

Southern-Korean Fried Chicken Comes to Midtown

Reflecting their Korean American identities in the food they cook, Mukja owners Peter Chung and Sean Chang tell a story of loss, resilience, and triumph.

By Paul Kim

July 5, 2020

When you bite into the Southern-Korean double-fried chicken at [Mukja](#), restaurant co-owners **Peter Chung** and **Sean Chang** want you to taste the story behind it. It's a story full of struggle, triumph, and identity.

"When you bite into that first piece of chicken, we want you to feel what we felt," Chung said in an interview with What Now Atlanta. "You can taste the struggle, you can taste the victory. You can taste it all and have it all make sense to you."

Yet, at its core, this story is about two friends.

Despite going to different high schools around Atlanta, Chung and Chang were close friends in high school who grew apart in college. Chung went to Georgia Tech and Chang, an aspiring chef, attended the University of Georgia. While in college, Chang was involved in a car accident while driving home. It left him paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair.

When Chung visited Chang in the hospital, Chang mentioned that he was transferring to Georgia State University because UGA was too hilly to navigate in a wheelchair. Now that they were both going to school in the city, the pair agreed to get an apartment.

"Every single day, this guy would just be cooking food," Chung said. "He's always been really gifted at cooking, naturally gifted. He can take whatever's in your fridge and make something really gourmet out of it."

Chang started feeding the friends that would drop by their apartment to positive responses. At this time, he was also trying to break into the culinary world, applying to jobs for anyone who would listen to him. He just wanted to be in a kitchen.

"Unfortunately, 99 percent of the people turned him down," Chung said. "It was a very dark time for him, because he felt like he could never achieve his dream anymore because of his injury."

That's when the pair decided to move beyond just feeding their friends and open their own restaurant. "If no one's going to provide a path for us, we'll just pave our own way," Chung said.

So the pair started testing recipes and refining their food until they came across "what we think is the holy grail of Korean fried chicken," Chung said. Wanting to move away from the negative connotations that comes with "fusion," Chung describes their fried chicken as a "marriage between Southern cuisine and authentic Korean food," reflective of their upbringings.



The "holy grail of Korean fried chicken." (Photos courtesy of Mukja)

Many Korean Americans, like Chung and Chang, can feel stuck in between two cultural identities. They're not Korean enough for Koreans, but they're too Korean for Americans.

"You kind of get in this weird middle ground where neither side fully accepts you," Chung said. "So you kind of have to make your own culture. I think the Korean American subculture is very prominent and deserves a voice."

This Korean American subculture is evident in Mukja's menu items, like their kimchi and bacon mac and cheese or the savory scallion jalapeno waffle in their chicken and

waffles. These items are meant to have an element of familiarity for non-Koreans while remaining true to the traditional flavors that make up Korean cuisine, like gochujang.



Mukja's chicken and waffles. (Photos courtesy of Mukja)

This idea also carries over to the restaurant's design. The decor in the **2,700-square-foot space** balances its Korean identity with its Atlanta setting. A black and white mural covers an entire wall, featuring prominent Atlanta features such as the Fox Theater and the Coca-Cola logo. The Korean characters for Mukja in red sit in the center of the mural with its translation "let's eat," underneath in blue. All the colors — black, white, red, blue — combine to resemble the Korean flag.

A “gallery wall,” features photos of Chang and Chung’s story in founding the restaurant and the evolution of Mukja from apartment-cooked fried chicken to a restaurant in **Midtown**. With this, the pair also envisions a polaroid wall where the owners can display pictures they take with their guests.

“We’re going to be the ones serving our guests,” Chung said. “We want this to be a local, organic, homegrown brand. We want this to be born and raised here in Atlanta. You see the owner on the wall, working in the kitchen kind of thing, very down to earth.”

The restaurant was also designed for people with disabilities, with lowered seating and countertops for people to order. Unfortunately, while raising funds for the restaurant, the pair weren’t able to raise enough money to create a kitchen that allows Chang to cook. Instead, he will be managing operations in the front of the house.

“The reason Sean enjoys cooking is because he likes seeing people bite into something and he likes seeing their eyes light up,” Chung said. “So he doesn’t necessarily have to be the one creating if someone else is making it to the exacting standards that he wants. If someone tries it and loves it, he experiences the same satisfaction as if he had made it himself.”

When the pair were developing Mukja, they aimed to create a restaurant equal parts Southern and equal parts Korean.

