

**Interview with Matthew Pisano
Conducted by Gary Mercadante
Carlisle, Pennsylvania
October 25, 2007**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Matthew Pisano on October 25, 2007. The interview took place in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and was conducted by Gary Mercadante for an oral history research project for American Studies: Workshop in Field Methods, at Dickinson College.

Matthew Pisano, owner of Matty's Kitchen in downtown Carlisle, gives his perspective on the struggles of the downtown economy. The interview gives great insight into the lack of effect car show crowds at the fairgrounds have on the downtown business district, while also proposing many ideas to boost the downtown economy.

Interview

Mr. Mercadante: What is Carlisle?

Mr. Pisano: Wow, that's a good question. Carlisle is like home, It's a future. Its an opportunity. A building ground. Carlisle is hard to describe; it is its own entity, and it feels good to be here. It's just a lot of energy and I guess you can say it's like home, it is home.

Mr. Mercadante: Last time we spoke, you spoke to me about your knowledge of the car shows, and how that was how you knew about Carlisle. What other than that, once you came, actually attracted you here?

Mr. Pisano: The area, where it's located. Centrally located, you can get to Maryland, New York, anywhere, you can hit 4 states in 3 hours. The mountains, 8 miles up the road, you're in the mountains. The scenery, cost of living, the whole nine yards.

Mr. Mercadante: What did it have, in terms of business that other places didn't have that made you want to work here?

Mr. Pisano: Growth. I saw something that I could fit into, and the potential for the town to grow into something that will support me.

Mr. Mercadante: I know you said when you came here, there were not many lunch places, or places like that, therefore you saw the opportunity (for business). It seems as if there are a lot of vacant stores and places suffering in the downtown area. What do you think is going on now with the town's economy?

Mr. Pisano: I think what is going on in Carlisle is at a position where there is so much going on that it is trying to find its direction. It is as if people waited to see what was going to happen next, so it is looking for a direction, and I think people are having a hard time finding that direction. Restaurant growth is at an all time high, they are throwing a lot of money into that, where as they should be spreading it out evenly to help it grow better.

Mr. Mercadante: In revitalizing the downtown area, should the town be working more directly with the college, community, or both?

Mr. Pisano: Both, because the college, all the young people, you guys have a direction whether it is from different states, countries, or whatever, you have all these ideas from different places from around the world that you are bringing in here. The community, you need that support, because we live here all the time, so we need to listen to what is going on in our community as a whole. And that is how Carlisle could move forward, like with the theater, Dickinson can work more with the theater to bring different things there.

Mr. Mercadante: I recently read on the Carlisle Events website that the company brings 500,000 people annually to Carlisle.

Mr. Pisano: That is a modest estimate. It was a lot more, I think it is closer to a million.

Mr. Mercadante: So with bringing a million people into the town through the car shows to the fairgrounds, what effect do you see personally on your business and the town itself?

Mr. Pisano: The town itself is a unique situation because when there is a car show, the town is empty. A lot of people from the car shows stay out of Carlisle and go to their hotels because most of their hotels are out of Carlisle on the pike. Unless it's the corvette parade, it doesn't have as big of an impact as you would think it would. Hotels do well, restaurants it is hit or miss. I think we need more in town to attract them and I think we need to lighten up on letting the cars [come through town], whether it is a car cruise in town because that's prohibited in there now, and certain things they have to work on.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think there are ways Carlisle Events could involve the downtown area and the community much more?

Mr. Pisano: Absolutely. There's a lot of things, take for example the corvette parade. They block over Hanover Street, have you ever been here for that?

Mr. Mercadante: Well the one this past year I was here.

Mr. Pisano: Oh, well you were during the tornado.

Mr. Mercadante: It was during the storm, but yes the parade was going on that day.

Mr. Pisano: What they could do is have the parade down there, we have the theater here, we could have literally a car show right here with different corvettes, and have something going on, whether it is a jamming Dean movie, or something, and they can have all the restaurants and bars have some attractions in each one. That is one way to do it. That would bring a lot of people into town because it is a big spectacle, a big attraction. They could do that with every single car show, but they don't, and I don't know why. We haven't tapped into that.

