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Gullah Digital Archive

Anita Singleton Prather, Charles Dennis Singleton

July 2013

St. Helena Island

Debbie Frost: Good afternoon. We're meeting with Mrs. Deborah Martin and she is our media specialist this year at St. Helena. She's been here for thirteen years. Thank you so much for allowing us to have this interview. And I'm going to allow you to tell your story. You can tell us a little bit about you as a media specialist, and on growing up, not necessarily on this island but coming to this island.

Deborah Martin: Alrighty well, I am a Michigander by birth, but my home is South Carolina. I am one of two children, two girls. I'm adopted and I have known that I was adopted since I was nine days old. And I've had a wonderful childhood. I have traveled. I was fortunate enough to spend my sixteenth birthday in London and in Paris. My father owned his own business. He had a janitorial service and I am a daddy's girl. And my father decided that he wanted to come to the south. Growing up that was something he never wanted to do because after, coming from the war and the treatment that blacks received in the South and the things that he saw, he said, "Never again." But, low and behold, he decided to come South at a great sacrifice. And we always visited because my parents have family in Atlanta, I'm fourth generation college educated, and we came South and had what we called cultural shock but in a very pleasant experience. For me, I was excited, I'd never ridden the school bus before. And in Adrian you have neighborhood schools, so that was a new experience. Of course, I was familiar with Southern cooking, but I had always gone to an integrated school and so, when we moved to South Carolina they had desegregated schools and I chose to go there. Went to Winthrop, which was an all girls school. Why they waited until the year after I graduated to go co-ed, I don't know! [laughs] But I had wonderful time. Had a fellowship at USC in library science, so I was able to go to school and get my masters degree free. And married. And decided to move to the Bahamas. I'm a Bahai by religion and my parents had come to South Carolina to help with the teaching work and I decided to follow the tradition of my grandmother to live in the Bahamas. Absolutely a wonderful ten year experience. I was able to do things in the Bahamas as the director of the college library that I would never have been able to do in the United States. From the governor general... I actually got to personally meet the Queen of England. We actually presented to her. We had an exhibit and she toured the exhibit, and we curtsied and all the things that you do, the protocol. But I think the thing that stood out most in my mind, living in the Bahamas, was that there was no disenfranchisement. If you were Bahamian it didn't matter what your lineage was, if your father was of one ethnicity and your mother was something else. If you were born in the Bahamas you were considered Bahamian. Wasn't like in the states where they put all of these labels, you're this and this and that and that--you were strictly Bahamian. And to grow up, and from the prime minister down to the ditch digger were all black. It was just a beautiful experience to be introduced that you can be

anything and do anything you want. And I remember people didn't go around, this was like in the 80s and you know in the 70s you would say, "Black is beautiful," you didn't say that in the Bahamas because that was a given. So you didn't have to express yourself or when they did rally it was for political reasons with regards to their independence from Great Britain, but you didn't have to prove yourself as a human being because you were black. And so you learned the history of the people. I was blessed because my parents, at a young age, taught us black history. My parents, well, my grandparents attended Fisk University, so they knew personally people that we talk about as "the Talented Tenth." And so I learned about black history because when I grew up you wouldn't find the information in the history books. Maybe certain people, but that was a wonderful introduction to how people live in true freedom, where they're not prejudiced by the color of somebody's skin. And so that was a wonderful thing for my children to experience and then I worked there for ten years and my contract ended and we came home to Charleston. And I went from being the assistant director of a college librarian to a school librarian cause there weren't any positions open for college librarians. And it was an adjustment and I worked in Sommerville for fifteen years and I decided I wanted a change 'cause you can only change yourself, you can't change other people. Came to St. Helena, my girlfriend Lynn Bryant, who was a childhood friend, had moved here the year before, and she was always talking about this St. Helena elementary school. So I thought that this school was actually located on the water. And so I remember I asked her, I said, "Well, do you have any positions open?" She said, "Well, we may." And within two weeks I had an interview with doctor Laverne Davis. So I'm driving and I'm driving and I'm driving, and I'm thinking, "Where is this school?" Well, it's on an island but it's not on the water. So anyway, I come in and it's not time for my interview, so I'm looking around and I'm seeing all these fabulous pictures of children who have gone to Africa, and Debutante Balls, and all kinds of activities and I decided I didn't care how she looked, who she was, I wanted to work at this school. And so I was hired and then was introduced to a wonderful, wonderful community where, when they talk about school community, it was a network between family, school, church and businesses. And now, after being here for thirteen years I can say, well, you know, I may not have taught necessarily parents, but I have had the opportunity to teach our current students, their older siblings, or I know their parents personally. And they're so surprised because they think, "Well, how do you know my parents?" Well I've been here long enough. I love the culture, I love the cuisine. I didn't realize how historic Penn Center was. Living in Michigan, or even in Charleston I'd come down and I'd visit Penn Center but I didn't know the historical significance. So to see the relationship between life in the Bahamas from plantation up to the present day. And to know of times when there were no bridges. Now, I haven't experienced this 'cause I haven't been here that long but to see the stories and see the growth and to go Penn Center, and now to have a public library, and the changes, and the community, and the island, I'm so glad, I'm so fortunate, I'm so blessed to be a part of it. And I'm still here!