“On one end of the spectrum, you have a really pure Korean chicken place, and on the other hand, you have like a **Hattie B’s** pure Southern chicken place,” Chung said. “We’re directly in the middle.”

Mukja’s opening also speaks to a rise in popularity for Korean fried chicken. Chung says he and Chang observed that Korean food trends that explode in New York and Los Angeles often come to Atlanta and Virginia next.

“We’re seeing in LA and New York that Korean fried chicken places were going crazy. They were blowing up,” he said. “What we found was that there’s no Korean fried chicken places in the perimeter of Atlanta. So what we wanted to do was be the first to take over that market share.”

Yet, when they pitched their idea to landlords, they were faced with constant rejection. “At the verge of giving up on this idea altogether, finally someone said ‘yes, this might be a good idea,’” Chung said. Shortly after, they were moved into the space [formerly occupied by BurgerIM](#).

Unfortunately, the coronavirus presents one more challenge they need to overcome. Mukja is ready to open but lacks the licenses needed to operate. With **Atlanta City Hall** shut down due to the coronavirus, Mukja’s opening date is entirely dependent on City Hall opening again.

With all the challenges they have already overcome, the pair plans to open Mukja in the fall. It serves as a monument to the pair's perseverance.

"We really wanted that story to come to the forefront and be more than just a restaurant. We want it to be a message to people," Chung said. "No matter what happens, you have good friends, you have the mindset, you can achieve anything. Nothing is out of your reach."



Peter Chung (left) and Sean Chang (right) in front of Mukja. (Photos courtesy of Mukja)

([Original article](#) published in What Now Atlanta)

Tony Chung Splits Med School With Keeping His Family's Chinatown Restaurant Alive

APRIL 6, 2021 BY PAUL KIM



Tony Chung outside of Pasteur Grill and Noodles. (Photo: Paul Kim)

Behind every great Asian restaurant are the owner's children doing their homework nearby, or so the joke goes. Whenever Tony Chung sees those memes in the Facebook group "subtle asian traits," he can't help but laugh. He was one of those restaurant children. "There was this corner table, number one, at the restaurant where we would always sit and just do our homework while people were eating," recalls Chung, now a 23-year-old Biomedical Science Master's student at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

Chung's father Dennis has owned and operated Pasteur Grill and Noodles since 1995, when he bought the restaurant from the original owner. Out of their small space at 85 Baxter Street in Chinatown, Chung senior has been serving the kind of South Vietnamese food he grew up with in his home village, Soc Trang. His family immigrated to New York City in 1980.

When Tony was seven years old, his dad would bring him around to customers' tables to take orders or to just talk to them. He recalls a judge who worked at the courthouse across the street and had been coming into the restaurant since before Tony was born. "I remember one time, he thought it would be a good idea to take my sister and I to the courtroom to see what he does. Needless to say, I did not pursue law," Chung said.

Chung is now on the path to becoming a physician, hoping to "work with my hands and treat patients with cancer," he says. He splits his time between his work and the restaurant, where he has been helping more since the coronavirus pandemic ravaged Manhattan's Chinatown. He is the one answering Pasteur's Instagram messages.

On this Wednesday evening, Chung is calling over Zoom from a research lab at Mount Sinai. Dressed in a navy-blue fleece jacket, silver wire-frame glasses and a yellow disposable mask, Chung sits in one of Icahn's stairwells and spends almost two hours talking about Pasteur, his father and what it's like to grow up in a restaurant.

When did you start stepping in to help at your parents' restaurant?

This was a little after COVID peaked right around the end of May. That's when I stepped in to really help, and I saw that our business was struggling. Most of the restaurants were closed at the time, but there were some that weren't planning on opening again. Having the restaurants round since I was born, I spent a lot of time there. So I thought it would really break my heart if the restaurant closed. So I thought to myself, I don't want our restaurant to be like that. So I said, "Let's do something about that."

I always try to look at things optimistically and try to see the positive in bad situations. I thought this would be a great time to find ways to improve the restaurant. Maybe it is a blessing in disguise.

So you took a step back and looked at the restaurant? What did you guys decide to change?

I think the first step was delivery. No one could sit in the restaurant at the time, so all the food ordered was coming through either the delivery services that we partnered with or through takeout. So it started with learning how to package food better.