Mr. Mercadante: So it is definitely an untapped resource.

Mr. Pisano: Absolutely, and also untapped resources are fairs, like Italian and Greek festivals. I mean we only have two or three festivals, we can have one every other weekend over the summer. That is another source of revenue. Why not, show off what this town has.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think there are other events that go on that have a greater effect on your business and the downtown area?

Mr. Pisano: Some things that the town does like...the arts festival because obviously it is right in front of here. Next year we are going to do...my friend is a Jamaican chef, and we are going to have a big BBQ out front here. But we need more events here like that. Because this town on the weekends needs to wake up. We need more events like that.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think it's the community itself that will be flowing to those events, or does it seem as if the college is more involved, or vice versa? Maybe the college isn't evolved enough?

Mr. Pisano: I don't think both parties are involved enough. I think there is a lot of people who would like to see these ideas but not move forward with it. And I think we all have to come together and move forward with it. I think there is a lot of people who have a lot of great ideas. I think they are afraid to implement them because they are afraid of either getting shut down, or they don't want to deal with the hassle of shutting down streets and going through the right channels and getting things done. So I think it has to be a collaborative effort, and I think people really have to come together and work with it and that is the problem we have now. Nobody is coming together in order to move forward with it.

Mr. Mercadante: I have heard a lot of people speak about the car shows as a tourist attraction for people all around the country and around the world, and many use Gettysburg as an example of a tourist attraction, and some speak of both the positives and the negatives, because a place such as Gettysburg becomes known as just that and nothing else. In terms of the car shows, do you think bringing all those people in as tourists and car enthusiasts is a negative or a positive? Can it be a bad thing for Carlisle to be known as that?

Mr. Pisano: It has been known for that for over 20 years. Okay, so why not use that to your advantage to educate people about Carlisle. I don't think it's a positive thing (right now). Gettysburg is known as a tourist attraction, but there is a lot of history there that people can really get into. You go to Gettysburg and there is so much to do, and it is so rich with history.

We have so much history in this town. Why not tap into it? Why not use it to our advantage to bring people into this town who will say "wow this is a pretty cool town!". What is the worst thing that can happen? You got a town that is booming on Friday and Saturday nights and throughout the week it'll start picking up because people will think, "Oh there is history here, and there are things to do here." It can only be positive. The people who are negative are people who are set in their ways, and are not open to new ideas. We have to be open to new ideas. You have to as a community, or else it is going to be the same thing. And any community would want what we have. This is a great thing we have here. Why not take advantage of it? Why not build a community?

Like you said, you see a lot of empty buildings here. Why not have a record store, why not have that. But you need all those people coming in. Get the retail going. Those car shows, you have 6 or 7 car shows a year. Those car shows could turn into year round profitability for the town. So that is how we have to look at it. We have to look at the positive things. And people have to be more open minded then that.

Mr. Mercadante: Another thing I often hear throughout the college community is complaints about the town pretty much shutting down late afternoon.

Mr. Pisano: Me too.

Mr. Mercadante: Four or five o'clock, it seems as if the town is shut down. Maybe a few restaurants are open, but besides that in downtown, especially here on the main strip there is nothing going on. What in terms of that aspect do you think needs to be done? Is it places that need to be brought in to be focused more towards the idea of a college town? Or is it the stores that are here now that need to do something about that?

Mr. Pisano: I think it's both. You take us for example, we know there is nothing at night here. We have done it before. We try to tie in with the theater and what is going on. We usually have good things going with that. We would be more than happy to do things if the town was open. I think what they need is to look at your Boston, Georgetown, etc. Look at all of them. What makes those towns and communities successful. They have a lot of diverse retail, whether it is record stores, different book shops, maybe it is different micro breweries. Something that is going to peak the interest in the people to keep the town going and alive.

And like you said, it shuts down because I just think it is an old mind set town. And I think we have to have new ideas. Yeah there are new restaurants coming in, but once you have more business and people flocking into town, I don't care if you have Emerald moving into town. We have to do diversity. Diversity is a good thing. I think if there is

a cool old record store, not a CD store, an old record store, a punk store, you know where there is different old clothes. Look at the Clothes Vine. That place is cool, and she has got a good thing going on. Now there could be another one totally diversified from that. So we need diverse things.