DF: That's wonderful. The idea of family and school and community, I can see that ingrained in this island everywhere you go. And most of the school, I mean it is an outreach to the children and to the families because a lot of them are related, how

important is it for you as an educator to know the families that you're going to serve in this community?

DM: Well, you know the saying where it says, "It takes a village to raise a child?" That's the way that we work at this school. A parent can't do it by themselves in bringing up a productive child. The teachers cannot. If you don't have the support of the community to do what's best for the children, you really haven't served the whole child. And so to be able, for example, we don't just do school activities, you're able to attend birthday parties and functions because you know the family. They see us as being the parents away from home and they trust us to have the best interest of their children--not just to educate them academically but to help them become productive members of society. And that's our job. It's beyond, with all the things that you can encounter, the negative things that you encounter in society today, it takes everybody to safeguard the welfare and wellbeing of our children.

DF: You mentioned also that Penn Center has been instrumental in making that gap with the schools and community, can you talk about a little bit about some of the things you've experienced through Penn Center?

DM: Well, I've been fortunate. I'm not sure, I want to say six or seven years ago, the Beaufort County school district in collaboration with Penn Center offered summer institutes because this is a unique culture, it is a unique community and the blessing is that those things have been preserved. And so for us to better understand and better serve the children they had summer institutes for teachers where we could gain first-hand knowledge, have hands-on experience about the culture, be it from literature, to cooking, to arts and crafts. And so we would be able to attend the institute and learn just all kinds of phenomenal things and then apply that to our school environment and teaching the children. And so it was a wonderful experience and we would get to the point where, I think I did it for three years, and you would look forward, it wasn't just local teachers but teachers from different parts of the country. And we would collaborate, and each year you'd look forward, you'd build friendships, and you'd look forward to seeing those individuals again.

DF: That's wonderful. I know I told you that we're using this film to help our students with oral history. Through the studies and through the experiences you've had with Penn, can you tell us any oral history stories that you've learned along the way?

DM: Well, everyday there's a story because oral history is so much a part of the culture and that's one of the things that I enjoy. As a staff, when you're talking to people who are from here, the way that they tell stories, it's not just a Gullah culture but it's a part of the black heritage in storytelling. And it's something that's very natural. Growing up in a black home I have heard stories from knee-high to a grasshopper until today just about life in general. My favorite stories, however, are the Brer Rabbit stories. And when the children say, "Well, Mrs. Martin, do you like this book or do you like that?" And I'll say, "Yes, I do" But they'll say, "What is your favorite?" And I love the Brer Rabbit stories because they depict the plantation system in a way that, if you just read it you might think

you're just simply reading about three animals that play tricks but it goes much deeper into that. And I enjoy analyzing stories and sharing them. So I would say that I'm amazed at the amount of stories for black children or about black children. When I was growing up there were very, very few stories. And now you have stories from different countries that people can share their cultural experiences through literature.

DF: Reading is more vast than it was when I was growing up, as well. You said that you also lived in the Bahamas and you've been here at St. Helena, I know that the cultures are maybe similar, and yet maybe different. Can you share with us some of the similarities and maybe some of the differences, if there are any?

DM: Okay well, some of the similarities, like some of the words were the same. In the Bahamas they would say "yinna" and it's been awhile so... but they're similar words. There are also foods, for example we'd have peas and rice. We'd eat peas and rice in the Bahamas. We'd eat conch, so I got very excited 'cause last year someone offered to sell me some conch, and I accepted, but it wasn't quite like the conch in the Bahamas. But you've got the ocean, you've got the beaches, but most of all you have the warm hospitality of the people, and you have the importance of religion in their lives. You've got the, what I call, the colorful and stylish dress.

