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Abram, Elijah and Alberta

Elija Abram

Alberta Abram

Damien Johnson

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Gullah Project
Elijah and Alberta Abrams
Damien Johnson, Hope Perry and Dave Catchadorian
July 22, 2012
St. Helena's Island, South Carolina

Summary: Mr. Elijah Abram and Mrs. Alberta Abram tell their story of adapting to life on St. Helena Island while coming from other places. They discuss the differences in culture pertaining to religion and general lifestyle as well as their own personal journey in learning about the Gullah culture of St. Helena Island.

Keywords: St. Helena Island, Penn Center, root doctor, Baptist church, Methodist church, Marine Corp, family, food and cuisine

DJ: Good afternoon. Today is Sunday, July 22, 2012. We are in the lovely home of Mr. Elijah Abram and Mrs. Alberta Abram who live on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. And they're here, well we are here to talk to them about how they moved to this area and what are some of the qualities and characteristics that brought them to St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Oh my name (laughs). I always forget. My name is Damien Johnson. Sometimes I forget that. And this is Hope Perry (points) and on the camera is Dave Catchadorian. Alright... so Mr. and Mrs. Abrams, first of all thank you for allowing us to come into your home and talk to you about the spirit of this island and how wonderful things are down here. We spoke earlier. Said you're from Ocean City, New Jersey and you're from a little further north up 95. From Maryland, well Marion, South Carolina. What brought you down to this area?

EA: Well from Marion, I was twelve years old and I went up to... my family was in that 95 rim going north. And my family went up to New Jersey to stay, about 1959. And I used to go up there for the summer. And I think in '63, that was my final ride going to... coming to South Carolina. And I stayed up in New Jersey and I went to school in New Jersey and finished high school in New Jersey. And after high school, I worked around for about three or four years. And then during my time in high school... going back to when I was in high school, my thing was I wanted to be a marine. And I put in my yearbook as a marine. And when I finished college, I mean finished high school, then I had worn on the knees and it kept me from going to the Marine Corp and high blood pressure. I worked with it and worked with it and about four years later on, I was able to become in a marine and be a marine.

DJ (offscreen): What'd you do, Elijah to help you with your high blood pressure? Because that was very prevalent as far as African-Americans. I mean, I have high blood pressure. So I'm wondering, what did you do?

AA: Exercise and dieting.

EA: Exercise and dieting and spear of the core. That kept me going.

HP (offscreen): What year did you go into the Marine Corp?

EA: I came in the Marine Corp in 1974. And after I graduated from boot camp from Parris Island, the land that God forgot and I thought that I would never come back here. And I didn't want to come back here after I left boot camp. I left and went to a school in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and stayed there about 8, 9 months. And I went back... got orders to Okinawa, Japan and I went to Okinawa. And I came... I did thirteen much ten days there and I got orders back to God forsaken Beaufort, South Carolina. I thought I would never come back to you... Parris Island. I said, "I didn't wanna be here. I didn't wanna come here." Cause I had boot camp here, and I thought I would never never in my life come back this way. So that's how I end up back in Beaufort.

DC (offscreen): Why did you say that? Why did you not wanna come back?

EA: Well the training was hard. And I figured in my mind, I was twenty, twenty-one years old and I figured I never wanna come back here - Parris Island, in this area here. Because it was so hot and the bugs was beating and they was bitin us down there. And I said this place I never wanna go to again.

AA: But he didn't get stationed at Parris Island.

EA: No, I didn't. I get stationed at Parris Island. I got stationed at the Air Station. The Marine Corp Air Station in Beaufort. And that's why... that's 6, 7 miles away from Parris Island. And that was too close. So that's...

AA: But he worked. And I have to put a plug in for. He worked with a unit that was half military, half civilians. And the civilians that he worked with, the majority of them were all from this island. And it was through that group of men that he worked with... that we mentioned that this would be a nice place to live and that they showed us some property. We started looking at property over here. And we drank the water and ate the rice. (Everyone laughs). That's kinda how the story always runs. You don't wanna drink the water or you don't wanna eat the red rice. And um we did. And met with some beautiful people. Separated work for him. Separated the Marine Corp from how we positioned ourselves after work and joined a church and the rest is history.