Mr. Mercadante: With the town having that old school feeling, should the focus be more on that old school mentality? Because the college is here I feel as if there is that younger generation, or college generation, and then you have the community itself with that old school mentality, so how do you balance that?

Mr. Pisano: (Laughs)

Mr. Mercadante: It is pretty difficult.

Mr. Pisano: It is difficult because number one, the powers that be are so old school and they control a lot of things. How are you going to get them to change their mindset. You have young entrepreneurs like myself who are here, who are saying we need to change this, that, and this, when these people are just staying on a steady course and it is hard. You need people who are willing to take charge, who are willing to come in and say, "I got this hip thing happening here, I want to do this for Carlisle. I don't want another restaurant," or, "I don't want another pizza shop. I want to do something different." To break into that round, it is hard and I can honestly say I don't know.

There are people that are in town that went to Dickinson 40 years ago. They are still here and their mentality is, "don't touch it, it is not broke." All these old buildings that are owned, these men in their 60's and 70's, they are the guys who own 20 buildings in town...they don't care if it doesn't get rented...they would rather let it sit, so they can make money off of the taxes and stuff. So we have to in a way get them out, get new blood in, and diversify everything. And it's a tough one because Carlisle is handed down from generation to generation with one mindset.

Mr. Mercadante: It is difficult to break into that.

Mr. Pisano: And we're learning that where our ideas are, people think we are nuts.

Mr. Mercadante: So do you feel as if there are a lot of people, who, if you were to propose an idea, would not be on board with what you guys are feeling?

Mr. Pisano: 50/50, absolutely. I think you can talk to any business owner and they'll say that. I know that. That is what everyone is frustrated about. We need to change the thinking, the way people think. Change is a good thing. I can see this town just like a Boston or a Georgetown, the different stores, this and that, I can see that. But people have to want to do it. It is in place.

You guys from the college, you guys are all trying to do your best in town. Kids all support all the places in town, but there is only so much you can do. Now we need to

bring other people in and show people, wow, this is a college town and they have all this stuff. Once that happens it will all fall into place.

Mr. Mercadante: But it seems as if the businesses, even though most like yourself are frustrated with that 50/50 mentality, have to come together, and without doing, so are not going to be able to do much. Do you agree?

Mr. Pisano: I am with you. I agree with it, and I am open to anyone's ideas. I'm willing to do anything. Problem is trying to get everyone together. That is when you have the problem with too much of one thing, that everyone is fighting for the scraps and everyone is thinking for themselves. Everyone has to be open minded to a lot of ideas even if someone is saying pizza throwing contest in the middle of the street. You have to do that, you have to make Carlisle exciting so that people say, "wow this is Carlisle, I'm coming there, I'm going to do it...during the day it's happening, nighttime it's happening." That is how we have to get people thinking. Unless we all get together and do it, it is not going to happen.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think that involves the surrounding areas also, or just Carlisle?

Mr. Pisano: Absolutely, I think it is downtown Carlisle, I think it's surrounding areas, I think if you bring people in with different ideas and you sit down and you figure, okay, if this is good for Carlisle, it will bleed over into Mount Holly or Boiling Springs. Why not have a whole thing of communities rockin & rollin. Because you know (people will say), "tonight...all right I'm going to go to Boiling Springs...Boiling Springs is hopping... Carlisle is hopping...Mount holly is hopping. Why not go there? Why not have all these different communities (working together)?

You go to New York and all the boroughs are hopping. Why can't we mold ourselves after that. Whether it is different clothing stores or whatever. You have to get everyone excited. You know I'm excited to be here, there is only so much I can do. It is only me and Cindi, and we are about ready to fall over man, and there are a lot of things we want to do next year, too. And we'll do it, we'll be tired, but it's our business, this is it. But I really think as a community it has to gel. It just has to. And it's splintering. Like I said, a tree has many roots. When they start to splinter, it is not a good thing. I think the potential is here for Carlisle to be a hip, cool...it could be that whole thing, and we all have to work together. We need someone to be a leader to pull everyone together even if nobody wants to...say, "hey, this is for your benefit." That's what we have to do.

