

Kenyon College

Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange

Video Collection

Gullah Digital Archive

2012

James, Dora

Dora James

Trudy Andereski

Debbie Frost

Malik Austin

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.kenyon.edu/gullah_video



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James, Dora; Andereski, Trudy; Frost, Debbie; and Austin, Malik, "James, Dora" (2012). *Video Collection*. Paper 129.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/gullah_video/129

This Video is brought to you for free and open access by the Gullah Digital Archive at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Video Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Gullah Project

Dora James

Trudy Andereski, Debbie Frost, Malik Austin

2012

Capers Island, St. Helena Island, South Carolina

TA: This is Trudy Andereski, Debbie Frost and Malik Austin. Today we're interviewing Ms. Dora James and we are on Capers Island, which is a part of St. Helena Island, South Carolina. It is Friday, July 20th, 2012. And we are interviewing for the Gullah Digital Archive as part of Carolina Connections. So thank you for allowing us to record your interview today.

DJ: You welcome.

TA: (Chuckles). So, Ms. James, can you tell us a little bit about your family history on this island?

DJ: Okay. My great-grandfather purchased this property 'round about 1938. And my great-grandfather had five children. And my grandfather, well my great-grandfather's Mr. Joseph Bows. And my grandfather, which is his son, Charles Bows. And Charles Bows' son, which he only had one son, which is my father, which is Robbie N. Bows. And Robbie N. Bows have six sons and six daughters. So it's twelve of us. So we been on this property since 'round about 1938. My children experience this property and I've been here back and forth quite awhile.

TA: So, what was it like growing up on this island?

DJ: Growing up was very isolated. It was, like I said before, it was twelve of us, so in my mindset, that was it. My world revolved around this property. We didn't go anywhere. We went to school, went to church and came home. And my family literally didn't leave off the compounds of the 78 acres. When my great-grandfather purchase it, it was 78 acres, and we never left. Matter fact, I can remember goin to school and it was like a big adventure cause I never actually left the island. So, and when I talk about leavin the island, I'm talkin Capers Island itself. So it was very isolated, living here. But it was fun. I can remember, just me and my sisters, my brothers. I remember Christmas gifts. I remember games. We were a game family. My parents always bought us games so we played games, we created houses. We roamed up and down the woods so it was an adventure for me. Isolated but an adventure.

TA: So, can you talk a little bit about going to school for the first time on the island and what school was like?

DJ: Going to school, I went to St. Helena Elementary School. School was new, it was scary. I, matter fact, my first-grade friend was Sandra Mack. She Sandra Mack-Hough now, and we are

still friends up to this day. Going to school was exciting. I was very inquisitive. I talked a lot, I asked a lot of questions. And I got into a lot of trouble. (Chuckles). I do remember that. Because I was very talkative. So, going to school was fun. And school-hood friends are still my friends today. Matter fact, I have another girlfriend, we met in sixth grade. And she lives in Chicago, where I presently reside. And we're still friends. And her name is Yvonne Hough, I mean Yvonne Middleton. I don't know if I should be calling names, but anyway. But anyway, she's a good friend of mine and we're still friend. Another friend is Julie Canfoll and we met in sixth grade and we're still friends now. So the island has a very clan-ish atmosphere. You sort of live together for life and it's been a rewarding experience living here. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

DF: Now you've left the island?

DJ: Yes.

DF: And come back to open up a business. Can you talk a little bit about coming back and maybe why you know, how important that is to you, far as establishing some roots here for you yourself.

DJ: Well, well coming back for me was, I don't know. I guess it was something that just was in me. It's like home. You leave but you always come back. And being from St. Helena, you really don't get a appreciation from it until you actually leave. And I think visitors have more of a fascination with it then people who are originally from here. Cause my husband is the main person that calls me to come back, cause he came here and he just fell in love with it. And when we retired out of the military, he wanted to come here, so we came here and we both have entrepreneur spirits so we started a business here. And we been in business since 1999. And we're still in business now, so the business part was just acquiring something for yourself. Just being able to own something besides what I own here, you know. And then it gives you a sense of independence. And then job wise... There are not a lot of jobs here. So opening the business, it was like being able to be a blessing to someone else. That was our main push for starting the business. And not only starting it but being able to help anyone else to start a business. Cause entrepreneur gives you a sense of freedom, you know. You don't know how free you are until you're working for yourself. And then being able to help someone to achieve and acquire whatever their dreams are so... That was our push.

DF: Now, for the present generation and even with your generation, what message as far as culture do you wanna try to maintain? Why is it so important to maintain that culture for yourself and maybe for future generations along the way?

DJ: It's important to me, in the culture, because it defines who you are. Wherever you're from defines who you are. It's part of the fiber that helps you developing to be whatever your desires

are for you to you know, whatever your desires are, whatever you wanna accomplish. So just having a sense of ownership helps you to acquire more. You know, and it helps you to appreciate life more. So, for my children, I always stress to them the sense of family. How important that the sense of family is. I have two sons and a daughter. And I've stressed to them throughout their childhood is that you have to make sure you connect. Stay in contact with your family. We at family reunions. I make sure my son and my daughter are part of the family reunion. That they come down, that they know their family. My oldest son, who's 26. And he lives in Charlotte, he treats his family back to Sierra Leone in Africa. And that's his quest. He just called me the other day and he wanted to an island flag, you know. Because of the history, the rich history here, has caused him to want to know more about his history. So, and he's very independent. Independent thinker, he's a go-getter. And I think all that's because of him knowing who he is. So, it's important. It's really important.