DJ (offscreen): Well, what year was that, Mrs. Alberta?

EA: '70... '75.

AA: That was '75, '76 time period. Yes, I also was fortunate enough to get a job on the Air Station and work around some people. And ya know, God puts people in your path. It's not all about work, it's not all about school. And it's how you have different lives and you section off things. So, it was really hard, being as old as he was joining the Marine Corp around a much younger group of people. We lived the first few years on the base. We didn't have any children, so you're around a lot of young people that have children. But we found solace in people that had nothing to do with the military life and that was over here on the island. And they adopted us, took us in. Kinda slowly, ya know... I don't know. It just became a family away from home. All our family was far away and so this was home.

DJ (offscreen): That's nice.

EA: Ya know, and just like she said. The friends I met when I at work. They usually, they bring fresh vegetables and they tell you to try this and try that. And fresh seafood and meats and all kinds of...And I shared what I had with them and we became real close. Friends that talkin to each other, and like I said. Guys used to come by and specially older fellas. I felt with them and it was kinda like it welcome me to church. They invited me into the church and from that point on, ya know, it was connection. And with my South Carolina roots, it kinda made a little easier way. So ya know... I'm from South Carolina and you from South Carolina, so you can kinda connected easily without a hassle.

HP (offscreen): What church did you connect with?

EA: It was St. Joseph Baptist Church at that time. Now it's Bethesda Christian Fellowship now. It's changed the name.

DC (offscreen): Now, I'm real curious. You said having come from South Carolina, it was easier to sort of fit in. Did you see... what was the similarity, what was the difference between here and Marion?

EA: Well, really what it was, it was the accent. We had a different accents from there. They call it the high country and they call this the low country. And when I was a little boy, we had a neighbor. She was from this place called Georgetown. And she had the accent, they call it the Geeche-Gullah. The Geeche accent. And I was always told not to laugh at those people when they talk. Cause they are from South Carolina, they just on... from the coast and they had a different speech. And I never laughed at 'em. And you made fun of how they talk. Some things you had to understand what they was talkin about. Things like, "Open the window." And instead they say, "Upnawinow." And you look at them like, "What are you talkin about? Upnawinow?" But after awhile I understood 'em, what he was talkin about. I never laughed at 'em and fell right into it. The little sayings... I understood. That's kinda where I was, I felt... with the guys.

Specially with the fellas. The men, we kinda bond together and as a friendship. And still today, we still friends.

HP (offscreen): They're still living here, in the area? And they belong to the same church?

EA: Yes. No, the got different churches all on that Martin Luther King Blvd, most of them are in that area there. So we go to church and we fellowship together, different churches. So...

DJ: A lot of times, when you hang with people, you tend to pick up their mannerisms. Did you pick any of up their mannerisms?

EA: Oh yes, all the time. (DJ laughs). Yes, yes. And we just sit there and talk and we understand each other when they talk. And when I was in Marion, I always had "Yes sir, no sir." And that kind of helped me with the older people. Showed how much mannerisms I had and they understood it and that really really helped a lot. So all I wanna take a long and let em talk some day.

AA: I can't think of anything else right this second. It's not coming to me right away...

DC: What's the biggest difference between South Carolina and New Jersey?

AA: Um, aside from the people just takin you in and talkin to you and not worryin about the color of your skin or... I don't know. They just make you feel comfortable. I don't necessarily wanna say that it's because you're younger or you're not from here but that they wanna break you in. It's just that they just automatically treat you as if you're family. They don't really care that you're not, but they will treat you as if you're family. At least, that was always my impression. My mother moved down with us for a lot of years when our kids were younger, because he was gone on deployment and what not. And they took her in and treated her just as if they were... she was their grandmother. They will give you things, they will share with you. It's not all about what I could give to them, but it's what they felt like they could give to me in the friendship and the family. It's really hard to describe, but they make you feel at home even though I know that they knew that this was not home for me. They just treated me as if this was home. I don't know... very similar to the way I was raised. Like I said my mother was from Delaware, my father was from North Carolina, the upper part of North Carolina. And our home in New Jersey was the place that all of our family members came to during the summer months. And you always made room. You always put a pallet on the floor, or just doubled up in a twin sized bed. And that was how I felt like here, that people would always make room for us if we didn't have. And so I felt like okay, I could do the same thing. And here was where I felt comfortable at.