I'll admit, I haven't been spending as much time as I'd like on our social media pages, but one good thing that came out of it was being able to connect with customers. Some really loyal customers do reach out and say, "Hey, we love your food." Or they'll post our food, and tell their story about how they first started coming in and what they order. We've been able to connect with people, and I think that's really special.

Your parents have owned this place since before you were born. Was there ever a point where you thought you were going to inherit the restaurant?

During college, my goal was always to go to medical school and become a physician. But I think after I had started working there after COVID, I started getting more invested in the restaurant. It's a really hard thing to do to juggle everything, but I really do enjoy helping my parents develop recipes and seeing customers be happy.

My dad always told me, “Just focus on school. Don’t worry about the restaurant.” But I do enjoy being an entrepreneur, and I do know some doctors who own restaurants and are also physicians. There’s one I follow on Instagram. His name is Chef Dr. Lo. He’s an anesthesiologist at some hospital in Queens, and he also owns Spy C Cuisine.

Your dad has been running this restaurant coming up on 26 years. At some point he’s going to stop working at the restaurant, right? I’m wondering if there are any thoughts or plans for its future or if you’re going to cross that bridge when you get there?

My dad was 21 when he came here. Now he’s 62. So I imagine he’s going to retire in the next 10 years. What’s going to happen to the restaurant after that? No idea. We haven’t really talked about that. I think at the end, what he wants to see is that I’ve finished my education, and that I’m working and am able to provide for myself, and then he’ll call it quits. But like I said, I don’t want to see the restaurant go like that because I have an emotional investment in that restaurant. It’s been there all my life.



I think there’s this disconnect where your dad sees the restaurant as a means to an end where he can put his kids through college and close the restaurant, but this is also a pillar of the Chinatown community.

Well, I'm glad you think Pasteur is a pillar of the Chinatown community. I always thought we were one of the smaller restaurants, and there's just so many Vietnamese restaurants.

It's crazy you mention there's so many Vietnamese restaurants because when your dad bought the restaurant in 1995, there were almost none. Now we're looking at a Vietnamese food craze over the last decade. When you look at all that, what role do you think your dad played in that?

I think our restaurant definitely helped put Vietnamese food on the map in New York. New Yorkers definitely had to know and taste Vietnamese food before anyone could garner an interest in the cuisine. There had to be some Vietnamese restaurants in New York, and I think the very first ones to exist were in Chinatown.

I think that the Vietnamese food craze is still going very strong. I think some of the Chinatown restaurants, such as my restaurant, helped put Vietnamese food on the map, but it's these modern restaurants, these restaurants [that] are doing their modern take on Vietnamese food that are continuing this trend.

It's interesting that you want to be a physician and a restaurateur, two industries that famously have no time for family.

I did always feel that way. Growing up, my dad was trying to build up the restaurant and he was just working a lot. I always wondered, "Why aren't you home?" The picture of a dad that I had in my mind was an image ingrained in me by American ideals. You know, a guy who would work 9 to 5, Monday through Friday.

I think I have a better appreciation for what he does now that I'm older. When I was a kid, I remember being a little frustrated. Sometimes my mom would work at the restaurant to help my dad catch a break. On those days, my dad would take my sister and I and travel, sometimes we'd go to Disneyland or somewhere. He really did try to help me and my sister have a good childhood.

I kind of feel bad for him, cause he's worked so hard his entire life since starting the restaurant. Since coming to America, he's worked every day. He even told me, the first time that he was ever unemployed was COVID.

How did your dad cope with being unemployed for the first time in over four decades?

Surprisingly, he took it pretty well. He didn't show signs of distress or anything like I expected he would. I think one of the good things that came out of COVID, if there ever was a good thing, was that it allowed our family to bond more. My dad was spending a lot of time with us and with the dog. He was generally happy and learning new things, learning about the stock market. I was surprised at how upbeat he was despite all the bills coming in. I knew he was panicking inside, but I guess that's what I always liked about my dad. He always saw the positive side of things.

I know we've talked about a lot of things such as fatherhood and growing up in a restaurant, but I want to top it off with what might be a sort of surface-level question. What is your favorite dish you serve?

I would say right off the bat, our pho. I can never get sick of eating it. I eat it probably every day. I'll ask my dad to bring some home from the restaurant. I think the reason why I like it so much is not just because it tastes great, but because I know so much work has gone into making this one dish, this one liquid. There's a long process into making a soup that takes eight-plus hours. It doesn't look like it when you see it, because it just looks like soup.

