Voices of Southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

Interviewee: Dennis, Benjamin
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Abstract: Benjamin Dennis, known as BJ Dennis, takes us through his childhood growing up in West Ashley. He talks about his time in the neighborhoods of Maryville and West Oak Forest; how they were then and were they are now. The changes coincide with the development and gentrification of the area. He talks about his time at the College of Charleston and the changing environment of the tourism scene. Dennis walks us through what the nightlife and restaurant scene was like when he was a young man in the city. Giving us a glimpse into this world, Dennis touches on the state of the local economy and the death of the mom and pop businesses that used to dominate the area. He touches on the impacts that Charleston's transformation has had on the inclusion of Gullah and Geechee cultures and how best to incorporate them in the cultural dialog of the city. Dennis has spent a lot of time watching the city transform and take a more drastic shift towards corporate influence. He remarks on how the changes that have transpired have been done not in the interest of local Charlestonians like himself, but rather the needs and wants of outsiders. Towards the end of the interview Dennis take time to articulate his feeling on the perception of black culture in the United States and, more specifically, the South.

Biographical Note: Benjamin Dennis is an esteemed chef and cultural icon in Charleston. He prides himself in his work as a Gullah Geechee chef sharing his knowledge and culture with member of the community and visitors alike. Dennis has spent almost all his life living in Charleston, with the exception of 4 years spent in St. Thomas. His influence in the food scene here in the city has been fundamental to the survival of his culture and Charleston's identity.

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.

Interview Begin

[Interviewer Initials]: SB
Interviewee Initials]: BD

SB: All right. This is Sylvie Baele here we are at Earth Fare in South Windermere. It is July 5th, 2018 and we are conducting interviews for Voices of Southern Hospitality for the Lowcountry digital history initiative [Correction: The Voices of Southern Hospitality project is not under the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, rather the College of Charleston Special Collections]. So would you introduce yourself and tell me where you're born and…

BD: Hello, I'm Benjamin Dennis the Fourth.

SB: Okay.

BD: Affectionately known as BJ, BJ Dennis born and raised here in Charleston, South Carolina. And specifically West Ashley near… an area named called Maryville, which people may be familiar with, but specifically West Oak Forest. Just same, same area. Everybody knows Maryville though because it's the historical reference, but born and raised there, all my life except for four years, I lived in the Virgin Islands from 2004 to 2008 in Saint Thomas.

SB: Cool, Oh, uh, let's see. What was your childhood like growing up in Maryville?

BD: Typical. Yeah, you know, it was working class, middle class, lower upper middle class, a majority black neighborhood. Um, you know, what's the typical who parents like want you to, what school, you know played, rode bikes, hung out with kids. Your friends. Try to stay away from the, the negative parts of growing up in that side, you know, you had issues with the drug culture, the drug dealers and this stuff. And you know, it was, I say, I think it was just a normal childhood.

SB: Right.

BD: Honestly, you know what, go to somebody's house. Somebody's house was the hangout house. Go see the chilly bear lady. You go on the weekends buy a plate the food from somebody's house out their backyard. You know, it was one of those things.

SB: You spent a lot of time outside?

BD: Oh yeah, back then that side of West Ashley, it's the old neighbor now. When I was coming up it was like at least a couple hundred of us kids living in and around that neighborhood.

SB: Cool.

BD: So we outside. In droves, in packs, sometimes on the park. Sometimes people will have basketball courts set up on the street in front of the driveway to be in the street playing and play street football, um, riding bikes up and down the track from Maryville to Ardmore, through Oak forest, it was a normal childhood.

SB: How's your, your home area changed since then?

BD: Its Older, it's old, most people moved out. Obviously, you know, you don't want them to live in the same neighborhood you grew up.

SB: Right. Right.

BD: Gentrified now. Cause you can't get that type of property in Charleston anymore. Front yard, backyard.

SB: Right.

