

Voices of southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

Interviewee: Stone, Jessica

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Abstract: In this interview, Jessica Stone tells about how College of Charleston and the city in general shaped her to be who she is today. As the international student services coordinator, she provides details about how her experiences working with students unfamiliar with US and southern culture influence how she shows hospitality to visitors who may feel uneasy. It is important for her to help international students become comfortable living in the social environment of the South, which includes teaching them about manners and vocabulary. As someone who grew up in Pawleys Island, leaving and then coming back, Stone shares her insight on the changes that have taken place, including the establishment of businesses and the influx of affluent non-locals. She discusses how these changes are affecting Charleston's culture and demography as well as how the youth of the world key drivers in the move toward more sustainability and better conditions.

Biographical Note: Jessica Stone grew up in Pawleys Island and moved to Charleston in 1999 to attend the College of Charleston. After graduating in 2003, she moved to Montana to broaden her horizons and experience new things. When she realized that she missed her family and home, she moved back in 2009 to stay. Influenced by the helpfulness and involvement of the campus community, she decided to search for jobs at the College. A position with the Center for International Education became available once she completed her master's program, and since then she has been the international student services coordinator. Her job entails working with international students through the application process, providing welcome serves, making sure they're oriented and advising them throughout the semester.

Project Details:

In the summer of 2018, student researchers from the College of Charleston conducted oral histories for the research project, *Voices of Southern Hospitality*. The project documents diverse opinions and stories about southern hospitality in Charleston, South Carolina, but also offers a deeper and more intimate history of a changing community. Over the past thirty years (early-1990s to 2018), the Charleston peninsula and its surrounding islands have experienced rapid

economic growth and rapid cultural and ecological changes. The *Voices of Southern Hospitality* project chronicles this profound transformation with the personal histories of Charleston residents.

The project was launched in June 2018 with funding from The Committee for Innovative Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the College of Charleston. In addition to documenting important stories, the project was designed to train College of Charleston students in oral history research methods. Five student researchers and 42 interviewees participated in the first phase of this project (June and July, 2018).

Interview Begin

[Interviewer Initials]: L.R.

Interviewee Initials]: J.S.

LR: It's July 19th, 2018, and this is Laura Robbins sitting down with Jessica Stone at the College of Charleston in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. Jessica, can you tell me how long you've lived in Charleston?

JS: Let's see. Well, I grew up in Pawleys Island, so an hour north. I moved to Charleston the first time in '99 and was here until 2004, and then I moved back in 2009 and I've been here since.

LR: Okay. So where are your parents from? Pawleys Island, as well? Your whole family?

JS: My mom was from Georgetown, South Carolina, and my father was from Anderson, South Carolina.

LR: So, what brought you here in '99?

JS: College.

LR: College.

JS: Undergrad.

LR: To the College of Charleston?

JS: Yeah.

LR: And what did you study?

JS: Political science and sociology.

LR: So, you graduated in, you said, 2005?

JS: '03.

LR: '03, and then came back?

JS: Yeah. I moved out to Montana for five years to, you know, have an adventure. But again, my family all being here, I inevitably found the call to come home greater than that need for exploration.

LR: So, what made you want to come back and work at the College of Charleston?

JS: I really... The College just helped me find myself, my path, even though it was a zigzag line instead of a straight line to the graduate program that I ended up completing once I returned to Charleston from Montana. It really was the support that I found through my professors and the size of the College. I was a transfer student, so again, I just was kind of figuring things out on my own and felt a little lost. And the academic program here really helped me gain some structure in my life. I know we're going to talk about hospitality. I was working full-time in the food and beverage industry and going to school full-time. I think one semester I was taking 18 credits, and I was going to school in the summer. I really wanted to finish up in four years with transfer credits and all of that. And my professors and my academic advisers really helped me stay on track and realize those goals.

LR: So, can you tell me what exactly you do at the College of Charleston and your title and what your work is here?

JS: Sure. I'm the international student services coordinator, so I work with the director and the associate director on the services that we provide for our international students. So, comprehensibly speaking, when you look at the whole international student, they're going to liaise with admissions office, the English Language Institute, and then CIE provides immigration documents for everyone. We also house the application process for J-1 exchange students. So, I work with them from their initial look at C of C to help them get everything they need for their application and their visa appointment. So, my work with the international students starts before I ever see them. And then we provide welcome services, pick up from the airport, orientation; very comprehensive. Full week now before classes and then throughout the semester, just those life advising, soft skills; they come in and when they need anything on the academic side, living in Charleston, driver's licenses, security cards, stuff like that.

LR: So, do you think you have a very different experience from other Charlestonians because you encounter so many international students and people in general?

