

## Voices of Southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

**Interviewee:** Della Porta, Donatella

**Place of Interview:** The Hidden Countship, 21 Burns Lane, Charleston, SC

**Date of Interview:** 2018-06-26

**Interviewed by:** Matthews, Tanya

**Date of Transcription:** 2019-04-25

**Transcribed by:** Davis, Alexis

**Date of Revision(s):** 2019-05-07

**Length of Interview:** 00:32:46

**Keywords and Subject Headings:** The Hidden Countship, Italy, Charleston, Spoleto, development, festivals, history, hospitality, hurricane, tourism, tourist

**Abstract:** In her interview with Tanya Matthews, Donatella describes her initial attraction to Charleston, the southern hospitality that she has experienced in her time here, and the role that tourism plays in daily life. A lover of the traditional, Della Porta is very concerned about the preservation of this special city which is her home.

**Biographical Note:** Donatella Cappelletti Della Porta was born in Italy and decided to travel the rest of the world with her husband, Giulio. In their exploration of the South, the two ended up in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. After falling in love with Charleston, the couple bought a house in 2009 and opened the Italy-inspired boutique The Hidden Countship in 2012.

### 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.

**Interviewer Initials: T.M.**

**Interviewee Initials: D.D.**

**TM:** All right. Thank you for joining me today. This is Tanya Matthews, sitting down with Donatella Della Porta, owner of The Hidden Countship on Burns Alley in Charleston, South Carolina. Could you tell me a bit about where you're from to start off?

**DD:** Yes. I'm from Italy. I was born in Perugia. It's in the very middle of Italy in the region of Umbria.

**TM:** Okay. What brought you to Charleston?

**DD:** Charleston. We felt a love for Charleston. We were traveling and having [inaudible] in Virginia, Woodberry Forest and then UVA. And we were traveling in the South, discovering not-so-touristic spot for international travel. We fell in love. We could not resist to buy the first house. It was 2009. And we are still here.

**TM:** Very cool. Could you describe what attracted you? The environment or people?

**DD:** When we came, we literally- our door, we were adoring the architecture, the unique- we have architectural background and also the climate was gorgeous. I remember the very first time was December with a tee shirt, nothing else. And the beauty of the city, the very high quality of life. And also, so we bought, oh my God, it's such a beautiful house from the 1740s, very old, gorgeous. It was like, oh my gosh, the best, the best place to buy any historic house. And so we, yes, I would say the combination with architecture, quality of life and weather.

**TM:** Okay. Very cool. How would you describe the culture of the region that you've experienced?

**DD:** We felt so welcomed. Oh my gosh, it was, it was amazing. We in the years, we have made so many friends, so many, it's incredible. Neighbors, so happy and welcoming us. So, oh, the neighbors and then when we open in the 2012 the business we- oh my gosh, I wished to have take note of every kind, welcoming sentence. It was really, really, really sweet. Also, I think that like the Charlestonians, they love to- they love people who they can trust. So they saw it as a very normal couple and everybody travels. So they know Italy, so this was lovely, it still is.

**TM:** So that's a little bit of southern hospitality. How would you define that? What behaviors did you see that were-

**DD:** It's, it's lovely. It's warm. You can tell now that Charleston has been discovered, we can see the difference between the people from here and who comes from somewhere else. So, very sweet, very thoughtful, lovely sort of hospitality.

**TM:** Okay, so how large of a role does tourism play into your life here?

**DD:** Like living here in Charleston? The tourism people that comes here? So they like- our business is in a hotel magazine and we get a very interesting selection of tourists. We see that- in my analysis there is, they are several layers of tourists. Like, we are very lucky to have a very high-end kind of clientele, people that are in Kiawah, people that are here in beautiful hotels and they have traveled and they love to do- because we have a particular kind of boutique. Then there is a kind of-, so we have people from Seattle, Texas, Florida, New York, a lot of New York. A lot of Connecticut and even Canada; we have done shipping to Canada. It was super heavy. [inaudible] So a lot of very amazing- then there is another kind of tourist, I think is the majority like people that come for a couple of days or I don't know it is related to the, to the ship. They don't come. We see them. The market is flooded.

**TM:** Yeah. Well, how would you define hospitality and your perspective?

**DD:** Hospitality is- do you mean how I-?

**TM:** You yourself just define hospitality. Are there any activities that you are involved in in Charleston that are for tourists? Like, any festivals or anything like that.

**DD:** Ooh, not strictly related to tourism. We don't actually; we invest in the tourism in advertising back like we have the Italian Cinema Festival that actually is- so looking forward to meeting people from out of town. Yes. So hospitality I think is very crucial.

**TM:** Could you talk a bit more about the Italian Film Festival and what the goals are?

**DD:** The Italian Film Festival was started by the College of Charleston, thanks to the vision of the Professor Giovanna De Luca and personally to me it's a very important event because it's about culture, contemporary culture. Something real Italian, finally not about mozzarella or pizza. So it's culture that comes through young people and we hosted them. Also there nothing in downtown about movies. There is not even a movie theater. So having here in this super southern city, real Italian Cinema Festival, it is unusual and important. Also, College of Charleston is the only college [inaudible] in having an Italian Cinema Festival. So I am so proud of it. And actually there are so many [inaudible] that don't know anything about it, but they

would love to so there is a lot to do. Unfortunately, the city's not helping- we feel a little bit alone working on getting people; we have to work a lot.