BD: So does single single single, single style homes like single level homes in the old style, Charleston homes from like the 70s. Um, so no, it was quiet. It was quieter that what it was it cleaned up a lot of the issues that was around here, I always say it was hood. But It wasn't ghetto, to me the ghetto, if you live in a ghetto areas. It's Third World almost. There were parts of Charleston, that was damn near Third World. But I grew up in two parent household where we still have the issues of any urban area with the crack and the cocaine and heroin. All those were issues. But um, now it's very quiet. I said its old because all my neighbors and the parents are in their middle age, 60s going on 70s.

SB: Kind of the age of the neighborhood, the people in it is just on average older.

BD: Yeah.

SB: It's funny I have to ask this, but for the record, what's your occupation and why did you pursue this type of work?

BD: I'm a chef. Why did I pursue it? I don’t know it kind of chose me. I went to College of Charleston for one year, this was the year I stayed in college lodge. You laugh and you know, still, I don't know if it's still the reputation, still the same, but um, I think the year before I went to the College of Charleston, College Lodge was voted number one party dorm in the country by high times magazine. And it was a party. So I literally didn't want to go to College of Charleston coming to the school, I wanted to be a software designer, game designer. I was really into video

games then and wanting to go into that field of designing software. Didn't have, I was gonna go to Devry. I met with the counselors and didn't have the GPA or get a scholarship and my parents couldn't afford to send me to school out of state. So the night I graduated high school, that next morning I was at College of Charleston and taking two courses to get into school. So literally all my friends are out partying, high school graduation and the next morning and walked the stage. Next morning I was taking, I wasn't at either math or english class like 7:30 that morning and went to College of Charleston and didn't do anything. Partied

SB: I feel you, that's what I did.

BD: But back then you know, Charleston, nothing shut down. There was no two o'clock law then. You partied til' five. There was no such thing as upper King back then. That was a novelty. Rue de Jean was like a trendsetting restaurant in that location, but there was the best club ever in Charleston and then too club, club...not trio club...not envy It was three levels. It's weird. The alleyway where coast is now. No, it was…

SB: Oh really?

BD: Three restaurants, three level club called club. It'll come back to me.

SB: Cool.

BD: You saw everything in there, anything you could imagine. Walk past him like oh those over there and having sex and you kept moving that club was ahead of his time. But the two o'clock law. You wouldn't leave the house til one in the morning back then.

SB: Right.

BD: So there's two

SB: More European style, when people go out at like midnight.

BD: Yeah. And you already, I said back then it was a lot calmer because you can rage hard. I think now everybody tries to get it in within a two hour.

SB: Right.

BD: Back then we'd stay at the house. We did, we get our buzz and walk out and we will be, so you didn't want to really drink like that. You have a drink just to you, but you weren't wasted used to Be. But um, yeah, that was those days. Yes.

SB: I have more questions coming about those days, but now we're going to kind of, it kind of segue into something that probably more than a buzzword in Charleston anymore, but uh,

tourism, right? {inaudible} we've watched it develop over the last decade much to blow up how has it affected you or I guess really your current occupation? Working as a chef?

BD: For me it's been, honestly for me it's been a blessing.

SB: Right.

BD: Um, because of why, the reason why it's a blessing because tourism, it was, it's weird, the fact that there's a lack of representation of Gullah Geechee culture, a physical aspect, like physical buildings, locations. Cause honestly we're here. I think you're going to see a black Charlestonian downtown before you run into a white Charlestonian from Charleston. But the history and the culture, it's been such a hidden thing. It's always been a very kind of insular culture. So for me, being a Gullah chef, it's been good because a lot of the press people come in town want to get a taste of the real. So I get people who will want me to do cooking for them, In their Airbnb and things like that. So for me it's been a good thing.

SB: it's pretty lucrative then, right?

BD: Yeah. I mean, don't get me wrong, I don't get a lot of tourists, but you know, those who, who want to know they'll. Yeah.

SB: Seek you out? Right. How did you, did you have any views or understandings of tourism when you were a child in Charleston?

BD: Nah.

SB: It wasn't really around.

BD: I really didn't.

SB: Yeah.

BD: Everyone, we didn't think about it too much.

SB: What's your current opinion on tourism in Charleston?

BD: It's becoming too corporate.

SB: I'd say that's a fair assessment.