JS: Probably. I also take care of the programming for international students. So, it's kind of a rule of thumb on college campuses in the US; you're happy if you get, like, 20% attendance or response. I don't experience that. We get 100% because students are here. The majority of our international students on campus are exchange students. So, the majority of students I work with are here for only a semester, maybe two. And they are really utilizing every opportunity they can and really excited about going and seeing, you know, it's not just some other program or some other experience that they've already had in high school or growing up in the US. These are very

different experiences for them. So, everyone lines up, sometimes we have to go to a wait list. So, it's really enjoyable to see that excitement.

LR: So, you're a very hospitable person because you're welcoming all of these new people to Charleston and really shaping their experience here from the moment they get here. Can you tell me some of the most important things that you show your international students or you think are important for them to recognize in Charleston?

JS: Yeah. I mean, I guess I never thought about it like that, like the hospitality and now I'm in this very hospitable role, but... and I don't know if these are things that I learned from growing up in the region as much as from, you know, my mom and influential role models in my life. Just a prompt response, even if the answer is "I don't know", just letting someone know. And I know I didn't let you know that 11:00 the other day worked, but I do try. I think that's important. And then for international students, and maybe this is a southern thing because things in the South are very different, you know, and we know that from an early age, just kind of explaining like, this is how we do it here. Just breaking down any barriers to someone understanding and feeling comfortable engaging in the environment here.

LR: Like the social environment in Charleston and in the South? It's different.

JS: Yeah. Just any little tidbits you can give them. So, for international students, there's many phrases we use on campus that do not make sense like Cougar Card is actually a student ID. So, making sure that I remove that barrier of just putting out what we would say and letting them know the actual description, actual definition of what we're saying. So, just anytime someone's kind of looking lost or asking questions and you can tell they're intimidated or they don't know or they don't want to ask a dumb question, you know, just to say, just say it outright, like this is different, this is how we do it. It doesn't make any sense really if you're not from here. So, just making sure people are comfortable, I think, is a very southern...

LR: So, do you encounter a lot of other international individuals besides students that come to C of C?

JS: Well, this year, for the first time, we're going to be doing a faculty mixer with a lot of our international faculty. So, Melissa, my colleague, she works with the international faculty and scholars and we do see a good number of-- I mean, we have to see everyone because we handle the immigration. So, yeah.

LR: Did you have an international experience in your undergrad? Did you study abroad, or did you travel around after school?

JS: I studied abroad, actually with Andrew, the director of CIE. Yes. I took Spanish throughout high school and then when I finally transferred to the school that I knew I was gonna finish with, I started looking at their programs and really wanted to do the Trujillo, Spain summer program. And I was going to go the summer before my junior year, but I was paying for it myself. And so, it

took me another year to save up, to pay to go to that trip. So, I actually walked across the Cistern and flew to Spain the next day. But they let me finish my last two. It was just Spanish 201, 202 that I was able to take care of over there. So, that was awesome. Andrew was the faculty on that trip. And then I really did not want to come home necessarily. I loved Europe and Spain, but I really do think that experience is what gave me the courage to move out to Montana. I didn't know anybody. I had like \$300. I drove a sedan with all of my belongings, so no mattress, no couch, nothing. It really gave me the courage just to leap into another, and it is a completely different culture out there. But inevitably, I always found myself looking at the College website for jobs, and it's just something that really being involved in the campus community, giving students courage to make, you know, big life-changing decisions. It just always has spoken to me. So, when I got back, a girl actually asked me, she said, "Well, if you could do anything, what would it be?" And I said, "I would work at the College." She was like, "Oh yeah. You kind of need your master's to do that these days." I was like, "Okay, well so where do I go?" She talked about the Citadel Program. Everything just comes full circle. And then when I finished that up, this job appeared and the director was Andrew Sobiesuo, and I was like, there can't be too many of those people. And I looked online and, sure enough, there he was. So, yeah. I started here 10 years after I studied abroad in Spain. So, pretty crazy. Yeah. Sorry, that's probably not at all what you asked.

LR: No, I just want to hear what you have to think or what you have to have to say. So, do you think... How are your interactions? Are they different with people from Charleston versus people that aren't from Charleston? Not necessarily international students, but just non-locals or non-southerners?

JS: I would say so. I would say so because the region... When I grew up in Pawleys Island--have you been there? --so, you drive through to go to Myrtle Beach. There was one stoplight when I was growing up.

LR: Really? So, it's changed a lot.

JS: I'm talking about through high school, through '99, one stoplight. Now, we have car dealerships, 10 grocery stores. I mean, it's insane. Okay. So, people come move down here. I mean there's a joke that there's a highway straight from Ohio to South Carolina. They're older, for the most part. But there's this attitude, you know, that, okay, we're opening our doors, you're moving here and then you get here and you poke fun at us, you know, like we're ignorant or we used to own slaves or, you know, just whatever. So, I have a hard time.

