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Edna Jackson

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Interviewee: Edna Jackson

Interviewers: Debbie Frost, Portia Morgan

Date: July 25th, 2013

DF: Uh, good morning, today is July 25th, and we're in the beautiful city of Savannah Georgia, and we have the privilege of talking with our friend, the honorable mayor Edna Ryan Jackson. Good morning.

EJ: Good morning, how are you doing?

DF: Um, I guess, well where does this begin? How do you tell your story?

EJ: Oh my goodness, uh, how much time do you have?

DF: Well, take what you need.

EJ: No, um, Savannah is home for me. Uh, I grew up in an area that would now be called low-income area of the city of Savannah, in a house with no toilet, uh, one light hanging out of the ceiling. But the most important thing about that is that even though we were, and I don't say poor, we were a person of, of less than others, uh, but we had a family, we had a neighborhood, and the neighborhood was the family. Grew up, was reared by my grandmother, because she sent my mother to Florida in order to get a decent job, you know and my mother was a cook, that by profession. And so my sister and I remained here with my grandmother, with the uh, knowing that we would be moving to Florida with our mother but it never happened. Because my grandmama said no. You know so then we stayed here and spent summers and holidays down in Tampa. But fortunately as a result of that um, my mother was able to bounce back, to get a job, remarry, and she opened her own restaurant. In Tampa, Florida. But I stayed here, my sister and I stayed here, and we became a part of the total community, both of us graduated from Savannah State University, and of course uh the difference in my sister and me is that I was always the one in the family that um, was the non-conformist. So, my grandmother took that energy, and uh, I've become a member of the NAACP at the age of nine, and as a result of that during the Civil Rights movement, I was one of the original sit-int-ers here in this community. So that's my life, and it has been going on and on from there. From there. And it is because of other people that I am where I am, people that pushed me from a child to now. So, you know that's where I am. And Savannah when you look at our city, our, I've seen our community come from a very segregated community to an, from there to uh, a desegregated community, and then to an integrated community. Very diverse community, very diverse community. So now does that tell you a little bit?

DF: That does tell us a lot. And your, and your role as service. And now, so what does it feel like to be the first African-American *female* mayor of Savannah?

EJ: Right now, it's feeling wonderful, and having... this is part of a journey. And I'm having the time of my life. And I think that maybe my expectations were different than what I'm uh, actually uh, is experiencing at this time. My expectation was, and is, you know are and is, was

that um, I didn't know what I would run into, even though I was on council for thirteen years. But the coming together of this community has really happened. Uh, I didn't know if I, you always have nay-sayers that are going to be out there, but Savannah is a very unique community because they want this city to be successful, and uh we have been able, we are able to do that now, because of the connectivity with various groups, whether it be racial, business, community, neighborhoods or what have you.

DF: Now we work with a project through the Carolina Connections, and um, studying the Gullah culture. Do you see that rich culture also surfacing on, uh in Savannah?

EJ: Uh, very much so. When I was working at Savannah State University, I was the uh, director of the elder hostel program. And one of the things, one of the classes that we took that I offered was the Gullah language. And we had a former professor that uh, taught the class, that was from South Carolina. And so people are very much interested in... it's a different language, it's a different culture but if you realize that here in Savannah, a lot of the people that live in South Carolina are those that are living here, we have relatives all over the lowcountry. So when you look at it, the lang-- the uh, pronunciations or what have you may be different, but we all understand each other. And you can't talk about uh, uh, the Gullah language or the Gullah people without talking about here and Savannah, where if you go along River Street you see the cobblestones, and you know that the slaves are the ones that laid the cobblestones. Uh, the other day I was driving down those, you know the hill, and I saw them taking up some of the stones that I said oh no, but you know what they were doing were resetting the stones in order to maintain the history of the people. You can't talk about Savannah, and you can't talk about South Carolina without putting both of them uh, together. Because we are the first city in Georgia, and a lot of the slaves that were here went onto to live over in South Carolina and vice versa. And I don't know how deep you're getting into it, but uh recently I was talking with some people that are interested in going over to Daufuskie Island. You know, years and years and years ago, we used to have excursions to Daufuskie Island on a boat that was owned by an African-American man. And we would go over there, we would party all the way over. And we would party all the way back. But we would get off and have the crabs and the wine and drinks and... and it was fun. So in talking to one of the people that have purchased land over there, they want to see some of that culture come back. You know if you read, what's that, Conrad book, yeah you'll realize that a lot that has been lost. You know the children over there used to have to leave and go into Beaufort, or to go to school and what you have you. But a lot of the people that were on the island used to come over here to do shopping as well, by boat and this was Captain Sam's boat, or do that, so the culture is still there. And then when you look at Savannah, and you're talking about the Gullah culture, you can go all the way down the east coast and pick up, you know, part of it, St. Helena's definitely one, that's become a development on, Ham Hock? Is it Ham Hock or something? Over there you have the natives that are still living on the island, but you've seen the University of Georgia, and the other people that have come in to do a study of what actually is happening here. So Gullah is very, it's very important that we get the history of the Gullah people, you know we, we're rice eaters here in Savannah, just like in St. Helena, we can eat rice morning, noon and night. We are seafood eaters, the fish and the shrimp. And a lot of the um, the crab pickers were here in Savannah. And people would fish for, you know, for food and shrimp, oh lord, child you know, shrimp and grits! [Laughs] That's the new thing! But

what people don't realize is that it's, it wasn't new, everybody's eating shrimp and grits now. But we ate that years ago! You know what I mean, that was like, you know you had the shrimp and the grits and the gumbo, with the shrimp in it.

