the only thing he could compare what he saw at Clover Bottom State School and Hospital to was what he had seen when they liberated the camps. And so that, that fundamental experience in him drove him to this idea called citizen advocacy. That we, that that would be important to intentionally

15:37:35:11 and persistently invite individual people who are socially valued, thick ice, to personally align themselves and commit themselves to the interest of individual people who are socially devalued, that is live on thin ice. And so that, that was his, and, and, and a lot of that came from his Catholic faith.

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- 15:37:58:23 [Tom Kohler]: Faith. He was a very, and became, quite frankly, almost like a radical Catholic as he got older and in some ways, sometimes an intolerant Catholic, if you will, very, very, you know, rigid. But, but that was his core idea, you know, I can think so. So that was the work that I did. I can tell you a story about a man named Sammy Benjamin who lived with his mother and out in the Coffee Bluff area until the state decided he
- 15:38:36:09 was, you know, needed to go live at Gracewood State School and Hospital, a big state institution. His mother, I had one other child or daughter, she was murdered by her husband. And then the five children came to live with Elizabeth. So the mother is now raising her five grandchildren out in Coffee Bluff. And what today would be called a shack No Plumbing. I didn't know any of this, but I did find here that Sammy Benjamin, a man
- 15:39:05:07 named Sammy Benjamin was living in a group home on the south side and they were not willing to give him eye surgery. So I went to meet a man named Sammy Benjamin, and he heard and thought, I think I've heard this is a familiar name, and I think maybe it's Clete Bergen who has told me about this because Clete grew out in Coffee Bluff. I call Clete an attorney. He said, Sammy Benjamin's dead. I said, I saw Sammy Benjamin last week. Sammy
- 15:39:30:19 Benjamin's dead. No, he is not. So we went to see Sammy Benjamin and then Clete went to see Sammy's mama, who thought Sammy was dead. And so we stopped the move to Jacksonville where they wanted to send him. He wound up living in a nursing home out on White Bluff Road, but Clete organized over 300 people over a five year period and took the piece of property that the family owned that the shack was on. And with the help of Richard
- 15:40:00:01 Shinholster, Speedwell United Methodist Church, who was also the assistant director at VO-Tech, Joannie Lubovich, Isle of Hope United Methodist Church, John Mendralla, an architect I think at Sacred Heart, if I remember right, over a five year period, 300 people built a three, a four bedroom brick house for the family. And Sammy Benjamin got... Was able to come home. And so that seems to me to be a story of faith in action, if you
- 15:40:34:22 will.
- 15:40:37:13 [Tom Kohler]: Sandrell George, I'll never forget, Sandrell called me on Christmas morning to say that she was in the, at Memorial Hospital with the woman that I had introduced her to who had grown up in foster care and then run away from foster care and was basically living in the street when they met. She was, she was there and Lorraine had just had her baby and she was there to be there to be like the birth coach. And it was Christmas day and she said it was not lost on her that it was Christmas

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- 15:41:07:13 day. And, you know, seems to me that would be faith in action, if you will. Yeah. So that, so over the years, you know, matched up 650, 700 people in individual matches. And many of those people, part of their motivation would've been based on their faith. Other people's motivation might have been more based on their idea about what community should look like or the, or, and some people may have gotten involved based more on, if you will,
- 15:41:41:19 kind of a social justice orientation. But that social justice orientation, generally, if you peel it back a bit, it some point it comes from a set of faith beliefs or religious beliefs. And so, you know, over the years I'd say that that certainly citizen advocacy is an idea that found fertile soil
- 15:42:07:21 here in Savannah. 'cause there are many congregations here. The joke in Savannah's always been there. There's as many churches as bars. That's always been the joke, you know, but, but I think, you know, the idea did do well here, partly because there was fertile soil here in the... Congregationally.
- 15:42:28:16 [Tom Kohler]: And because, you know, Savannah's big enough and small enough in a way, right? I mean, we're big enough that you can get some stuff done. We're small enough that you can get some stuff done. So, I mean, a man named Irv Tate as an example, a man has dr... Dramatic cerebral palsy, a Nell Bordeaux connected with with Irv and makes sure that Irv gets good medical care when he's in the hospital, et cetera, et cetera, et
- 15:43:00:06 cetera. And, and now, now is the associate pastor at Wesley Monumental. We, Margaret Minus, who very active in the Episcopal faith and a, a lay leader at St. Thomas matched for many years with a woman named Pam Insley. And Margaret and her husband Bobby organized some people and got Pam outta
- 15:43:28:18 Chatham nursing home and wound up arranging for Pam and a roommate to live in a lovely little house over in Blueberry Hill. And then Margaret's also the person one day that said that she had read one of our stories that we'd written about two people being connected to one another. She'd read one of our stories.
- 15:43:52:19 [Eric Darling]: Come on in. Do you mind if I put these back? No,
- 15:43:56:19 [Mickey Youmans]: You want us to do it for you?
- 15:43:58:04 [Eric Darling]: No, just mind your step please. We've got junk everywhere, you're