LR: So, you think that people's attitudes have changed? Not changed, but there's a new influx of people that have changed...I guess the overall attitude of the region?

JS: I just think that as a local southerner, you have to be on your toes because you cannot make outsiders feel excluded because it's inhospitable. It goes against your nature, but you're welcoming, and they could take advantage of you.

LR: Yeah. Okay. I understand.

JS: And just, you know, be unfriendly, unkind. If you try to, like I said, I try to reduce barriers. southerners are very good at self-deprecating, you know, just being like, "This is the honest truth. You might think it's wacky, but there it is." I feel like outsiders benefit from that, but then they... I don't know, it's just like we're silly or we're just like less than, you know. If they looked at us so negatively, why is everybody moving here?

LR: It's condescending.

JS: It's very condescending.

LR: So, you're explaining that your hometown Pawleys Island has changed dramatically. Did you... You spent some time away from Pawleys Island and you also spent some time away from Charleston. When you came back to each city and each town, did you notice anything really significant that stuck out to you? Maybe when you graduated C of C and you went back to Pawleys Island, you noticed something or when you went to Pawleys Island or Montana and came back to Charleston.

JS: I mean we're using our uniqueness, you know. People move here from other places. They bring--let's just say an example. In Pawleys, would be now Highway 17, has huge concrete--what are those called?--medians. So, you can't just pull out and make a left. You have to go up and do a U-turn. And it's because somebody on the council grew up some place in Philly where they have this.

LR: Yeah.

JS: So yeah, I mean it's impossible to say that we're immune to other people's... I don't know what I'm trying to say, but they're coming here. They're bringing their own set of how things should be. And I mean, I think 144 people move here a month, a day or something insane. So, it's just inevitable. That's just inevitable. So, figuring out how to make our unique voice withstand this influx and just--

LR: Sustain the southern style of everything.

JS: Yes. And you know how Americans will take cultures and Americanize it? That's what happened. That's what's happened to the South.

LR: Like Northernizing it.

JS: It's just watered down. Yeah. And so, I mean, I live on James Island. James Island is the last little foothold, and I just got an email that they had voted to extend the Folly Road Overlay. So, we're going to get like 10 new fast food restaurants that every other town in the country has. And I just think if you were to pull, and I wouldn't even say people that have been here five years or more, you know, it's not that I'm opposed to people coming here, it's just...

LR: No, it's just such rapid change. I mean, I've been here three years and just in those three years, I've seen a lot of change already, so I can't imagine anyone who's been here longer.

JS: I mean, when I was in school in the early 2000s, so--I mean, we'll just go ahead and say 20 years ago you--did not cross Vanderhorst Street. That was as far as you went.

LR: I've heard that, above Calhoun, it was--

JS: Vandy. That's one block from Calhoun. No, no, no. It was East Bay. You know, down by... I'm trying to think like Amen Street, Cypress and the Vendue and all that. That's where you went. And we were such--I mean the College has remained about 10,000 since.

LR: Roughly.

JS: Yeah, and that was about where we were when I was here. But it's just, you know, we see the billionaire yachts parked at the marina and we're like, oh look, somebody can afford to come here and eat out because we can't. (laughing)

LR: (laughing) So you would--it sounds like you're saying that the College has remained relatively the same. It's just the landscape around it that's changed the most.

JS: Whoever named Charleston "Number 1 City in the World", I could just hurt that person. It's like, "Shh!" It used to be such a well-kept secret; it really did. And the cruise ships coming in, I know. But that's just it. It's like we're southerners, we want to share, but at the same time we need to all get on the same page. Like we came here, everybody was drawn to here for the same reason, you know, a love for the city. How do we create a community that can actually help shape policies that will ensure that we can remain intact as that city that we were all drawn to initially?

LR: So, given all the changes, is there a certain spot in Charleston that maybe is your favorite and you haven't seen any changes at?

JS: I would say Folly Beach.

LR: Folly Beach. It remains relatively the same?

JS: It's still got that, like... It's funny 'cause I think in other--unlike the West Coast it would read as like "boho", but here it's like a little trashy and I love it. (Laughing)

LR: (laughing) So, Folly Beach.

JS: Yeah. And Charleston, anyway. And I always tell our international students, you know, 'cause I'm trying to get them to think about things from a different perspective and like... Because a lot of students are coming from Europe or other places in the world that have very efficient public transportation. Like, okay so we do not have that here--a negative. But the positive, you know,

side effect of that is that the highway stops at Crosstown. And so, that's why the city can stay like it is on the peninsula because there's water around it, the Historical Society protects any structure 75 years or older. Those policies are in place. That's not going to change. It's these outliers where the locals live and that's what's got all my friends, everyone I've known since growing up, fired up. It's like, okay, let's preserve the city where all the tourists go and look, but all the people that live and work here and make this place function, you know, gets to live behind the Taco Bell.