PM: Stewed fish?

EJ: Stewed fish, that's right, my grandmother stewed even just the fish heads sometime. You know, so you get a lot of the, the culture now other ethnic groups are experiencing what we've had all of our lives. And you know I can get, I can get carried away on that, with that kind of stuff.

DF: Well it looks like we're still celebrating that, with y'all's heritage that has also spilled over into Savannah, and other places. So we're just celebrating that. And um, do you find that the um, that the education system, far as united, are not embracing that Gullah culture in the schools or is it through the church? How is that culture being shared?

EJ: Well, I think it's being shared more so through churches rather than the educational system. I don't think we've made the inroads into the system. To say that, you know, this is a part of the history. You know years ago, you didn't even see anything about African American history in the history books. It was taught by people like W.W. Law, and R.W. Gaston here in Savannah, and others and Gene Ganson. That's how I got to appreciate who I am. You know, what we did in this community, and across this nation, because it was not being taught to us. Everybody knew about Benjamin, you know about uh, what'cha call it, started Tuskegee. Um, I can't remember...

DF: Booker T. Washington

EJ: Booker T. Washington, Booker T. Washington and others and stuff. But the real people, the people that affected a lot of change, are the locals that are here in Georgia and South Carolina. You know, I can talk about during the Civil Rights movement, or in South Carolina, the I Quincy Dumans, that were there. Cause I was a child in the NAACP, you know the Matthew Perrys that were attorney. And these were people that I looked up to, you know that had a, you know that had... that helped me in my life and what I wanted to accomplish. In life because they were our mentors. Yeah, and you know there was a guy, his name was James Blake, uh, from Charleston, South Carolina, had that high Charleston, Charlestonian dialect, or whatever you're...

PM: The Geechee...

EJ: Yeah, the Geechee Gullah, real Geechee. Who later became, you know, I think a, uh, Bishop or maybe not a Bishop, maybe a presiding elder, in the '80s, in the church. But he came through the NAACP, and we were all run together, and I guess what we were trying to do is to see who could out speak each other. Sometimes because that was part of it. But his was the Gullah. And you could, he was an orator. And you could just sit and listen. And that's the difference that I see today. Because in those days, in the '60s when I'm talking about, those days, the leaderships in various communities, both locally here in Savannah, as well as in South Carolina and North

Carolina, uh, trained us. Taught us. Had us shadow them. So we can appreciate who we are. And that's what we did.

DF: As a mayor, uh, as the first African-American mayor of Savannah, uh, what um, I guess I wanna say what are some of the things that you'd like to see change in the city under your leadership?

Unknown: What are your hopes and expectations for the city?

EJ: My expect-- my uh, well one thing that I think is very high on our agenda is making sure that we have an open line of communications. Yeah, uh, but the other thing is trying to bring some more jobs to our community.

PM: Businesses, mm hmm.

EJ: Businesses, and particularly small businesses are very important, because that's where our people need the jobs, they're the ones that keep the engine going. But now even within industry, how do we reduce the poverty level, which because of the recession went from about seventeen percent up to twenty five percent. How do we get that number down again? If we were proud that we were able to do some of the reducing, but then when the economy bottomed out, it made our numbers higher. So how do we reach that, and how do we reach, and this is a personal goal. How do we reach our young children? To let them know what the history is, and let them know that they can be whatever they want to be. Those are the kinds of things that are on the table, and one of the things that I'm doing is, I'm pulling together groups of people. Because if you're gonna be successful, you have to get people to buy into what you're doing. So within the business community we pull together two business groups that will be working, um to tell us what the city is doing wrong, but also let us know how to correct it. Yeah so we, we're doing that, and they're very excited about it. The other thing that we have to continue to realize is, is that even though we are desegregated, our diverse culture, that it's very important that we understand each other. So, and, and when I talk about that, I'm talking about beyond the racial situation. We have to realize that we're talking about people that are gay, lesbian, transgender, all of those that are residents of this community. How do you talk about it? Alright, then you have to talk about, you know, we have very strong ties in the Irish and the Jewish community. Asian community. How do we get everybody together, to get them talking to each other? The south is now setting up a summit, you know they hear the ideas and then they take it and run with it, to get people and communities excited about it. We're getting ready for this big summit. And we're gonna be talking about issues. Hate crimes and, what are we going to do about it? Because as we look about, our young people don't have jobs now what are they doing? They're getting into the drug business and then they're shooting each other. You know, how can we stop that? How can we let the community know that we have to work on that ourselves, we have to work and reeducate parents and also our young children. Yeah I get upset all the time and see, and you know I can talk and talk and talk, but I get upset when I see young people on the cell phone and all this, texting and all of this kind of stuff. They're losing the social skills out here in the community. They're not, they have no grasp of the, the english language. Of the written word because if you aren't (thank you) if you are texting, you know they're using the r for you are, you know, the u