Tom Kohler

15:44:05:08 [Chuch Staffer]: Fine. If I don't do it, then I'll leave them. Or somebody'll take them. You grab them off right here. I think

15:44:16:03 [Mickey Youmans]: Those are amazing, good examples.

15:44:19:06 [Tom Kohler]: Okay. I could do,

15:44:21:13 [Mickey Youmans]: I you got a list?

15:44:22:12 [Tom Kohler]: I could do four. I don't have with me

15:44:23:13 [Eric Darling]: You have 600

15:44:24:18 [Tom Kohler]: Or so. Yeah, I mean I've got, I've got a bunch, but Yeah. Yeah. But again, they don't all spring out of faith, but I've got, I've got stories. Yeah, yeah, there's that. So just to, so Margaret Minus very active, is in the Episcopal church, I think a lay leader and also very active out at St. Thomas matched with a woman named Pam Hensley. And so she and her husband Bobby, and helped Pam move outta Chatham nursing home. And they found a nice little home for Pam

15:44:56:00 over in Blueberry Hill right off of Skidaway. And then Margaret was one day reading one of our newsletters, and she said that the story that she was reading reminded her of like a modern day parable. And so we sort of heard that and, and sort of ran with it. And so she helped us put together a little Sunday school curriculum called Disciples Among Us. And, you know, several congregations participated in in proofreading it and, and that sort

15:45:26:03 of thing. And then several congregations, several Sunday school classes used it as a curriculum, if you will. And so that was kind of a, a nice way that, that the work that we were doing in citizen advocacy connected up with the faith community here. We also did an event for several years at Asbury United Methodist Church on Waters Avenue called When Brothers Dwell in Unity. And E Larry McDuffy, who was a maybe the, the dominant... E. Larry is like the top choir director

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- 15:45:59:03 in, in, in the city. And he was on our board at the time, and he was kind of the music master of this thing. But we would have several gospel choirs, we'd have jazz quartet, we'd have all sorts of music from all sorts of different parts of the community. And we'd have readings that again would be, you know, related come from different people's faith homes and that sort of thing. And we would fill up Asbury with this event, calling
- 15:46:25:16 Brothers Dwell Unity.
- 15:46:27:04 [Tom Kohler]: And again, you know, the Chatham Savannah Citizen Advocacy was never overtly in any way, shape or form a religious organization, but it was an organization that certainly engaged the religious community community kinda consistently over time. If you would ask the question, could we have created citizen, could we have created a citizen advocacy program, and been able to have the kinda stories that you've heard emerge in a faithless world or in a non-religious world, it
- 15:47:04:18 would be hard for me to say. It would've been very different. I, I do think, again that the, the, the idea of people being willing to be more responsive and response responsible to one another as individual people. I do think that the, the, the soil here was fertile. And again, partly that's because the soil here is, is, is is so rich with church and, and faith, if
- 15:47:28:13 you will. Right?
- 15:47:29:11 [Mickey Youmans]: So the, the, I mean, what, what you, what you're saying is that the, the good stuff was grounded in faith.
- 15:47:36:04 [Tom Kohler]: I mean, not for everyone, for many people, right? Yeah. But certainly not for everyone. But, but certainly much of, much of what people were bringing forward, they were bringing forward because of, of maybe what they learned in Sunday school or maybe what their parents learned in Sunday school. But their parents decided that they weren't gonna make their kids go to Sunday school or maybe what their parents', parents learned in Sunday school. I, I mean, the thread goes deep, right? I, I mean, I mean, the moral thread goes deep. I mean, I mean, it, it could have been four generations back that the moral thread came out of the church.
- 15:48:10:10 The church may have been abandoned, if you will, by the family. But the moral thread that comes outta that generation four back is still that moral thread that

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runs through that family, if you will. So one other quick way that, that faith and religion sort of played out it with Chatham Savannah

15:48:31:20 anyway, was I met a man named Waddie Welcome in a nursing home.