When you know the process, and just how much work people put into it, you can really tease out the notes in the soup and really appreciate the food and the process and the history behind it. I see people before they've even tasted our broth, they'll just dump in basil, the beansprouts and the hoisin sauce and the hot sauce. Please taste the process first.

Gilly Brew Bar Expanding to Castleberry Hill, Adding Kitchen To Original Location

The Stone Mountain-based coffee bar will hold several popups in Peters Street Station leading up to its opening later this year.

By Paul Kim

June 26, 2020

Daniel Brown has a lot on his plate. The owner of Stone Mountain-based **Gilly Brew Bar**, Brown is in the process of opening a second location in Atlanta while working on opening a kitchen and cocktail bar space in the original Stone Mountain Village location.

Gilly Brew Bar, known for its cocktail-like coffees and teas they call “elixirs,” will open a second location later this year in the front portion of tattoo artist **Miya Bailey’s Peters Street Station**.

A community-driven coffee shop, Brown said Gilly’s main goal “is to get to understand the community that we’re in because we feel that’s the best way we can meet the needs of the people in that community.”

Despite finding success in the first location, opening in April 2018, Brown said he was initially reluctant to open another bar. Planning with the long view in sight, Brown says he wanted to build for longevity, not expansion.

“At the time, I really just wanted to focus on the growth here and didn’t want to grow the business too quickly,” Brown said in an interview with What Now Atlanta. “But my wife had asked me if I did want to open another location, what would be the ideal location? And I wanted to serve in a community where the A.U.C. [Atlanta University Center Consortium] was.”

The opportunity came shortly after that conversation, when Mori Russell, granddaughter of Atlanta entrepreneur Herman J. Russell, connected Brown with Bailey, who was looking for a coffee shop for Peters Street. After a couple of months of talking, Gilly Brew Co. announced its Peters Street opening on Juneteenth, holding a popup at Peters Street Station.



Gilly Brew Bar in Peters Street Station. (Photo by @maryclairephoto)

“I actually didn’t have a set time as to when I wanted to announce it, but with the way 2020 has panned out, I knew I wanted to have kind of a celebratory moment for the Black community,” he said. “It just made perfect sense to announce it on the 19th for Juneteenth.”

Gilly Brewing Co. will continue to hold popups up until its opening later this year. For Brown, these popups are a way to introduce themselves to the community. Brown says that the reception from the people in the area has been encouraging.

“I had a lot of students who graduated from Clark or Morehouse or Spelman who said that they wish we were there four years ago when they were at school” he said. “They were like, ‘we needed something like this.’”

Brown says that the popups are also a way to understand the community they’re joining and cater its services to the community’s needs. “We still plan to do innovative drinks and elixirs, but a lot of them will probably look a little different just because we want to stay relevant to that community,” he said.

Though the menus will vary between the two bars, on a broader scope, the intentions behind the two locations are different because the communities they’re in are different.

The Peters Street location will reflect the predominantly Black arts community and Black-owned business that surround it.

“It will most likely be reflective of [the community], just being a Black-owned business, and wanting to let the world know that just because we’re Black-owned, doesn’t mean that our prices should be any lesser,” he said. “I want to promote that although we’re a Black-owned business, we can do things with excellence as well, kind of a celebratory, artistic, very prideful demeanor.”

Meanwhile, in Stone Mountain, where a lot of racial tension still lingers, Gilly Brew Bar works to build relationships. “A lot of the events we put on, a lot of the strategic relations that we build are always with that in mind, trying to figure out ways we can help to reconcile that division that occurs here,” Brown said.

This is partly why the Gilly Brew Co. is opening a kitchen in its Stone Mountain location, which the Gilly team refer to as the Mayor’s House. “I knew that it would be great to bring a restaurant back especially because there’s not that much diversity [in Stone Mountain] in relation to food and different cuisines,” he said.

Built in 1834 by slaves, the Mayor’s House [has a long history](#). It housed Stone Mountain’s first mayor, Andrew Johnson, served as a hospital during the Civil War, operated as a hotel, then a restaurant.



\The Mayor’s House. (photo by @maryclairephoto)

When Brown bought the building six years ago and learned that it used to be a restaurant, opening a restaurant was a given to him. “It already came with a grease trap,” he said.