BD: It's too corporate, not enough local mom and pop businesses anymore.

SB: There is an IHOP on East Bay.

BD: Granted, we did have a Huddle House where Basil at.

SB: Oh really? I didn't know that. Wow.

BD: Which was cool back then. But I mean that was one of the only ones you saw, but I think you, it just becoming too corporate. I think it's become too, we want to, we want to be cultured but don't want to embrace our culture in the city and that's beyond black or white. Charleston culture in general, of all races. We want to embrace it. We want to embrace everybody else's culture who comes to the city. Charleston to me now as a mini New York or Ohio. There is a plane, a flight coming from New York every hour now, every hour, JetBlue back and forth. So very corporate We've lost a lot of our true identity, but it's kind of the the mayor and the city council's fault for allowing a lot of outside developers come in and not saying, hey, let's reach into our communities and find those who can help develop. Most of these people who develop these new highrise apartments and stuff are companies from Ohio and Charlotte

SB: They're outsiders.

BD: Outsiders who don't understand the landscape. And half of these buildings are not even full.

SB: Let's be real, that might fool some of the people. Some of those buildings, they're building on Meeting [Street]. I know they're not really old buildings. They can try all day to make it look like and not really fooling anyone. I don't think.

BD: 1080 NoNo or 1030 NoMo, whatever that big building right there. I mean when I'm on, that's the highest crime and drug traffic area in the city. I found that out from a police officer.

SB: Wow, I believe it. The kids got money over there.

BD: And at the same time they still can't fill out, fill up the whole building. So what's about these other buildings as well? I mean what are we really doing? Cause everybody be, everybody's being out priced now. First the gentrification was just black folks like okay whatever. Now it's like affecting everybody.

SB: Now locals of any color can't live unless they are saving any money.

BD: ...and most of these homes are being AirBnB'ed out.

SB: Right**.**

BD: So what does that really bring to the community, you AirBnB-ing your place.

SB: So what you would change about the tourism industry, you kind of alluded to it, but if you really wanted to sum it up?

BD: What can we change? that is really deep because it's so far gone, I think. You can only wait for the economy to crash.

SB: You're not the only person who says that.

BD: You really can't. I mean the housing, the housing, not the economy in that sense but the housing in Charleston's is going to crash at some point because there's not going to be enough people to work. Who can afford to get back and forth downtown? And what you find in most of these places like okay, say for instance, the rich kid's family from Colorado went to College of Charleston. Their family bought a house. Cool. Well now the AirBnB that house out, after the kids go like there I let my kids stay in here and we can rent out to other college kids. That's cool. Right? But how does that, how does that build a community? It doesn't. You know, college kids.

SB: College kids don't care.

BD: What's the most successful place on Spring street right now? Warehouse. If Y'all think about businesses and most restaurants don't do well except for Xia Bao, which is an exception, right? Why? Because Warehouse is a place that people going to get shit faced. College kids want to drink, to be honest, drink, do drugs, and eat junk food.

SB: That's true. That's the M.O of most college kids.

BD: I mean when you have, you used to have communities like right before my generation, you had communities and you had mom and pop businesses that sustained the community. You can't have that now because there's no, there's no constant money to sustain the community.

SB: Those kinds of businesses right?

BD: Right. I mean you look at all, look at all the mom and pop businesses that opened up in Charleston through gentrification that have gone, you know, I'm talking of people who go, oh, it's the opportunity and they lasts maybe a year, two years. There's no steady because this is no constant money. I think people downtown right now are house poor. They look good on the outside, right? Prime example for me is that restaurant on. I love Carol Lee. She owns like Taco Boy...Park cafe. They close for dinner. They don't even do dinner no more.

SB: Yeah I think that is pretty strange.

BD: Who's going there to eat? How can, uh, how can the family who's trying to live downtown Charleston paying all this money, how can they afford to go out to eat?

SB: Right.

BD: So how can these mom and pop businesses in that community sustain?

SB: Because housing is so expensive, they can't right. People need more surplus income to spend, to put back into their community and not pay their landlords. Landlords they're probably the ones going out to eat if they're not big developers, if they are individuals.