15:48:37:16 [Tom Kohler]: And he, a man had cerebral palsy and he did not wanna live there. And so I recruited a man named Lester Johnson to help get to get Mr. Welcome out of that nursing home. And through that process, met a woman named Addie Reeves, who Mr. Welcome had gone to church with at Connor's Temple. He had, Mr. Welcome had had an active family et cetera, or he had outlived his family. Unbelievably. The child with cerebral palsy would outlive his mother, his father, two brothers. He had one remaining

15:49:11:05 brother. But that brother, unfortunately had his own limitations. Good, good intended people. Took him outta the neighborhood and, and sent him to live in this nursing home. He hated it. I found Mrs. Reeves. She had sent Mr Welcome a Valentine card, and I found the Valentine card in his nightstand in nursing home. And so I had her name and her address, and I

15:49:41:09 figured out how to find her and went to see her. And she lived in Yamacraw Village and she was a member of Connor's Temple, and she was the oldest member of Connor's Temple at that time. And she had told Mr. Welcome's mother that she would, quote, watch over Waddie at Mr. Welcome's mother's deathbed. And she had done that as best she could. She was the only person that had maintained personal contact with Waddie after he was put in his nursing home and then sent to a nursing home in West

15:50:11:01 Georgia, in South Georgia, rather. So Lester Johnson got involved and got Mr. Welcome back to Savannah, and then a group of people organized to get Mr. Welcome outta that nursing home and to be able to live in a adult foster home, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So it was a long journey. Getting to know Ms. Reeves was quite remarkable in that she had a mission society she'd set up at Connor's Temple, and this is what they did.

15:50:37:07 [Tom Kohler]: If you were a member at Connors Temple and you were in the hospital and you were gonna be discharged if you needed to be discharged and have care after you were discharged, they had a women, you could come live at their house. And this kept people from being discharged into nursing homes and stuff. And so that was her part of what she did at Congress Temple. And she kept her promise to Mrs. Welcome to Mr. Welcome's mother. She watched over Waddie until, you know, his death. And so from

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- 15:51:10:17 that came a story called "Waddie Welcome and the Beloved community." And the phrase beloved community comes from the Reverend Jim Lawson. And it comes from the American Civil Rights Movement. Many people attribute to, to Martin Luther King. 'cause he used the phrase very powerfully. But the phrase really does come from Reverend Jim Lawson, who I've had the pleasure of meeting, and I'm gonna read it if I, if I may... "The beloved community is not a utopia, but a place where the barriers between people gradually
- 15:51:40:00 come down and where citizens make a constant effort to address even the most difficult problems of ordinary people. It is above all else, an idealistic community." The Reverend Jim Lawson. So I think right there is a pretty strong expression of the relationship of faith in community and an expression of this idea of faith in action.
- 15:52:03:07 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah. That's beautiful. Let me ask you, is there an interracial included in all these folks that, that particular one, was it all one African American, all
- 15:52:16:07 [Tom Kohler]: White? No, this is interracial. This is butcher, baker, candle. This is a little bit of everybody.
- 15:52:20:21 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah, that's what, that's, that's one of the things that maybe if you could just, you know what I mean? Sure. Just sort of talk about the, that that flow and that inter you know, how cool, I mean, you know, the, during the time of how that's was different. I mean, did you know?
- 15:52:39:18 [Tom Kohler]: Yes. One of the thing, one of the things that people have said that's interesting about the citizen advocacy is they watch it over time is that you will see as broad a variety of people in one room than you'll ever see in Savannah. And certainly in, in this story about Waddie Welcome and the Beloved Community... When you, lemme see if I can find it real quick. If I may. There was a letter that had to be written to some bureaucrats, okay? And so the letter was written by Deborah
- 15:53:09:18 Sellman, who was a woman who happened to use a wheelchair. And then Mr. Welcome had what was called a circle of support. The circle of support would be Deacon Hart from the church, Addie Reeves from the church, Lester Johnson, an attorney in town, Robert Butts, an act, African American real estate agent, Archie Gadson, Mary DeLoach, Naomi Brown, Tom Lamar, Jackie Immel, Dottie and

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Paul Black, Clarence Peterson, Sylvia Kemp, a state representative, Regina Thomas, Kathy and Jeff Alden, Henry and Donna Moore

15:53:43:00 Henry's the assistant city manager, WW Law, Deacon Miller.