DF: This is in both?

DM: Both, I'm talking about the similarities. Even the colors like, for example, in the Bahamas the houses are pastel colors and you will find here those similar colors of pinks and blues. Art is a very important part of the culture. Family, the importance of family and getting together and supporting each other. Some of the materials. The cinderblock homes. Let's see, what else? I guess the differences are that the Bahamas was a British country, so they drive on the opposite side of the road than we do. But even the landscape, the palm trees, and the hibiscus, I don't think we have flamingos here, but some of the vegetation, the flora, the fauna are similar. So making that move from the Bahamas, to Charleston, to Beaufort, St. Helena was not a huge adjustment for me. I feel very much at home.

DF: I know that I've met some of your students when I've come the last couple of days and they seem to be really enjoying school, and also the pride they take in the things that they do. Do you see that as being something that is ingrained in the structure or the fabric of St. Helena when students come to school with that pride?

DM: Well, I think that they are taught that education is very important. That whatever you need to do to be successful in life that you come to school and you're serious about your learning. I've also, this summer I've been very fortunate because I've been a part of the migrant program and that's exposed me to a different culture. And the children in the migrant program also have such a high regard in importance. You can kind of see the similarities, and we realize that the world really is a very small place. And that, regardless of the the culture, family is important and that parents love their children and they want

the best for them, and that it's our responsibility to work together to help their children be successful.

DF: That's interesting because when I came and I saw the migrant program, I guess I just, because I live in Cleveland, Ohio, that is not necessarily common for us. So I was really amazed how, you know, the students come, and can you tell us a little bit about what that process looks like? Because I think you said, it was said they would come for six weeks, maybe at a time, only. So when you get students kind of, how does that process work when they're coming, and knowing when they're coming, and knowing that they're leaving and where they're going?

DM: Well, we generally expect to have the migrant for several weeks. It really, the length of our program, the attendance really is based on the weather and the crops. And so the children come, they're excited. I mean when children are excited about coming to school in the summer, that really says a lot. And so we might start with a certain number of children. Families may have to move. New families come in. So, we're very flexible. We're here to serve the needs of the children and to make learning fun. And I just feel blessed that I'm a part of that opportunity, a part of being exposed to a different culture.

DF: Yeah, it's amazing. Now, you said they come based on the crops, so say for instance show me a little bit of that. When they're coming in, like they're here now, this is early July, what crop are they coming into?

DM: Well, to be honest I'm not highly knowledgeable. I know that the crop might be tomatoes or cotton. I think we got a late start this season because of the rain and so when they're finished, or when I guess the crop is ready for harvesting and they've picked it, then they move onto the next place. And so we may have a session that's three weeks, it might be longer. And so you just have to be very adaptable. But the children make it so much fun and they're so eager to learn. As a matter of fact, they love the Brer Rabbit stories and I'm reading not in strictly Gullah dialect but I'm reading it the way that it was written, and they understand, and they laugh. This week we've been making Brer Rabbit paper bag puppets. And so we're sharing and we're learning. And they're far more knowledgeable than I am about our culture than I am about theirs. But I'm learning, too.

DF: I guess it would be fun to go around and travel to different places, because when I talk with some said, "Oh, I'm going to Virginia next summer. I'm going to uh..." and then they knew where they were going. I thought that was just amazing that the family structure has allowed them to continue their education, as well as see the world, because they get a chance to travel. And I think that it's really nice that they have welcoming educators that are willing whatever it is to meet their needs and it really does take a village.

DM: Yes, yes it does.

DF: Is there anything else that I didn't cover or ask you that you want to share?

DM: Well, not that I can think of. I thank you for this opportunity.

DF: Well, I really enjoyed coming to your school and I really enjoyed talking with you. It's been a great experience for me as an educator and I'm going to take a lot of to back to my students because I think that just knowing that, what you said, that the world really is a smaller place and we think of it being a big place and not being able to see as much, but we have things more in common than we have in difference. So thank you for sharing your rich stores. And the Bahamas, I think we've gotta talk more about that food because I like to eat a thing, you know, so, and the similarities of St. Helena school and the Bahamas. Thank you so much.

DM: You're welcome. I thank you.