TA: You mentioned family reunions. And I was wondering if there were any traditions or rituals that you have that happen at those reunions. Or what kind of things do you do there?

DJ: Family reunions is basically a time where you can review your history. The history on my father's side, which is from this island. Basically, we get together, and we meet once a year and we have a... always, everything is centered around food. Food is a big thing for this island, you know. Everything is centered around food, whatever you do there must be food. So food is a big thing. Religion is a big thing. Knowing God, serving God, loving God and also making sure that Christ is ingrained in your family's awareness. That you do your Christ. And that's a big thing for our family. But mostly playing games. For our family, it's playing games. Basketball, kickball, volleyball. We are board games, we're big board games player. Like growing up, we did a lot of Monopoly, Life game. Connect 4. You name it, that's how my mother kinda kept us together. And then it also gave us a competitive spirit. So you know, brought about that, "you gotta win." You know. But basically the tradition of staying together as a family. Like right now, I always call my, when I talk to my children, the question I'm going to ask. "When is the last time you talked to your brother? When the last time you talked to your sister?" Because that's important. Family is very important.

TA: So regarding food, do you have any like special dishes that you still cook when you're in Chicago or that your mother or grandmother passed down to you?

DJ: Well, unfortunately, I just didn't have that fascination with food everybody else had. (Everyone laughs). But I am known for my shrimp salad. Yeah, I make, when there's a family function, I'm the one's gonna make the shrimp salad. I have second oldest sister, Ida Austin, she's known for sweet potato pie. Matter fact, she's actually tryna market her sweet potato pie. That good. And Penn Center have a traditional Heritage weekend. And that's, you know, where all the culture of this island. Everybody gets together and have a big festival. And people put up vending, vendors and you know, displaying their food, their artwork. Whatever it is that they do.

You know, they do it during Heritage and my family, we do pies. So we bake anywhere from 150 to 200 pies. And we actually sell the pies. And my oldest sister, she's known for her potato salad. So, she makes her potato salad. And the baby girl is known for macaroni and cheese. And my mother? She's known for it all. She's an excellent cook. Yeah, but she's basically known for her bread pudding. So everybody has a specialty. Growing up, my father was the baker. My father did all the baking. So my sister, Ida, learned how to bake from him. And growing up, I avoided the kitchen at all costs. (Everyone laughs). So you know, that's far as the food is concerned. So it's a big thing. It's the fiber that brings everybody together. Some type of dish. Yeah.

DF: It seems to me the love on this island for just maintaining traditions and the culture. How do you see that changing, I mean when you... changing now far as the younger generation?

DJ: It's changing because... I think the younger generation is not as invested. They, the main thing is they wanna leave. And when they leave, either they don't wanna come back, but then they eventually do, but it's changing cause times are changing. You know, it's a lot of crime, it's gang related stuff. You hear about more violence now. Even on the island, you know, you hear about more violence. But overall, I think the, I think the unity and the love, I think that the fiber of it all will stand. I really believe it will stand the test of time. I really believe that, you know. Although, you know you can... the negative in the younger generation, they don't see the same way. But I still believe it will stand the test of time.

DF: I think you're right about that because I think that that's happen worldwide. But like you said, sometimes people can not really appreciate the island until they leave.

DJ: Right!

DF: And then when you see, when you start to realize how much you really love it, I think that will bring community back.

DJ: And then, there's a sense of peace here.

DF: Yes!

DJ: It really is. I mean, I've been living in Chicago for the last two years but when I come home, there's just a sense of peace. You know, it's not the hustle and bustle. It's not the rudeness. You know, people speak. You know, people are just genuine and they just... and you know everybody! You know right now if I go up the street on Capers Island, I might not know that individual's name but I can look at them and tell them, "Oh you're a Mack or you're Sampson or you know, you're a Chaplin." Because you just see the individual, you see the generation in that individual.

DF: Strong sense of community.

DJ: Yes. Very much.

TA: So you said you live between Capers Island and Chicago. When you're...

[End Clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

TA: ... in Chicago, are there any parts of Gullah culture that you try to still live when you're there?

DJ: Friendliness. I'm still very friendly. I am still very a people-person. Basic, my profession is social work. So I am definitely... I care about people. And I think it comes from being here. I genuinely care about people. It's not a career. It's a lifestyle for me. So, I hold on to that. I hold on to usually, there's something going on, I find myself cooking. You know, my husband had a misfortune in his family and we started cooking, you know, it's like, "What can I do?" So I made a spaghetti and fish and took it over. That's part of the culture, you know. It's sort of come naturally, even the things that you don't think like, I didn't like cooking. It just came back naturally to me. So I hold on to that, I hold on to love and I hold on to loving people. Yeah, so.

TA: You have a business both here and in Chicago? (DJ nods). And can you talk a little bit about how it's different running a business on the island rather than in the city?

DJ: In all actuality, it's really no different. The only difference here, it's rural. So you have more land mass to cover. But in Chicago, it's huge. The networking is still the same as far as... the people work, bureaucracy, all that's the same. So I really don't see much of a big difference in it as far as you know, you have a cultural difference, you know. The crime is higher there. The personality of the clients that you deal with. Basically, I don't see much of a difference. I really don't, unless I'm missing something and then it could just be my view.

DF: Well, I really thank you for sharing your story with us. I think this is going to be very valuable and again, I sense that sense of community and love and caring about one and other. And I sense that with you, for sharing your story with us. Thank you so much.

[End]