**TM:** A little recognition. So what is your engagement in cultural affairs in Spoleto? Do you know exactly where your place is in the Spoleto Festival?

**DD:** We have been sponsors of Spoleto Festival since forever and we love Spoleto Festival. We found out by coincidence that Charleston was the town of Spoleto. I remember 30 years ago when Spoleto Italy was talking about a sister. It was A little place somewhere in America and by chance we ended to live here. So Spoleto is amazing. We think it's an, it's an amazing opportunity for Charleston to get people from- to get a certain kind of people from all over the US. Yes.

**TM:** Okay. How would you compare the festival in Italy to the festival here? Is it similar?

**DD:** It's similar. I think that the original idea of the founder, Maestro Gian Carlo Menotti- I was so lucky to meet him before he died, yeah 30 years ago. So his vision is still here in Charleston and actually the modality like to have artists and to celebrate them and all the parties and events. And it's very nice. There are not anymore, there is no relationship between Italy after [inaudible] divorce and in Italy, the festival is still facing a big crisis due to so many factors. But in Italy you have the amazing venue, like the 2000 old Roman theater and the 1500s small theaters. And it's completely different and yeah, but I think they are- even if the two festivals are not friends, of course they share a lot.

**TM:** A common goal? Very nice. So in relation to tourists coming to visit Charleston, have you seen a difference in how locals treat the environment and how tourists treat the environment?

**DD:** It is really sad. I think that- so when we came nine years ago, this was another city, another planet. Like I remember it was more pristine. Now I, I know I am a guest of this town. I should not say anything, but I hate to see the, the new hotels in upper King- the construction, the cranes, investors coming from up north. How they say here, "Just making a business", and the city is changing so much. And the traffic. The traffic I know very well because like in my middle age, the traffic is killing people. So you see that people stop to be nice, the cars, you cannot go from one point to another. Yesterday I had to go in West Ashley; I had to turn my car, go back and say "Okay, I'll do it later." I have customers calling me from Kiawah. I don't know if the experience is the same, it's crazy. I have customers calling me from Kiawah saying "Would you please open for me at 9:30 so I can go back before the craziness of the traffic." Yes. So I may say that I don't see improvement for sure.

**TM:** Yeah. In what ways, in your opinion, would improve the tourism development?

**DD:** So, this is not just tourists who makes it complicated to leave. Charleston is a little peninsula. You cannot- we sold our previous house that you maybe saw because we had coming eleven condos at the end of Lauren Street. There was the Vegetable Bin- gone. There was True Value, the little pharmacy, everything is gone. Eleven condos- how can you manage to do that? It's just impossible. So say "No, let's change the neighborhood." So if the city thinks that is a good investment to destroy Charleston, to send hotels and apartments, this is, this is not what to do.

**TM:** Do you think that it affects the quality of life for people who are local?

**DD:** One hundred percent. Yeah, I know so many people that are selling their house, leaving. I have a very dear friend that says "I'm going to Beaufort."

**TM:** That's near Hilton Head.

**DD:** Yeah. People who came here for the lovely environment and atmosphere, yeah, they are leaving.

**TM:** It's sad to see that happen.

**DD:** It's very sad. And every day I spend so much time at the store. It's amazing that everyone asks me "Where I can have a lovely Italian dinner and the second is, "Why, why they are doing that to Charleston? I came 12 years ago, it was gorgeous, and the feeling and everything now, oh my God." Every day I have people complaining, every day I have stuff to make [inaudible].

**TM:** Yeah, it's kind of crazy how it's been changing. Do you have a specific favorite place in Charleston that you have gone to throughout your time here that you've seen change?

**DD:** Meeting Street is becoming- upper Meeting Street is becoming the outskirts of any town without any personality. Upper King, oh my God. The new Hyatt is an insult to the Peninsula, oh my God. The historic, like 100 years old, shoes store is becoming a hotel. The part like I was talking about at the end of Lauren Street is awful, and very often the architecture is cheap. Mount Pleasant is becoming monstrous. Condo. Yeah.

**TM:** How does that make you feel?

**DD:** Really bad. Really bad, because also, you know, we have seen gorgeous, old places in Italy ripped out by the contractor, Fiori. So, yeah. And actually it, this makes me crazy like American

tourists say "Oh my gosh. We were in love with Venice. Then we saw the cruise ship. They are awful. Then we saw the outskirts, so all the new construction." They are doing the same. Yeah. It's sad to see that like [inaudible] does not, they don't- aren't helpful to save a gorgeous, gorgeous town like Charleston. Yeah.

**TM:** Yeah. It's part of the history. Almost historic preservation in a way?

**DD:** I should know what the historic preservation is doing, and I don't know what the city of Charleston is doing for sure. The preservation does a very, very good job for what they can do, but... the city.