BD: And like you said, most of the properties that I'm seeing now, either college kids who are...and college kids are not putting money into the economy except for a bar.

SB: Right.

BD: And outsiders, or not outsiders: AirBnB. I live on the east side, my neighbors moved out there a little apartment. I thought I had new neighbors coming in. It wasn't.

SB: Really.

BD: It's like, oh, they were in and out and then I realize what is it...they are AirBnB even though it's technically illegal.

SB: Right.

BD: They're still doing it downtown.

SB: Yeah.

BD: It's because they got money, but that doesn't, that doesn't help a community though. So I guess, did I answer? I don't know…

SB: You answered the question. So we're going to switch gears again. Another buzz word, especially with the tourism industry, southern hospitality. So what do you consider to be southern hospitality?

BD: Speaking to somebody, when you see them pass by.

SB: Like saying hi?

BD: How you doing? Nod your head? But southern hospitality in Charleston is gone because it's…

SB: There's not any southerners.

BD: Yeah. So when I walk downtown like I'm used to anybody I know, even see this person could be a bigot right. Could be the biggest bigot, but that instilling that hospitality, the southern hospitality is always, they still won't speak. They may not be hey, but they don't know how they nod their head "How you doing" and keep it moving. Now, people don't speak right. I

walk on the street and was like, oh, okay. Um, let's be frank. I mean southern hospitality is also a facade on the outside because Charleston people can be some assholes, but from the outside looking in like just the everyday nuanced things of walking down the street and saying hello. Not like looking at like I can tell the difference between somebody who is from Charleston who is white and somebody who is not from Charleston. Because a white person from Charleston will at least say “hey” also at least, “hey, how you doing”?

SB: They use the words.

BD: ...or at least nod their head. Listen, I drive a pickup truck and I've had cats in other pickup trucks with Dixie flags on their trucks look at me and I guess we drive pickup trucks. This is a thing right. Now, I can tell who's not from Charleston, they don't speak and maybe it's a, maybe it's a younger generation thing.

SB: I don't think so, but maybe. I nod my head at everyone. I got to New York and people like, who the hell are you saying hello to? I'm like, sorry.

BD: All these nuance things like holding the door open for a woman. I don't care who you are, who you are. I was just in New York and I did that and people are like, oh, it could have fit.

SB: You'd stand there for an hour.

BD: My homegirl who lives out there and she's been in New York for so long and she's from Athens, Georgia. And she was like, wow, I forgot about the nuanced things from back home. Like, yeah, you shouldn't be carrying your bags. I got, let me hold the bags. Let me open this door for you. Those things.

SB: Yeah. You think there's a relation between southern hospitality and food or being a good host and food or drink?

BD: Yeah, you’re not gonna go to someone's house and not get something to drink. So yeah, I think that's a big thing. No matter who, no matter who they going to feed you. My Grandmother, she didn't want to give me something. She's not one. She's, she wants to give me something, you know? I'd have to be like, no, I'm good. After all that, I'll just take it. Yeah.

SB: Do you think southern hospitality, where it does still exist in Charleston, if it does, if it's changed or adapted to the present day.

BD: No, I think those who still have that in them still have it. Like I said, obviously you got to get outside of downtown and really get Charleston vibe. See locals.

SB: Yeah. So where, where are your favorite places off the peninsula?

BD: I like to go on the islands. John's Island. Edisto, Wadmalaw, James Island too, North Charleston. I mean I lived downtown but I don't even get into the perks. I mean I should be going out to the bars and stuff but I've been there, done that. And this is like after a while It was like the hangout, upper king on Friday or Saturday night, you got to be wasted.

SB: It's aggressive.

BD: It's aggressive. And like if you're like sober and you're walking, you feel that aggressiveness.

SB: Yeah. People are hollering at each other.

BD: People bumping you talking shit and keep it going cause cause they're so wasted.

SB: Yup.