To increase culinary diversity, Brown is planning on inviting several chefs to the Mayor’s House throughout the year, rotating different types of cuisines through the kitchen. He is also working on acquiring the permits and licenses necessary to open the cocktail program he’s developing.

However, he says that over the course of opening and developing his business, he’s received a lot of pushback from the city.

“I can write a whole book on the many hiccups that I’ve had just solely on the lack of support,” he said. “They’ve put certain systems in place that will make any business owner have a difficult time opening up.”

That said, since Brown owns the Stone Mountain property, he has a lot of freedom in controlling the speed of growth in his company. It also means his business wasn’t hit nearly as hard by the coronavirus than those leasing their spaces. In fact, his business has actually expanded during the coronavirus.

“A lot of people are seeing how many businesses have been affected due to corona, but when you look at our business, it’s the exact opposite. We’ve been able to grow,” he said. “I’m always trying to encourage people to look into ownership, especially the Black community.”



The “Gilly Gang.” (photo by @maryclairephoto)

Though Brown has built a business that can withstand a pandemic, he wants to build something longer lasting. “I wanted to really establish a brand and a legacy for my family,” he said

In building that legacy, he has surrounded himself with a team of people that believe in what he believes in.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be where I am if I wasn’t surrounded around a team that has grasped onto the vision of the business,” he said. “We know that this is something really special.”

([Original article](#) published in What Now Atlanta)

A Learning Moment in the Midst of a Chinese Restaurant's Controversy

The owners of Lucky Lee's, accused of cultural appropriation, hope to move forward.

Paul Kim, Deputy Copy Chief

April 19, 2019



Lucky Lee's Chinese food restaurant (Staff Photo by Jorene He)

The history and perception of Chinese food in the United States is long, complex and deeply rooted in racism. Narratives of "[Chinese restaurant syndrome](#)," a term coined in the 1960s based on a fear of MSG, have followed Chinese cuisine for decades, along with [the idea](#) that Chinese food is dirty.

Such narratives perpetuate negative stereotypes that Chinese American communities have been fighting against. Though they started decades ago, these narratives still linger around, as seen in the controversy surrounding recently opened Union Square restaurant Lucky Lee's, marketed as a healthy and "clean" alternative to American-Chinese food.

Jennifer Berg, associate clinical professor of Nutrition and Food Studies at NYU, dates these narratives around Chinese food all the way back to Chinese immigration into New York as a result of the working conditions on the West Coast at the time. Berg says that Chinese immigrants — leaving the high-fatality railroad jobs behind in California — moved east to New York, where they were relegated to Lower East Side laundromats and restaurants.

"Because the food was so different than what people were eating and because the general living conditions on the Lower East Side were so overcrowded with inadequate plumbing and hygiene, it started these early stereotypical [questions]," she said. "'Chinese food is suspect, what's in it? Is there dog in it? What types of animals go into it?' The palette of what New York was eating was very homogenous and this was something completely different."

This isn't to undercut the role that racism played in these negative stereotypes.

"Society always tries to push down people at the bottom, and so recent Chinese migrants were lower on the totem pole than recent immigrants who were also low, but were white." Berg said. "Race played a huge role in this. Race and racism."

Decades later, the food landscape in America has changed drastically. Yet Chinese restaurants seem to be fighting an outgrowth of the battles they've been fighting for years: cultural appropriation. For the third time in less than a year, a non-Chinese-owned Chinese restaurant is under fire for cultural appropriation.

Following Andrew Zimmern's [controversial statements](#) on his new restaurant Lucky Cricket last year and Gordon Ramsey's London-based "authentic" Chinese

restaurant [Lucky Cat](#)— that has no Chinese chefs — openings earlier this year, Lucky Lee's, which opened on April 8, has come under criticism for [cultural appropriation](#) and [racist language](#) in its marketing campaign.

A since-deleted post from the restaurant's [Instagram account](#) described the feeling after eating lo mein as "icky" and "bloated," and offered an alternative in its "HIGH lo mein. Not too oily. Or salty."

In an interview with WSN, restaurant owner Arielle Haspel said that she was naive in the marketing of her restaurant. "I never meant for the word 'clean' to mean anything other than in the 'clean-eating' philosophy, which caters towards a specific nutrition and wellness lifestyle," she said.

Berg says that when looking at the incident in a vacuum, the language can come off as incredibly racist but thinks that "it comes down to whether that was their intention or whether it was just a lack of awareness," she said. "It seems to have not even crossed their minds."