DC: Did you raise your kids here?

AA: Yes, they were raised here.

DC: And how was that different from if you were raising them in New Jersey?

AA: In New Jersey? The only difference that I think that was different here from in New Jersey is the lack of sidewalks out here to where you could just walk and street lights and here you wouldn't never say "You're in before dark." Because dark comes a whole lot earlier than the sky and the sidewalks. That's the only thing that's different. You have to have transportation to get where you want to. Where I grew up, you could walk everywhere. And the neighbors up there, we all lived in a certain community. You could never depend on, I'll say it, the white folks up in New Jersey to fill in. It was all the black community amongst themselves. Here, when I got here, I felt as though my neighbors to the back, white or black, I could call on them to do that. I don't know if it's from being here in this area that did that. I don't know if it's because they all came from somewhere else and they were more willing to change their lives because we're here in the South from the way you were when you were in the North. I mean, I don't know. Maybe up North, you just kinda stay to yourself. Don't know why. And down here you feel more free to... I don't know. It's just something that you give up when you come below the Mason-Dixon line. That you just give up being selfish. You share a little bit more with the other people.

HP: Did you find at all in your fellowship with other people in the community, that you, there were people who were trying to teach you traditional foods? Do you now cook traditional Gullah food here? (AA and EA laugh). How did you learn that and what do you cook? (AA laughs.) What was that process like?

AA: You just share recipes. Through our church and even through the job, we have more potluck meals and they are more traditional. He always (points to EA) did the greens anyways so that's nothin unusual because he learned that through his family. But I do do the shrimp and gravy.

EA: Shrimp and grits.

AA: Shrimp and grits. Put it over the rice. I don't do the red rice only because he has a thing about spoiling rice. So it came out gummy and so I have other friends that do that so I get that from them. The fish fry's, we do that. Mainly through the fellowships, where you know what your specialty is. And we would bring that to it. Which would be the cakes or the cobblers or the crabs. We do the boils. We do that. After Thanksgiving... our son is a seafood lover. Loves crab so we do the frogmore stew.

EA: Frogmore stew!

AA: Which is the crab and the corn and the shrimp. And I can remember when we first got here, I bought a recipe book. And my mother and I, we would sit down in it and that was the one recipe that caught her eye and she says, “Why in the world would you cook crab whole and mix those other ingredients in at the same time and cook in the same pot?” And you just... reading it, it just doesn’t sound right. But you have to taste it. (EA laughs). Once you taste it, you’re hooked.

DJ (offscreen): (Laughs). I understand that.

AA: The red rice... I don’t know that I would cook it the traditional way because we stay away from more pork than we used to and the bacon and what not. But yes, I’ve done it. The potato chip cookies, the bread pudding...

EA: Bread pudding, yes.

DJ (offscreen): What are potato chip cookies?

AA: They’re made with potato chips. (EA laughs). And I don’t know if that’s a local thing, but I’ve only had it here from a coworker that I work with. And a lot of the recipes that I know, even from his mother and his godmother and the people that I work with... when you’re poor and you make things work out of what you have. And so the potato chip cookies was just kinda one of those things. They had plain potato chip, you add a little bit of flour, a little bit of sugar. And if you notice in most your recipes, it calls for salt. So the potato chips had the salt already on it so therefore you could do it. He loves bread pudding (points at EA); I don’t do it well. But if someone makes it and brings it church, I know to take a little piece and bring it home. And he’ll do the bread pudding. I know, I worked with a coworker who did bread pudding.

DC (offscreen): I’m real curious about bread pudding because I know in different parts of the country, they do it real differently.

AA: Yes.

DC (offscreen): So what’s bread pudding like here?

AA: It varies as well. Some people do it with the raisins and with the fruit cocktail and with bread. Some do it with... they’re particular about the bread.

EA: Some do fresh bread or stale bread, the ends of the bread.