BD: And I'm like, sometimes I think this is why I see how some hospitality has gone out the door. It's like there's so much more, they're more worried about homeless people sitting on a bench somewhere sleeping than a group of bridal shower girls who are wasted in the street stopping cars almost going to get hit. You're not worried about, you know, concerned about them cause they can cause an accident with this homeless person sleeping on the bench. Your harassing them. Charleston…

SB: I think it will reach a breaking point where it has a gears will shift think it's going to happen. Um, it's just waiting for it right?

BD: You can't continue to have transient people who moved to the city. Who here for part of the time that does not build an economy.

SB: And to build the economy is to build the community. Let's see. Well I guess trying to choose which questions we haven't really talked about yet. Do you think there are certain things in the South here that are respectable to talk about? Um, some that aren't. You find that people avoid certain topics still or do you think that's changing?

BD: Yeah, no, I mean I think the South gets stereotyped too much for racism and like look at the South, what to me, I respect the person who lets me know their beliefs and in the South people won't let you know how they feel about that. And I go up North, it's mass I think cause it's just as bad up North as it is down South. And that's like, I think in the South people are so more used to living in amongst each other. I always say people used to living amongst each other and respecting each other's speech. You know. Those things never really been talked about. So how can it like be uncomfortable if you never really talked about it? Right. And then you look at your textbooks. There's nothing about Gullah Geechee cultural history in any South Carolina history books. You might get a little group.

SB: Here's a picture of your basket.

BD: Yeah, exactly. Those things. Until we become equally talking about history and shared history, that's part of all our history. Then we can talk while they're making waves. Taking out a confederate flag.

SB: Not really actually doing too much. It's, it's placating some people. Yeah, but it's not - so it's not like symbolism and you're right.

BD: I'm not worried about someone who rides around with a confederate flag half the time. They probably can relate more than me and than a person in a suit and tie. I went to school with them.

SB: Right.

BD: They will play rap music in their car.

SB: You're not the first person who's told me that. No, I know. I heard it. Yeah.

BD: Big Dixie flag in the back of their truck and listening to Tupac. You're trying to hold onto something.

SB: Right. It's part of their identity.

BD: Right. They're trying to hold on or something. It doesn't make it right. I'm not the one to judge because I know white guys where that's the pride for them and sometimes didn't want to. They don't have, they have a hard time understanding that pride, that flag comes with a different symbolism for us. But it's just a symbol. The people who we are really worried about is the judges, the bank, the bank manager who wouldn't want to give me that loan. They don't fly the flag. Those are the ones who had the power.

SB: Right.

BD: It's just like our current president. He don't give a fuck about poor white people, but he uses them as puppets.

SB: Right, as pawns.

BD: I just came from the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. You'd be surprised.

SB: It is tough there.

BD: It is rough. Virginia has the highest number of overdoses, drug overdoses in the country. Now you would think that would be in some urban communities that would have that issue. But no, in West Virginia. And who do you think most of West Virginia voted for?

SB: Super red state.

BD: Because the education is not there. So they still feel hope from somebody who looks like them, who don't give a fuck about them, and could care of less. Yeah. So that's when you're not educated.

SB: How do you picture or hope the area, this area in Charleston lowcountry will be like in the future?

BD: We need a little more, embrace all the culture. Um, I think particularly us as Gullah people, we need to... there is in fighting with us too.

SB: Yeah.

BD: You know, um, we need to get over it. And a lot of the elders, need to let go and understand that there is that, you know, us young, us younger folks, aren't kids, I'm 39 years old. I mean I don't think I'm a kid, but I still get looked at as if I'm a kid and what I want to see more representation, more ownership of from us, more ownership, us being able to have a part of this tourism talk, you know it's like some...some 3 billion, $4 billion…

SB: Billions and billions.

BD: Like can we find 1% of that for us? It's like 100 million out of 1 billion. So I think us getting ourselves together and getting back to group economics, you can't ask the government to be giving you and giving you.

SB: Not sustainable.