For Berg, the intended meaning behind "clean food" was more toward the idea of lighter foods, but the connotation, given the historical context, gives it a different meaning entirely.

"You know language played a big role here as well," she said. "The word 'clean' when you're talking about an immigrant, is symbolically laden, and I'm sure she totally regrets saying that."

A nutritionist and health coach by trade, the first-time restaurateur turned to the restaurant's Instagram page to [apologize](#). A post from April 15, written by Haspel, reads "I am genuinely sorry to have disappointed and hurt so many of you. We learned that our marketing perpetuated negative stereotypes that the Chinese American community has been trying to fight for decades."

Haspel says that her intention with Lucky Lee's was "to make people feel great when they walked in and even better when they walk out. My intention is to serve great food, great hospitality, and a great experience."

While Berg said the apology is a good step forward and might ease the pain that people feel, "the reality was it was a decision that was made that wasn't thought through." She suggested that Haspel reach out to the Chinese American community, something that Haspel says she is doing.

"We started engaging the Chinese American community to understand how to make positive changes, and we started to make positive changes," Haspel said. "Food is always something that unites people and we're excited to move forward in that way."

Despite the controversy, diners at Lucky Lee's seemed unaware or unaffected by the backlash.

Chris, who only gave his first name, said he's a repeat customer, ordering the kung pao shrimp on this particular visit. Chris said he was vaguely aware of controversy surrounding the restaurant, but he thinks that everyone was over-sensitive and overreacting.

"I don't know what the intention of the owner was, but what I do know is there's a general trend towards healthy eating for all cuisines," he said. "I'm Korean. There's a trend for that in Korean food. There's a trend for that in American food and everything so I don't see why there's anything wrong with that for Chinese food."

He also says he doesn't conflate Lucky Lee's with authentic Chinese food. "I grew up eating Americanized Chinese food like Panda Express," he said. "I know they're not great and I know they're not great for you, but I grew up having that taste and so I like it. If there's a healthy way of eating it, I'll do it."

However, other people aren't sold on Lucky Lee's. CAS sophomore Daryl Tan doesn't think there's anything wrong with the concept of "clean eating." Instead, he has a problem with the name.

"What I don't like is Lucky Lee's as the name," he said. "I know it's named after her husband, but I feel like it's a bit disingenuous."

Berg agrees, saying that while Haspel's husband's name is Lee, it is also a Chinese last name.

"It was an appropriation of the name itself," Berg said.

The appropriation of "Lee" and the other controversial statements such as "HIGH lo mein," to Berg, might not have struck a nerve on their own, but the combination of multiple issues "comes out as icky."

The professor offered some advice in the form of a tagline suggestion: "Lucky Lee's: A Love Affair With Chinese Food Culture." Berg believes that the owners' love of Chinese food is genuine.

"At the heart of it, that's why they opened it," she said. "It was the cuisine that they love."

This is a point of contention for Haspel as the cuisine she serves at Lucky Lee's was inspired by her husband.

"We were proud that Lee's name was on it because he inspired the idea to open up the restaurant," she said.

Yet as an entrepreneur, Haspel acknowledged how far the company still has to go.

"We're still learning," Haspel said. "We're still listening. I hope that we can move forward positively so we can eat well, live well and be well together."

For Berg, this controversy can be a teachable moment.

"It doesn't have to end with an entire population feeling really slighted and a business folding," Berg said. "It can end with groups of people growing."

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NYU London Holds Its Breath as U.K. Approaches Brexit Deadline

With no formal picture of what the U.K.'s departure from the EU will look like, NYU London does its best to prepare for Brexit.

Paul Kim, Abroad Correspondent

November 25, 2019



NYU London does its best to prepare for the UK leaving the EU. NYUL Assistant Director for Student Life Nigel Freeman talks about the plans for Brexit. (Via NYU)

As the U.K. government extends its Brexit deadline from Oct. 31 to Jan. 31 of next year, many potential ramifications of the U.K.'s separation from the European Union remain unknown. The ambiguity of the situation has made it

hard to plan for the future, a dilemma which extends to the administrative staff at NYU London.

In an interview with WSN, NYUL Assistant Director for Student Life Nigel Freeman said that planning for Brexit has been a moment-to-moment process.