and the r. But when they come into a society seeking a job, you have to write standard English! And so how do we kinda get to the young people. And so I, you know, people mentored to me, corrected me, and we have to get back to the old time way. You know, like like it was, you know, not necessarily every way, but those things that helped us when we were young in this community.

DF: Sounds like you have your finger on the pulse, and the fact that you've been progressive but understanding that there are needs.

EJ: Definitely.

DF: And understanding that there are problems, but it does take the community. It's not, one person can fix it.

EJ: Right.

DF: So, I really appreciate the time you spent with us...

EJ: Lemme give you one other question, I mean lemme tell you one other comment.

DF: Yes.

EJ: You know, we used to make use, this morning I've been working with, gosh, agencies that serve this community, our union mission which services the homeless in this community. How do we get people who are more fortunate to realize that we need more help? A step up. Who has done their part by doing little, I call them charettes, is that what they call them? Where a person that gets a group a people, and you may be a millionaire in this community, but then you may represent a person that is very poor. You may be that poor person. And you go around and, within that night you know you have to go, if you are very poor, how do you pay the rent? If this is your income, x number of dollars, you have to pay rent, gas, you have children you have to feed. How do you feel, so you would get the feel of how that person that is in poverty feel. And it has helped us in this community to do those kinds of things and we're continuing that, our Step Up program does a tremendous job with that and it's becoming a national program. Underprivileged, this program started under Mayor Johnson, you know because he had that vision, you know, about it. And he was an academician. So, you know his outlook was really how do we change things but with people like you, that are going around and getting the stories, and if these stories get out to our young people, it helps tremendously. It also helped tremendously if your, if these type of stories get out to people who may be of means, and they can say "how can I help?" If we get one, you know we've done our job.

PM: Yes.

DF: That's true.

EJ: So thank you! You know just for coming, and I'm honored that you thought, and I know this lady right here [gestures to PM] when she called I have to answer! [Everyone laughs]

Unknown: I just wanna offer to you because in the city of New York, you know the mayor of the city of New York has set something called the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York, and it's a 501C3 honor, so that all the public programs that you would like to see move forward have a partnership in the private sector.

EJ: Right.

Unknown: And this organization does that, we go find the private partners for our mayor, so...

EJ: Oh!

Unknown: If there's any way that we can be of service in even sending you some of our work

EJ: Please.

Unknown: And the other thing is called New York City Service, which is chief service officers in over 20 cities, and

EJ: Yes.

Unknown: And we started it through the national community service and we have all the literature because

EJ: I would love to have it.

Unknown: We just are a bigger city so anything we... you know I hate everyone to reinvent the wheel...

EJ: Right, right.

Unknown: So whatever we can bring to you or any question if there's a deputy or someone you wanna send up for a day...

EJ: OK

Unknown: To, you know talk with our chief service officer...

EJ: Well, we had...

Unknown: Whatever we can do.

EJ: We like your Harlem program.

Unknown: Fabulous.

EJ: And we've tried to get the funding, you know for that, our Youth Futures.

Unknown: Well, they'll teach you how we did it.

EJ: Yes. That's great. I wanna... I read it..

Unknown: Make sure you know, we'll just, we'll give you our, I mean you don't need to be taught, we'll just tell you what we like.

EJ: No, you're learning...

Unknown: You bring people in as angels, you bring people in as your angels, and you give them a little title as your

EJ: You're always learning, that's right.

Unknown: As your mayor's advisory committee, and they have the ownership. Over this.

EJ: Yes, you're absolutely right...

Unknown: And they feel, you go to some of these people who are in your community and then...

EJ: Well the Mayor is also the fundraiser, the this and the that...

Unknown: Mm hmm.

EJ: You have an arm... You do it all.

Unknown: That's right, suddenly you're

EJ: And I don't mind that. As long as you're serving people.

Unknown: Well, you speak so beautifully about it that...

EJ: Yeah, thank you, thank you. But I can tell you we are losing, we are trying for the Harlem Project under the president's plan with Hudd, the renaissance forum, whatever...

Unknown: Yes.

EJ: So we are definitely not inventing the wheel. Yeah, we're looking at programs that we can bring and we're talking about from womb to the grave. That's what we're dealing with, OK?

Unknown: And you've got some good New Yorkers that come down here in the summer that we can lend you as, you know.

EJ: Let me know.

Unknown: Thank you so much, thank you for setting this up and thank you for your time, and...

[End of interview]