BD: It's not sustainable, and how do you ever want to build for yourself. You're always expecting a handout, which is a part of the problem with the welfare system it's a trap, because it gets you comfortable. Don't have a man in the house, but we want to give you this little bit of money to make, but we're not going to build your work ethic so you're always like where's my check. We have to get out these mind states and say, how do we build futures? How do we have all this land? I mean this all his land that black people still own. How do we pull them together and build things and get away from that? I don't trust you mentality. So I think in the future just really see more working together and more representation cause its good for the city. I want to see in the textbook, I want to see in the school books, you know, that should be required course, at least from middle school up to high school every year. Something different about Gullah. Because sort of us, you'd be surprised if most of these kids don't even know Gullah Geechee - didn't even know what

SB: They don't know what it is.

BD: Until I start saying the words to them, they go oh and laugh and then you show culture. Laughing.

SB: Well thank you, I don't have any more questions. If there's anything else you'd like to say. Thanks for meeting with me today.

BD: Do you want a smoothie? Can I get you something.

SB: No, I'm all right.
[CONT.]

BD: But the islands are representation. The islands are murals of people who look like you.

SB: Right.

BD: A lot of kids grow up not knowing anything that looks like them. Oh, you were a slave. They don't talk about, well, why were they brought here? Because they had this, they had this culture, a grand culture. They knew how to plant, they knew how, they knew how to study the stars, they had all this technology built on another.

SB: Now They just…

BD: Now they just get mindless worker. And Charleston was run by black folks, horrible for you to say that. But the laws made sure you were in your place but the everyday in the city market, it was called the old slave market. Not because people get it confused so much thinking the people were sold out there.

SB: I was there

BD: I got pictures from 1850s when you look at the people in the market selling goods, it was all black people: Free and enslaved. That's what was sold - all the goods in the city and I have a friend up there selling spices where her parents, her family were there in 1890 or something.

SB: Wow.

BD: You know, these are the things like wait a minute y'all are artisans. You can make fish you could grow this. You have this knowledge. You're not going to bring this people or you may think that but someone was to brings you, you, you make sure you beat out of them the things you didn't want them to sell there, but you kept what they were good at. Brick masons, all these things. Look who built White House. Most of these buildings in downtown Charleston were built by black people. I love going on the plantation. Why? Because I see the, I see through all that bullshit. The greatness of skills they had the gardens, you know the cuisine, the houses. You have to look at the negative and understand why that was such a negative thing. But the

beauty and the ugly beauty that is within it, the ugly beauty that you see was the supreme. So something they have over there in West Africa. The same things to this day we think we went through something here with slavery, that I'm sure the mentalities are fucked up but the thing with karma - they had, we were talking to help grow the civilization. They have great civilizations that were destroyed, burnt everywhere, gold, gold pillaged, that was nothing to do all the time. I grew up seeing all these gold teeth in their mouths, gold crowns. Men, woman. And like, you understand a lot of us were taken from the Gold Coast and that was just something that was normal to us. The Ashantis, they said we were paid with gold. When the first Europeans first came there, these people were part of culture.

SB: It wasn't a status symbol.

BD: These things need to be in a books to help for understanding.

SB: Why?

BD: Why, who you are. And for everybody understand that wait a minute. There are great civilizations all over the world. It just happened to be that one civilization happened to get the hand on the iron from Africa, the gunpowder from China and made the gun. Which is still the most powerful thing in the world. Now I've got some that you don't have that can, a new weapon. I can just go around like wow. I will and I will bargain with those who on are on my team and give them weapons to help me with what I'm doing. This is a story that we don't talk about. We don't talk about the great civilization, the [Inaudible] and all that's in West Africa? The great Timbuktu , a prince among slaves, it was one of the greatest things I've seen on PBS. You should look it up. This guy was a real African prince from Timbuktu got caught in tribal war Sold into slavery, went to Mississippi. The person who was his enslaver had no knowledge of shit couldn't plant anything until this guy came, Made him rich. Years later this guy tried to run away from the plantation there and came back. Took the wife's foot on his neck and said, kill me, Cause, but he was too valuable. A couple years later, an English doctor came and saw the guy and said "oh my fucking God" his father saved me from a war in Africa. This is a real African prince. This is a true story. When he found out he had Prince, oh my God the man went crazy. Then it's like, oh the first time he really knew the value of. And then long story short, he got his freedom, went back to west Africa. Every year for the last how many years? The family from West Africa and the family in Mississippi have a reunion. Now when they talk to you about Timbuktu and this guy is as dark as me. And if you look at Timbuktu now, you this was truly dark skinned African men.