Mr. Mercadante: I think that excitement you are talking about is what attracts the college community to your restaurant.

Mr. Pisano: I mean we have fun in here.

Mr. Mercadante: Exactly, and that excitement and that fun is what attracts people here in my opinion. It attracts me personally here, and I know it attracts friends of mine and kids in the (college) community, but the issue becomes, how do you get people to open a

business here? How do you get people in that position now who are coming into town seeing a town with a lot of vacant stores and little business, to feel that excitement and to want to come in and get that going?

Mr. Pisano: Wow, they have to first of all feel in their gut that they can do it. And second of all, they have to do like what we did. Two years ago, we saw this place that literally should have been closed down it was so bad. And I had a vision. I stepped outside and I looked at it, and you have to get people who are really go getters. Not just people who are looking to go into a business, that have a lot of money, and they go out of business in a year. They have to want to work, they have to see something that hits them. My 360 dance fitters, that place was a CD store, it was a hair salon before they got it. And then it was vacant, they saw something in that little store that they looked at it and said, you know what, my store would fit in here...I can make it work. And they got excited about it.

And we need people, humble people, it is so hard to say, that just want to have that...that want to take charge and every day you come in and give your best foot forward. That is what you have to have. And how do you attract them? It starts with the community, let's go back to the community...the community has to be excited about the town to say, "look yes I know there are vacant stores here, but you know what, the potential in Carlisle it's amazing...this is our history...Giant started here, the first Giant store was downtown Carlisle." It can be something great, and the community has to build it up that they are going to make it very attractive for a prospective buyer, and I was part of it. We live on West South street and we dig the neighborhood. And we said, yeah this is a cool neighborhood, we can have a cool restaurant, and we're achieving it. And that is how you have to do it.

The community has to pitch in, not just the downtown business association saying, "come to Carlisle, we have these open spots...we'll help you out." No, business will be gone in a year. You have to do it so that this community, the whole community will support you, it is an exciting community, and that is where the festivals come into play, that is where that whole thing (comes into play). You come to Carlisle, this is what is happening in Carlisle, this is why you should have a business here because it will grow and you will flourish. And also, we have Dickinson College to where they are helping out with the community and are very involved with the community. So it goes back to that community/college thing. We all have to work together.

Mr. Mercadante: I feel in relation to that, the attraction of the car shows, in terms of a business coming in here, being able to say this is what we have on top of the community and the college, we have car shows famous around the world, and 1 million people coming through here every year. And I feel that if Carlisle Events were to get involved with downtown and with the main strip here and do events like the parade and things like that, and further events with their car shows, and get those people to venture towards the downtown area, I think that would attract them much more.

Mr. Pisano: I wish Lisa was here. You need to talk to Lisa who helped build that (Carlisle Events). Lisa was with them for 20 years, her ideas. She just got back from Las Vegas at the Playboy Mansion, she did a car show there. That woman built Carlisle Productions. Her and my wife, they had so many ideas, and you need a fire cracker like that, and it needs to...going with the car shows...build a community, don't stop with that, start with the fall thing, start with spring things and then people will say, "wow they got 30 things, 40 things, happening a year, there must be a lot of money. Yes, Carlisle is rockin', there's thousands of people walking around the streets," and it is that butting head thing. Everyone has to be willing to, their looking at the donut whole, not the whole donut. We have to.

Mr. Mercadante: Although the town has become known for it, does it seem in your two years here if the community is for the car shows, or mixed, against them?

Mr. Pisano: It is very mixed. Because of the traffic, they are out of towners, yada yada yada. But in reality, most of those people who go to car shows do not come in town. They go to Fay's, that's it. At night they go to Rillo's, maybe to California Café and Piato's, and maybe now Alibi's, or some of the bars. Maybe. But most of them, they don't even come into town, and that's a shame. People say, "Oh, their town is flooded." No, last car show that was here on Saturday, we walked to town, the town was a ghost town at high noon. Ghost town.