AA: Yeah, fresh bread or stale bread, old bread, the ends of the bread. Some soak it, I believe. Some put fresh fruit in it, rather than fruit cocktail. It's not anything... I'm a fruit lover, so anything that ruins fruit, I don't get, care for.

DC (offscreen): Do you put sauce on it?

AA: I don't do it. Do you? (looks at EA)

EA: No. I don't care for sauce. Just the bread pudding.

AA: I would put the coating on top of it.

HP (offscreen): I have a question about food. I'm wondering now, since you're from New Jersey, do you go back up to New Jersey often?

AA: No. Not as often as I should.

HP (offscreen): So in the years past, when you went up to New Jersey, did you ever make some of the things that you learned here there?

AA: Mostly anything with the seafood, with the shrimp. Instantly, yes. And we have relatives that come, and I have to do the shrimp and gravy, coleslaw. We do the seafood boils for them.

HP (offscreen): In New Jersey?

EA: They come down here.

AA: Well, when they come here. They come here. Mostly with your family (points at EA) more so than my family. They don't... (shakes head). Not heavy eaters. The lima beans and the turkey necks. Things like that. Ya know, my mother was a baker. And so she really baked well. So they look at me and wonder whether or not I had inherited any of her traits. And I didn't kinda get it. I didn't get the kneading of the bread and cinnamon rolls and that type stuff. But her experience... she worked in the bakery. So I didn't get that. So that's what my family wants when they see me, but I just do the shrimp dishes. (Laughs). Mainly.

DJ (offscreen): So cuisine just transferred from the baking to seafood?

AA: Yes, yes, somewhat. Other than that... I don't know of anything else. I'm sorry. Sorry.

DJ (offscreen): Mr. Elijah, you said that you got some recipes from your mom?

EA: Well, yes. She was a baker and she had like the collard greens. Things like that. And I like my rice a special way, grain for grain, and things like that. Fried fish. Like I said, some are from her and some are from down here. Like the different things they put down here in the seafood and makes it real spicy or tastin better. Mostly got that from doin it down here.

DJ (offscreen): Talk to us a little about you greens. We had... we made a pot of greens yesterday, one of our professors. And the greens were dynamite.

AA: Oh really?

DJ (offscreen): Yeah, they were dynamite. We used a little chicken broth, we used a little sea salt, and just let it slow cook all day long. And they were fantastic!

AA: Really?

DJ (offscreen): Yeah!

AA: Okay! (Laughs). (EA laughs)

DJ (offscreen): So I'm asking, what do you do with your greens?

EA: Well, I cut my greens. I cut them thinly and I just boil my turkey necks. I was used to usin fat back or some kinda pork meat to give the flavor in it. Since the diabetic, and I try to stay away from the pork. I usually like turkey necks, smoked turkey necks or something like that. And cook 'em down, cook the turkey necks down till they fall off the bone. Then the juices, the gravy, I just kinda put it over the greens and like I said, slow cook 'em.

AA: A little bit of vinegar.

EA: Oh yeah, put a little bit of vinegar in em. Little bit of baking soda to get the gas. We get the gas out of the greens.

DJ (offscreen): Wow! I've never heard of that.

HP (offscreen): I've never heard of that. You put baking soda into your greens? How much?

EA: Yes. Just a little teaspoon or half teaspoon full.

AA: They're writing recipes. (EA and AA laugh).

HP (offscreen): I don't know. I don't make greens myself. I just like to hear.

EA: Get the gas out of it.

AA: He doesn't like his greens real juicy and runny. So his are usually a little bit more dry.

DJ (offscreen): Okay. Same here. I don't like...

AA: Yeah. So they don't have to be... doesn't create any juice. But that was the way his cousins, up in Horry County, cooked theirs. And so they're almost to the fried side more so than the juicy, gravy-ish type greens.

DJ (offscreen): But they don't necessarily crunch when you chew em?

EA: No, no.

AA: No, they're called soft.

EA and AA: Soft. Soft. Steamed.

AA: More steamed.

HP (offscreen): The baking soda does that?

EA: No, the baking soda take the gas out of it.