“Literally some days we’re like ‘okay, so what’s happened now?’” he said. “I’m coming out of a meeting, what’s this new scenario? How’s this going to affect us? How’s this going to affect students?”

Dr. Marie Milofsky, a lecturer at NYUL who hails from France, has lived in the U.K. for 27 years. In that time Milofsky never became a naturalized citizen. Aside from voting in British elections, she didn’t see a reason to apply for citizenship.

“I could vote at the local elections which, to me, is the most important,” she said. “It’s also some financial reason because it costs, I think, 1,800 pounds [\$2,300] to have the honor of becoming a subject of Her Majesty. So I found that, given my family size, it would just not be workable.”

Milofsky also works at the London School of Economics, which hired solicitors to provide advice to the staff.

“The problem we have at NYU is the same in most of the English universities or at least the London ones,” she said. “They have to secure their facility and they organized for some solicitors to advise us. So the thing that I did was become a U.K. permanent resident, which is an intermediate status.”

In addition to permanent residence, Milofsky also holds a settled status in the U.K., which allows her to stay in the country. Though she doesn’t think her status will be subject to much change, she isn’t entirely sure.

“There’s so much uncertainty around this Brexit. We still don’t know when it’s going to happen, we still don’t know what the conditions are going to be,” she said.

Depending on the conditions of the Brexit deal, European students studying in the U.K. could see [tuition fees rise](#) if the U.K. leaves the European single market. Similarly, U.K. students would also have a harder time studying in the EU. That being said, NYUL isn’t expecting Brexit to significantly impact its students.

“Unless they’re an EU citizen and they want to end up living here, it isn’t definitely going to affect the students that are here at the moment,” said Assistant Director of Finance and Operations Ruth Tucker.

“I wouldn’t say we’re worried, but we’re monitoring it closely and we’re talking to colleagues in key departments like Public Safety and risk management and global programs about how things might change,” Tucker said. “It’s very hard to plan very cohesively in the moment because it’s so uncertain.”

This uncertainty seems to extend to incoming students studying abroad during the spring 2020 semester. SPS sophomore Isabelle Ross wrote in an email to WSN that when she was applying to study abroad in London for the spring semester, Brexit played a minimal role in her decision.

“I knew it would be going on and would probably have an effect on me while I was there but other than that, I didn’t think much about it,” she said.

Freeman said that Brexit hasn’t affected the volume of applicants to NYUL.

Tucker agrees that, from an academic point of view, Brexit might even be a reason to study in London. “If I were as a politics or journalism major then this is an interesting time to be here studying, right? I mean certainly it is for me as

a kind of politics enthusiast in my spare time. It's an interesting time to be here," she said.

Though staff at NYUL don't think Brexit will have a significant effect on its students, they are less confident about staff. According to Tucker, approximately 10% of the lecturers and full-time staff are EU citizens.

Dr. Eiko Thielemann, another lecturer at NYUL, has a different problem. Thielemann came to the U.K. from Germany in the '90s to study and decided to stay under the free movement rules of the EU, spending the next 20 years here without the need to apply for British citizenship. It wasn't until he learned the outcome of the Brexit vote that Thielemann decided to naturalize, getting his dual citizenship in December 2017.

However, in the wake of Brexit, Thielemann's citizenship status is in question. Germany only allows dual citizenship within the EU, which the U.K. will no longer be a part of in January.

"What I'm uncertain about, and nobody can give me a legally clear-cut answer, is to the question of what happens if and when the U.K. leaves," Thielemann said. "So the concern is that I might be asked to choose then, after Brexit, which nationality I want to continue to hold."

If faced with that decision, Thielemann already has his mind made up.

"It's not going to be a very difficult decision for me because in the end, I value my EU citizenship higher than the British one under those circumstances," he said. "What that would mean then for my resident status here in the U.K. is obviously not completely clear yet."

However, with a permanent residence in the U.K. or proof of long-term residency, Thielemann isn't really concerned for himself. "I think my main

concern, in this context, it's not for someone like myself, but it's for the other 3.8 million EU nationals," he said.

While employees from the EU like Thielemann and Milofsky are relatively secure in their residency, there are others whose residency statuses are still unclear.

Thielemann says that many EU nationals have not gone through the processes that would allow them to stay in the U.K. after Brexit largely because they feel that the decision was not of their own making. They do not have the ability or paperwork to prove they have lived in the U.K. long enough to qualify for settlement.

