

“Living Beyond Our Fears”

By Alexis Wright

“The best way to find yourself,” Mahatma Gandhi once taught, “is to lose yourself in the service of others.” This idea reminds me of my experience of being a research assistant with the Voices of Southern Hospitality oral history project at the College of Charleston. Throughout my experience with the project, I felt empowered by studying history and learning how the past shapes the present. The research not only allowed for me to grow academically but emotionally and mentally as well. Without the experimental journey of listening to unique stories and researching marginalized histories with a hands-on approach, I would not be able to honestly say that my perspective on social issues has changed profoundly.

The Voices of Southern Hospitality project is an opportunity that allows student researchers to analyze diverse community definitions of southern hospitality; and how members within the community have seen Charleston change in response to these shifting definitions. As a research assistant, I was responsible for transcribing interviews of community activists and leaders. I also had the opportunity to conduct background research on some of the historical issues that were mentioned during the interviews such as the transnational history of the Gullah Geechee community and the overall oppression of marginalized communities in the Carolina Lowcountry through globalization, capitalism, racism, and tourism development.

While conducting research and actively listening to the interviews of community leaders, a common theme began to emerge. As wealthy individuals continue to travel and explore the world, they build up the tourism industry. However, individuals living in these tourist destinations are often taken advantage of, or ignored, which further establishes a cycle of

systemic oppression. As the tourism industry continues to grow, we begin to see that those with established careers not only visit tourist destinations, but they also relocate to them for economic opportunity. Charleston is one of these globalizing tourist cities.

With the growing adoption of foreign companies to further stimulate economic growth, the city of Charleston is also seeing a correlated influx of wealthy newcomers who work for these companies. These individuals often maintain a higher standard of living, which results in displacing those of lower socioeconomic status. When wealthy newcomers and tourists begin to come to Charleston, their money not only has a systematic impact, but so does their power. The power to cause societal issues like gentrification, where a mother who has lived in downtown Charleston for her entire life can no longer afford to stay within her home because it is being condemned and rebuilt at a higher price to house a wealthier individual who is new to the area. The mother is forced to relocate in order to indirectly cater to the wants and needs of the wealthier individual. She is left feeling powerless, but she still has a voice. However, her voice is not heard because she does not have enough money or recognition for it to be. Instead, she is forced to live with this institutionalized system of gentrification and furthermore continue to live within this cycle of oppression.

Throughout my research and interviews with community leaders, this cycle of oppression was continuously referenced as a barrier that has been present within the experiences of many African Americans. However, this narrative of oppression has not only been caused by systemic issues such as gentrification but has been retained by members of the African American community. An example of this would be an interview with a community activist who had a passion for portraying and telling the story of African Americans within the south. The local activist felt proud and distinguished by her community due to the fact that black people have

been in bondage longer than they have been free and within those 153 years of freedom “[we] have become doctors, lawyers, and [business owners].” She continues that one should only imagine how “far we would be if we didn’t have liquor stores on every corner, drugs pumped into our community, and violent mentalities that are perpetuated by music.” This message deeply resonated with me because I am a proud member of the African American community and I was brought up by similar narratives and lessons of advancement that were mentioned during this particular interview.

Throughout my life I have personally struggled with getting other individuals within the African American community to understand the consequences of having negative cultural influences within our everyday lives such as drug and alcohol possession or the lack of education. This message has been accepted by many, but often times goes unnoticed to those who have seen nothing other than these negative cultural influences. I deeply admired the fact that I was preserving this message of advancement and empowerment within an archival context for further researcher use as well as spread the idea of a positive cultural narrative. I felt deeply fulfilled to progress this narrative and the message behind it.

At the end of the semester, however, I found myself feeling more and more uncomfortable in the research process. When researching the history of Gullah Geechee culture, I was astonished by the amount of racist content that overpowered the narrative and identity of these people. An example of this would be the repugnant writings of Jane Screven Heyward, the mother of Porgy and Bess writer DuBose Heyward. Heyward was known for her exaggerated caricature of writing in order to portray members of the Gullah Geechee community as unintelligible and undeserving of racial equality – a basic human right. Many people would recognize her writings as related to minstrel shows in which she purposefully degrades the

Gullah Geechee language and culture in a comedic fashion. Heyward's public readings were very popular in the South in which she was invited to speak at local colleges and universities primarily to remind the public of what the lives of Black people supposedly consisted of. For example, within one of her poems known as Superstitions, Heyward writes about how black people should not have the basic rights of freedom and that just because the physical bondage of slavery ended, the mental bondage of slavery will not. She says this by stating "from father to son is handed down a terror of fear, which had its birth in a far-off land on this same earth. A jungle land where the sun shines hot breads FEAR, which the black man loses not."

After I read this quote, I immediately felt heartbroken by the fact that this derogatory narrative is still seen today. The idea of fear was pushed into the minds of the oppressed during the days of the Antebellum period, but yet even after slavery many African Americans are trapped within this mental bondage that was forced upon us 150 years ago. Aside from feeling oppressed and heartbroken by Heyward's words, I also felt joyous and resilient. I felt joyous because I realized that even though the narrative of fear is still upon us, it has not stopped members within the black community from reaching such great heights as an interviewee mentioned. I also felt a sense of resilience because I realized that I was adding to a positive narrative of preserving the messages of community leaders who were uplifting the black community and not tearing them down. By having this opportunity to transcribe the positive narratives of community leaders, I ultimately see it as providing a service to others by making sure that their message is preserved and further heard. Therefore, I can honestly say that I also found myself within this process.

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