**TM:** Does it make you want to move?

**DD:** It does, yes. Very often my husband gets so... saying "No, no." Yes.

**TM:** Wow.

**DD:** We stay for now. We are so lucky, we have a beautiful, old house. Wait but, you know, if you, yeah, if the city changes so much, I don't know if- I have so many friends. I had a friend. She was so, so disappointed. A lot of the women from New York, she came 10 years ago say no. She put the house on the market; she sold right away. And now she's going back to New York. And other dear friend, oh my gosh. I miss her. She sold the house because she could not... No. I hate that she went back to another house.

**TM:** Is it almost a lack of community feeling? Is that why people are leaving because it doesn't feel like a community?

**DD:** No, because you have not anymore the same feeling that you have. All the traffic. There is a statistic, like a council member told me he's like "36 people a day moving in the area." This makes a big difference. Yeah.

**TM:** It's no longer a small town. It's more of a city.

**DD:** It's more a suffocated city with this traffic. The traffic is very... you feel suffocated. Like I need to go to my doctor in Mount Pleasant. You cannot do that. You simply cannot. It's impossible. [inaudible], I don't know if you experience it. If you have to go between- I am here, but between after 4:30, you forget it. So you can stay here, but this is making to me very poor downtown because also now who owns property thinks that Charleston is the golden egg. So they ask crazy, crazy rent prizes. Crazy, a lot. So many people are closing because they don't make any money because people don't come because of the traffic. It's closing. Oh my gosh,

even Michael Kors is closing. Yes. [inaudible] is leaving. They don't make any money. So many, so many places shut like Anthropologie. The manager told me "We are the only store in the US not making money." They are planning to leave when the lease ends. People have no reason to renew like the old antique store, close [inaudible]. The list is very long and it makes me very sad. But this is what is happening. The peninsula gets sorts of problems and the city does nothing at all. So I'm sorry to say that I wish that something could be done.

**TM:** That it was a little different. This is a little bit of a different question, but have you experienced any hurricanes or any tropical storms that have affected your experience?

**DD:** I had, I've been through Matthew and Irma. We were so lucky to be... the house is in a little elevated spot so we had no damage. We were totally fine enjoying an empty city.

**TM:** Nice. Did you see other places on the peninsula that were maybe destroyed?

**DD:** Unfortunately, we saw so many neighborhood with the high water. Yeah.

**TM:** Was the tourism industry affected by that at all?

**DD:** A lot. Very, very much. I remember, yes. I remember that we had been without customers for more than a month. And now people are scared of course. Yeah.

**TM:** Are there trends in like visitors that you see like month to month or year to year?

**DD:** As I told you, we have a very selected... So we see that like April and May, we literally- like it's amazing. But in the middle of August, so we have the best sales of cashmere for people who go back to Seattle. Yes. Not at all, all year round. Exception for the hurricane season.

**TM:** Were there problems with flooding in Charleston and that kind of affected your opinion of the city?

**DD:** No. We know it's, yeah. It's a problem. I say again, we are so lucky. Like the store, we did not even have close to the door, nothing. They house is in an amazing little elevation spot. So we did not even have the garden flooded. We were very lucky. Yeah. So it's okay.

**TM:** In your experience, what features of Charleston interest tourists the most, if they aren't afraid of the hurricanes, what do they keep coming back for?

**DD:** They come to see one of the oldest cities of America and to see the houses. Like our house is in the tour of the Historic Foundation and [inaudible]. So we, it's so amazing. They love to, to

see all the house that lives still today in the daily routine of someone and I think this is Charleston.

**TM:** Okay. One of the last few questions: Is there anything in your experience or memory where you can pinpoint a distinct change, like a development of the Crosstown or change in a certain neighborhood or something that's completely different?

**DD:** To me, everything was pretty okay until two years ago. I think that it was two years when suddenly, one day all the hotels were coming. So many, so many, so many. And then the development close to our house and yeah. Definitely two years ago.

**TM:** Well one of the last few questions, this is an oral history project and we're just hoping to share different perspectives on hospitality development in Charleston. Are there any hopes that you have for the project itself and your involvement in it?

**DD:** ...Well now let me understand that.

**TM:** So we're developing the oral histories and it's just documenting the various perspectives of southern hospitality and tourism development in Charleston. But in your experience, are there any hopes that you have for the project to make an impact in your community?

**DD:** Oh, yes. Ideally, I would be so interested to see what you can- because to me it's who comes to Charleston comes because Charleston is a special city. And of course it's very hard to preserve, in the best way, a city where everyone, I included, wants to be, but to me, if your project can make the city aware of the need of protection... Like I know it's very, very hard. Like I told you that if I, if 10 person a day telling me, "Oh my gosh, the traffic is driving me crazy. I want to leave this town." I hope someone is taking care of it. If your project says, "Oh my gosh, tourism is important and the city is changing, let's think about it", so you'll have a great goal.

**TM:** Do you think about sustainability and the community as well? Well, thank you so much for sitting down with us and giving your perspective. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**DD:** I think that's, that's all.

**TM:** Okay. Thank you so much, Donatella.

**DD:** Thank you.