"I hear it quite often," he said. "They say, 'Well, I've been living here for 20 years legally and now because of the situation that is completely beyond my control, beyond my choosing, I'm now basically being asked to do things that I should have as an intrinsic right because I came here under a particular legal context that the U.K. government signed up to at the time.'"

Undergoing these changes and uncertainties without a vote in the matter, it seems hard for an EU national to not feel helpless. Thielemann thinks that, given all the new information that has surfaced since the initial Brexit vote, the U.K. needs a second referendum. He took part in a march in October calling for exactly that — a second chance.

"I think it's only right to ask people to confirm that that's what they want," he said. "And ultimately, I think it's also an opportunity, a second referendum, to try to heal some of the wounds that the Brexit process has created."

The NYU Athletics Department Remembers Levester ‘LT’ Thompson Jr.

NYU’s long-time assistant women’s basketball coach passed away from COVID-19 in a Staten Island hospital on Thursday, April 9.

Paul Kim, Deputy Managing Editor
April 13, 2020



Levester “LT” Thompson Jr. was an assistant coach for the women’s basketball team. He will be remembered and missed by the NYU athletic community. (Image courtesy of NYU Women’s Basketball)

At 6 feet 5 inches tall, NYU's former assistant women's basketball coach Levester "LT" Thompson Jr. was usually the tallest person in the room. His bright personality, though, might've been even more noticeable than his height.

"He was sometimes the funniest person," long-time colleague and friend Janice Quinn recalled. "Quiet in a lot of ways, but he always kind of had that last word that was the funniest."

Thompson Jr., 46, died from COVID-19 earlier this week on [April 7](#). His memorial, held remotely over Zoom, took place on Friday, April 10, with hundreds of mourners calling in to listen.

"I think if it had been a live funeral, I think he would have had another 500 people," Quinn said. "That just kind of speaks to the love that emanated from him."

Thompson Jr.'s [career](#) at NYU started in 1996, when he was a senior at NYU Stern School of Business. He caught Quinn, who was the women's basketball coach at the time, in an elevator and pitched himself as a volunteer coach for the team. That was the year NYU won the [national championship](#). That was also the year Thompson Jr. got married.

Now the Senior Associate Director of NYU Athletics, Quinn said that one of the thousands of memories she treasures of Thompson Jr. is when she found out about his marriage to his wife, Simone. After talking his way onto the coaching staff, Thompson Jr. called Quinn to tell her he would be late to practice after winter break.

"You don't do that," Quinn said. "You don't call Coach Quinn up to say 'I'm going to be late. I'm not coming back to practice on time.'"

Yet, he did. His excuse when he finally arrived to practice:

“I had to go get married,” Quinn remembers him saying. “He said, ‘When you meet a woman like Simone, if she’s willing to marry you, you have to stop what you’re doing, and you need to marry her right that minute. You can’t let a woman like that get away.’”

Thompson Jr. would help coach the women’s basketball team for the next 16 years, where he and the rest of the athletic staff proved that a school like NYU could, in the words of Quinn, “take the best of the best of the best academically, and beat the best of the best of the best athletically.”

In 2013, Thompson Jr. took a job as an [equipment manager](#) at Hunter College before returning to NYU in 2015. He was promoted to Equipment & Retail Sales Manager for the athletics department in 2017.

During his years at NYU, Thompson Jr. gained a reputation across the athletic department for being as caring as he was tall.

“I miss his smile,” Athletic Director Christopher Bledsoe wrote in an email to WSN. “Levester’s smile is unforgettable and continues to light every room he is remembered in. A man with his physical presence could have been intimidating to students, athletes or co-workers. But LT’s easy smile quickly gave you to know you were in safe hands.” (*sic*)

Though Quinn sees a tendency towards speaking of someone who’s recently passed in mythical proportions, this inclination doesn’t apply when discussing Thompson Jr.

“You can’t use any hyperbole that would be exaggerated for LT in terms of the good and decent man that he was,” Quinn said.

Equipment Room & Retail Sales Assistant Mark Weatherup wrote to WSN that Thompson Jr. wanted to be sure that everyone in his department, from coaches to anyone who walked into the gym, was taken care of.

"I hope that you are able to capture even a small piece of the jovial, kind-hearted, generous giant of a man we all lost this week," Weatherup wrote.

Thompson Jr. is survived by his wife Simone and his two children, Jade-Anastasia and Chase.

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