I wanted to be open that day. I ate at the Backdoor Café at 12:30. He had four people in there. I left a little after one, and it was empty. Came by my restaurant, dead. You could actually park in the front. So that is a problem. When you have a few 100,000 people right up the street, this town should have been jumping. We have to create that buzz. Now people do talk about Pomfret Street. Why? They got three craft places there, but they cultivate and make a buzz. They are out there talking. Ok, let's take that energy and forward it into the whole town, because they'll profit from it. We will all profit from it. We all have to come together, but everyone keeps butting heads, and I don't know why. I don't know.

Mr. Mercadante: I know from a college standpoint, they had the first annual 5k for the Chip Miller foundation...

Mr. Pisano: Yes, I didn't go to that, when was it?

Mr. Mercadante: They had it last weekend, and I ran in it.

Mr. Pisano: How'd you do?

Mr. Mercadante: I did pretty well. It was a lot of fun. They had about 55 runners. It was the first one they did, but I had never actually been to the fairgrounds. I have driven past it, and been stuck in traffic for a car show, but I have never actually been there. We ran around the fairgrounds, and I never realized how big it actually is.

Mr. Pisano: 90 acres

Mr. Mercadante: Having been there and then leaving, I said to myself, “There are so many kids, most people I know, at the college that know it’s there, but have never either been over there or seen the actual fairgrounds. And they don’t know what their capabilities are, and I feel as if that word has to get out, not only to the community, but to the college community and everyone.

Mr. Pisano: I’m with you. Me and Cindi, we have an idea, I’ll say it. We have an idea for an Italian festival. Fairgrounds.

Mr. Mercadante: I would be there.

Mr. Pisano: Could you see that. With rides, food, everything...bands...do you know how huge that would be? It would be the biggest Italian festival on the East Coast, but I would have to do my homework. For the next year or two I have to go to every festival. In Delaware is the big one, New York, and my old neighborhood in Brooklyn...

Mr. Mercadante: I was just in one in Newark (New Jersey), the feast of San Genaro.

Mr. Pisano: Oh, Really?

Mr. Mercadante: The one they do in Newark is Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It starts late morning and goes until 10 or 11 at night. This one doesn’t have any rides, but they just have rows of food stands. Brick oven pizza, sausage and pepper sandwiches, chicken cutlets and fresh mozzarella. And then they have the big shops with all the Italian hats and shirts and the Newark Old First Ward t-shirts, and things like that.

Mr. Pisano: We need something like that.

Mr. Mercadante: The people that flow there...I love going just to see the history and the people that come out. They normally have a tent in the front where they have all the people who have been in Newark and stayed in Newark in that area for 80 years, people that have been there forever and you can tell because they are sitting down and 80 to 90 years old...looking around thinking I have been here for 60 or 70 years and this is still going on. That kind of history is a resource they still use in a neighborhood that is not very Italian anymore in that area, but still all the people flock there because of that history. Just hearing you talk about it, it is a great idea.

Mr. Pisano: Right there at the fairgrounds. Parking, or hell do it right down the street. Close the street and do it.

Mr. Mercadante: Downtown festival?

Mr. Pisano: Downtown festival...we used to have a couple other festivals. Remember the hoops?

Mr. Mercadante: No, I don't

Mr. Pisano: Well that was before I think you came here, when we first came here. They had downtown hoops one year, and they had 3 or 4 more festivals a year, and slowly they stopped doing them.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think that is because the people were not generating enough business?

Mr. Pisano: Who knows? You have to have people with a firecracker in their butt that want to do things. And that is what we need in this town...and I'm only one person...and if I can meet the right people, yeah, let's get it going. But we all have to come together. We need a mediator. Consigliere. Someone to come around and grab us all by the hand and sit us down and say look... It is a neat town, but I know we have to do something. You can't just say I'm here. I mean we are saying that we are here, but I don't know what else I can do. Unless I set a building on fire, I don't know. And it is here...it is all in place, and that is the frustrating thing. It is all in place, and it is just a matter of getting the right people to implement it.

Mr. Mercadante: The more and more I study it, I feel exactly what you are saying, that there's all these different things. Maybe 10 different things, but they are all separated. And they are all doing their own thing, and all those things are the things everyone talks about that we need that are here.