15:53:48:01 [Tom Kohler]: Sheldon Tenenbaum, a little bit of everybody gathered up around this man to make sure that his life got better instead of worse as he got older. If people come to the annual Chatham Savannah Citizen Advocacy Covered Dish, what you, you will notice and what people have talked about A.L. Addington, who's very active in the Episcopal church here, who's now I think 89 or something, I don't know. But Al once said, and I've heard other people have said that, they've said, coming into that

15:54:18:06 room, it's the first time they've ever been in a room where everybody's present. And what they mean by everybody is people with people that are walking, wheeling, Black, White, old, young, rich, poor. Everybody's in that room. And people have said that it's the first time they've ever been in a room and actually seen what a room looks like, where quote, everybody's there. And there have also been times when people have said, if there is a heaven, I think I've just seen it. So, but, but that is the power of trying to find ways to break down barriers and find ways for people who do not know each

15:54:52:18 other, to find ways to know each other that are positive and respectful. And in some ways, to me, the two big questions are what can people come to mean to one another and what can people come to mean to the common good? And and both of those questions are, are secular, but they, they both certainly live within all of our faith communities as well.

15:55:16:17 [Eric Darling]: I have, I have that, that brought the covered dish brought up a, a phrase I believe I heard you say one time, Tom, which was that it's really the important thing is the fellowship, fellowship being a key word in terms of how people work together, right? Like at, at the church, that's where it happens. Right?

15:55:36:10 [Tom Kohler]: Absolutely.

15:55:37:06 [Eric Darling]: And, and so I I, I'd like to get your thoughts on how, how important Fellowship is and how good Savannah is at Fellowship. That's sort of one of the standout features to me of our community. I, I'd like to hear your thoughts about that. Well, tell Mickey about me, please.

Tom Kohler

- 15:55:51:09 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, Savannah's interesting in, in that, you know, I mean, you can play this a lot of different ways, right? I mean, "Hostess City of the South," right? The great joke about Savannah, of course is in Charleston, they ask you what your daddy does for a living or whatever, and Savannah asks you, what do you drink? So I mean, there is a certain conviviality here that we're kind of famous for. And Conviviality is part of what lubricates relationships and relationship and the building of trust is what lubricates the
- 15:56:22:06 possibility of shared action and positive action. And, and so I, so I mean, and Savannah, I mean, we call Savannah "Slowvannah." And you can look at that two different ways, right? I mean, yeah, Slowvannah, well, if we weren't Slowvannah, we wouldn't have Historic Savannah, we would've knocked down all those buildings and it would've been urban renewal.
- 15:56:45:02 [Tom Kohler]: But we were too slow to do that. And that's became become, you know, our most important asset except for the oak trees, right? So yeah, we are Savannah, we are "Slowvannah", but we are slow enough that many times we do take the time to get to know each other. And because of the way particularly downtown is designed and, and, and the economics over the past 50 years with rich people, poor people, poor people, rich people, so close to each other. I mean, there are many times these unlikely connections that happened. I mean, Sheldon Tenenbaum can tell the story. I
- 15:57:17:18 can tell the story. Sheldon in the seventies was living downtown and a guy was going through his garb... trash can. And Sheldon went outside and said, what are you doing? And the guy said, I'm hungry. Sheldon said, if you're hungry, don't do that. Come knock on my door. The next day the guy knocked on his door. Tall, young African American man, lived in the housing projects on west, on West Broad, oh 50 years later, Sheldon flies back from
- 15:57:46:22 Colorado to do the eulogy.
- 15:57:51:17 [Mickey Youmans]: Hmm.
- 15:57:54:09 [Tom Kohler]: And see, I think that's the best of Savannah.
- 15:57:57:03 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah.

Tom Kohler

15:57:58:05 [Tom Kohler]: I I don't think it's the designer dog biscuits that we get to see in the lifestyle magazines. I, I don't think that's the best of Savannah.

15:58:13:19 [Eric Darling]: No. Speak for yourself. You're not a golden retriever.

15:58:19:18 [Tom Kohler]: Right. Otis is gonna be here in two seconds. Thank you, Tom. Thank you. That was fun. Let me read.