LR: Because the--even just the prices are outrageous.

JS: Oh yeah.

LR: It's not sustainable for people that have been here for generations, so.

JS: No, but it's going to bust. It's just, I hope, I think some people might be in a better position to capitalize on that. I mean, for instance, when the housing market--I mean we bought our house in 2014, October 2014, so four years now, and then it just appreciated \$100,000. We've not done a thing to it. It's just the market driving that. Like you said, it's not sustainable. There's going to be a new, cool place. Eventually... People who are moving here and they're not getting work, they're moving. I've known since I've been back since '09, going to 10 years, I would say about 12 families that have gone on to more affordable options. We're honestly considering it. And we haven't even talked about the sea level.

LR: Oh yeah. It's like everything is coming together to drive people out.

JS: Yeah. But on James Island especially, you see these old African American communities, and it's just wrong. It is wrong. And with the bridge... When I was in school here, when I was growing up, the Ravenel Bridge was the Cooper River Bridge and it came in at Churches on Meeting Street.

LR: Yeah. I know what you're talking about. Meeting, where you come off.

JS: Yeah. But blocks and blocks and blocks and blocks and blocks down the peninsula. So, all of those homes now between Churches and the bridge, where they had to create that huge footprint for the bridge, all those families were displaced, and the gentrification of this town is disgusting. It really is. I mean, you know, it's families handing down, handing down. These people are not, especially in this market, capable of going out and purchasing homes on downtown Charleston. So, what are we going to do for them, you know? And building, you know, multifamily units on, like... What is that land called? Brownfield or something. It's out. Like, nobody will touch it because it's maybe contaminated in some fashion, but that's a good idea of where to put affordable family housing.

LR: Is that on the peninsula?

JS: Mhm. It's like... You would get on 26 and then when you see the train tracks, like over in there. Down the Ashley. So, around the Cooper. It's becoming a rich person's playground.

LR: So, can you tell me if you have a vision for the future of Charleston or something that you're hoping to see?

JS: Yeah, I mean, it's at the legislative level for me. And this is...I mean this is just the US, you know. It's these policies that make it okay to cut down Grand Oaks. You know, one representative wants to identify a Grand Oak as anything over 18 inches. Well then, somebody comes in and says, "No, let's actually make it 10 inches." Let's just... Like, what about age? You know, or... There's no way to make a permanent anything in this country. It all changes when the next guy comes in and it's dependent upon who's in his or her ear, who is giving him or her money. I mean, it's so consumer-focused and money-driven. I don't know. It's depressing to be honest. So, I think just the people will have to stay dedicated. Did you watch Obama's speech at the Nelson Mandela?

LR: I didn't watch it.

JS: It was really good because everything is so pointing fingers and just so toxic right now. For him to just reiterate the ideals of Nelson Mandela and the belief and the hope and he said, "Let us be joyful in our struggle that we've seen darker times and if we remain dedicated to what we believe in and work at it, it might not happen in our lifetime, but it will happen." And I think the younger generation, I see all of y'all. I mean the farm-to-table movement, I feel, was very youth-driven. Just like, we don't want to eat crap, wear crap, ruin the planet and make everything look the same. And I really feel it's a youth-driven concept.

LR: That's exactly what you just said. Everything's just consumer-driven, and it's like the quality of everything is gone.

JS: It's just garbage. Right. And that's another reason why I love the campus community, 'cause you can remain progressive-minded.

LR: Fresh ideas.

JS: Y'all stay the same age, I keep getting older. But yeah. (laughing)

LR: (laughing) That's so not true. Everyone's getting older.

JS: I know, but you know what I mean. It's good to be around that, like...enthusiasm. It's really inspirational so, but you see institutions entrenched in tradition, like the College is, to a fault in some cases, usher in this notion of sustainability. I mean it's in the QEP, it is at the institutional level, thinking about what we can do to reduce our footprint, make the world a better place. So, I think you see institutions starting to do that and that's the trickle-down effect, as much as I don't agree with economics in that regard, I think that is a ripple effect out. So, any big city, town of any number, usually has a university. And if they are becoming the champions of these very logical ideas...

LR: They're gonna spread outward.

JS: Yup. And so, for the College, I feel like we're on the precipice of being able to drive that within the community. I would love to see the College work more with the community. I just feel disconnected, and we are on the outside of campus, and I am the only person on campus that only works with international students. So, maybe that's why I feel some of the disconnectivity, but it would just be nice, you know, to feel like we're part of something bigger. Saving Charleston from being whitewashed or watered down.

LR: Even just the geography of the College where we're integrated into the city. So, maybe we should really be more integrated into the city rather than just our buildings. Thank you for sitting down with me.

JS: Of course.

LR: I really enjoyed hearing your opinions. Very honest.