Mr. Pisano: And nobody wants to. Everyone is putting all this energy in different spots. Imagine how much, if we all came together, energy throughout the whole community...this town would be amazing. The potential is there. It pisses me off. Next year, I know speaking from my point of view, we are going to be doing a lot of new and exciting things.

Mr. Mercadante: Such as?

Mr. Pisano: Such as...I...You'll see...Cindi doesn't want me to blow anything, but they'll be including...you'll see. It is going to be pretty cool. I got some ideas for this place. I was going in one direction, but I have a path that I think will go real well with it. So we are going to do more comedy nights and some more things at night that I think are going to blow people's minds. I'm going to start bringing in some guest chefs. You are going to see me and the chef doing some things...with our chef coats on...and we are going to have fun.

Mr. Mercadante: Down the road in terms of the future, hearing you talking about how passionate you seem about Carlisle as a town, do you see yourself staying here?

Mr. Pisano: I hope so. And the only reason why I would leave is because it would annoy me enough that it is not...people aren't doing the positive things. I would like to keep

going here, but I am not going to keep beating my head against the wall. I want to see results and I want people to get together and move out. The restaurant community knows me. I know enough of everyone in town that they know I have ideas, but we are all not sitting down and doing them. I know everyone in town.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you think that is necessary?

Mr. Pisano: I think we all...and there have been other restaurant owners who have tried to do that, and nobody meshes together. They think it is like, "Okay, you are just going to take away my piece of the pie." No, it's not that, if my restaurant is doing well there is only so much my restaurant can do. I need you to tie into me, so that we can keep going. We all need to tie into each other that it works. And whether one of us restaurant tourists says, "hey, I know a friend who wants to open a retail store, what can I get him in here doing, something hip and exciting." That is how other businesses spark to. We'll see.

Mr. Mercadante: Hearing you talk about that, I picture the festival idea and having maybe all the different restaurants with a different stand.

Mr. Pisano: Absolutely.

Mr. Mercadante: You got Piatto, California Café, Georges, your restaurant. All places with different stands.

Mr. Pisano: And your doing whatever, whether it is different sandwiches or coffees, this and that, different desserts. Specializing in one thing that is unique. And people will say, "Oh, we didn't know this Italian thing was happening in Carlisle, or this festival." It would work, it would work. Not having, like what they did at the festival they just had, they had a big food court, and they had two or three people selling pulled pork bbq sandwiches, they had two or three people selling hot dogs, and nobody was going into the other restaurants in town. Why take away from us, the business in town, for people coming in for a day, where restaurants in town could've made a couple thousand dollars. Why not feature, whether it is Casa Mani doing whatever he does, why not feature everyone who does different things. And it would work.

Mr. Mercadante: A common problem seems to be with having stores like Wal-Mart and Target and all these "big box" stores. All the money that gets pumped into those places goes right out of the town. None of that goes back to the community. And all the money that gets pumped into places such as Matty's and Georges, that is money within the community. Money that is from the community, stays within the community, that helps the downtown economy. And that is where the business is. And that needs to keep being generated.

Mr. Pisano: And the only way how you are going to keep it going is by new and exciting business. You have to diversify and you have to get the community, whether it is the downtown business association or all these other organizations, to make it exciting and diversified and to make walking around...like you said, looking around now, nobody is

around here. People should be walking around doing things, going in and out of stores and stuff. And it is not there.

They have the parking lot over here by Bon Ton's, that place is empty. Start a free shuttle service from there. Say to people, "Hey come down to historic downtown Carlisle...shop there, eat there, do all this...we'll bus you in for free...drop you off right at the square...we have this going on, that going on...we have music going on." Have free music, who cares, we pay enough taxes here. Have free music there once or twice a month. "Come into downtown Carlisle, we got this band and that, free music, see all these restaurants, we got restaurants on this street." Bus them in, hundreds of people and they will go all over this scenic community, and that is what we need.

Mr. Pisano: So I don't know the answer. (Laughs)

Mr. Mercadante: Well Matty, thank you for your time.

Mr. Pisano: I appreciate it, I hope that helps you.

Mr. Mercadante: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]