SB: Right.

BD: They were talking about Timbuktu in the special, see how the civilizations, civilizations was grieving. The university is in the books. But do we know these stories? As soon as we start on everybody's stories and open up everybody's minds. Then everybody else will start looking at each other differently. So they say, Oh, you have mud huts. Well hold up time out. You know what a real nicely designed mud hut does? It keeps you cool. There's a reason why things were

designed that way. The reason that they were great cities in West Africa and then yes, you have the village in the bush in Europe you call it a, we call it the countryside. Same fucking thing. But you try to make one look lower than the other. This is where we at.

SB: That's the same thing that happens today between rural Appalachia and people here.

BD: Yes. A lady brought me to Appalachia to other black place for reason to do a, to be a guest chef for and this lady moved out Appalachia. She lived on, she's lived on every continent. Well imagine that, Antarctica. She used to set up events for the Olympics, came back home to her town. I mean Appalachia is probably maybe the poorest area in the country. One of the poorest.

SB: Especially per capita cause it's big.

BD: ...and I was like, she was like, yeah, I'm gonna bring you up here. I want y'all to do a summer lunch program. And even in my mind I'm still stereotyping everything. Are you going to sell my programs? I think it's going to be black and brown folks, but we in Appalachia all white kids and it was us raising money and she specifically all black chefs for people in the communities to be like look, these are people who want to help and they were very grateful. You saw the look on some people faces like "Hmm", but 95% were like really all the same in the same boat. It's really only 1%. You know all these athletes and making all this money like they making a lot of money, but behind the scenes who was making even more money. The owners and the people who ran under the owners. A little bit of all these things, outrageous contracts five years, 150 million or you can make that five times more.

SB: Yeah, but he's going to destroy his body doing it. You know.

BD: They'll give you some people a little bit to make it seem like we've made it somewhere and those who get that a little bit really don't do nothing because they just content, a little happier, But I respect Lebron James. This man has rebuilt. He's rebuilt Akron, Ohio, rebuilt that city and these like maybe I got to leave too, but I'm making sure everything goes back to Akron. People in elementary school now he's a put like a bunch of kids through college. That's what we need to be doing, but we have a mentality. It's almost a mental illness, people don't really think about it. It's like a mental illness. Probably is a mental illness. And these kids, you think these kids have don't, their parents have to worry about these kids and worry about the Gullah culture, I'm trying to put food on the table or I'm going through my addiction issues and I don't give a shit. Where is the community at? I get on my uh, my dad all the time. It was like you know come from, cause he does sometimes, but like my sister, my nieces are in camp, downtown Muslim kids off the housing project. Good. My niece has helped some of the kids read and stuff like that. I want them to do camp with my church next year "Blah Blah Blah". And it's like, do you not remember Yo ass living up in that country having to get dropped off to the foot of the bridge, the old bridge downtown walking 30 minutes. So you drove 30, 40 minutes to get to bridge. Have to get up, make your daddy got you out the car at the foot of the bridge and still have another 30 minutes to school. Don't forget about where you come from

Everybody don't have the same equal playing field, so you have to use what you have and what you've been blessed to have to help you. That's what I'm, I mean, I had my time at Burke high school. I said everything has happened for a reason. I was at Burke for couple of years as a mentorship. And that was like, this is what I want to do, but also had to make sure I take care of myself. Because I can't be broke trying to help people.

SB: I know.

BD: You have to be able to, it's a balance. But I know that when I begin getting blessed with money, it's going to life. I'm a simple dude. I love my little, um, my little studio apartment and Saint Thomas, it was nice little quaint, look in the ocean. [Inaudible] just chilling. living my life.

SB: Right?

BD: But life is a bigger mission. So my bigger mission is to give back and that's what imma do.

SB: I feel that. Yeah, I like it. Well BJ, I can't think of a better note to end on.