AA: So a lot of people eat the green vegetables and sort of like with cabbage, they give you a lot of gas afterwards. And so the baking soda keeps it from being so gassy afterwards. (Everyone laughs). Sort of like, if you're breastfeeding, you don't do those gassy vegetables. The broccoli and the cabbage with children or else they'll be real gassy afterwards. So the baking soda takes the gas out.

DJ (offscreen): Nice. So what about your rice, Mr. Elijah?

EA: I like just grain for grain. Just the way you cook it. Put the water on bout a half inch above the pot and just let it cook.

AA: It's not soggy.

EA: Yeah, I don't like soggy rice. (Laughs). My mother and my friends kinda told me how to cook it, cook you a pot. Steamer does the same thing.

HP (offscreen): You said, that when you first got here they told you that you were gonna drink the...

AA: Don't drink the water? You've not heard that?

HP (offscreen): Or eat the rice. Is that because once you do, you won't leave?

AA: Yeah. That was one of the expressions that they...

EA: And there's a lot of things that when I first got here. They told me not to come on the island. They said "Don't go on that island. People crazy over there. They believe in voodoo rich doctor... and guy they call him Dr. Buzzard." He's a root man.

DJ (offscreen): We've been hearing about this doctor.

EA: Yeah. Yeah, very good guy. Very nice guy.

AA: He's no longer living.

EA: Yeah, he's passed away. Couple years ago. But I heard that from my fellow marines, white marines and black marines. Said "Don't go over there. Don't go over there." And I couldn't really understand why they say that for after I got over here. After I got over here and understood...

AA: Fortunately, we came over anyways (laughs).

EA: Yeah we came and stayed.

AA: (Laughs). Didn't listen to 'em.

EA: What it was was, a lot of guys come over here and marines come over here and laugh at the people. Pick at, made fun of 'em and end up in a fight and they fight to death with these guys over here. And that's why they didn't understand. Cause they laugh at em and they didn't like it. And a lot of guys... white marines would come over here and didn't want you to come over here because the property. They wanted the property. They didn't want you over here because you made friends with these guys and they would give you a better deal on the property. And the white guys wanted the property, the waterfront property. And to keep you from coming over here so they can get it. So that was the main thing of keeping us away from over here. So...

DJ (offscreen): So there's so many... there's such a maintenance of community in this area.

EA: Oh yes. And like now you on a Tom Fripp Plantation. Yes and of course you be on Tom Fripp, John Fripp, Ann Fripp and all these so many different plantation communities, I guess you call 'em that. And a lot of people don't like today, I say those plantations and they get upset with

me. That's what they are. Plantations. That's what they were - plantation. And they say, "They sound slavery." I'm sorry. It was plantation.

DJ (offscreen): Yeah.

EA: It's nothing you can do about that.

DJ (offscreen): It's understanding who you are and where you come from.

EA: Right. So if anybody ask me, "Where you from?" I'm Tom Fripp Plantation. Yes, and go back in my military career, when I was here. I'd say, "Well I'm going home." And they used to ask me, "Well which home you going to?" Cause I say I'm from Marion, I'm from New Jersey and I'm from St. Helena's Island. So they ask me, "Which home you going to?" So that was a big joke for me, to me. So I loved all three of em.

DJ (offscreen): So if someone said pick one that's your home, what would you choose?

EA: I would say St. Helena now. (Laughs). Yes.

AA: We've lived here longer than we've lived anywhere else. Yes, it's been home.

HP (offscreen): How many years total have you been here? Since '74 you think?

EA: Wooo! '75 I really got here.

AA: Yeah and we lived in base housing for a good part of his early military career. For first few years before the kids got here.

DJ (offscreen) Thirty-seven years!

EA: Yes, thirty-seven years that we been here. And we... I enjoy it. This is home. This is home for us.

DC (offscreen): Um, could you tell us more about Dr. Buzzard? (EA laughs). We've heard but I don't think we've gotten a lot of information...

EA: Well Dr. Buzzard... It came from his father...

AA: In-law.

EA: His father was called Dr. Buzzard...

AA: (To EA) He was in-law.

EA: No, no it was his father (to AA). His father was named Dr. Buzzard and they just come and... he does things. He did things and listened to people and kinda figure out what that person need. And everybody come from New York, Miami, Florida and different places across the country and say, "Where Dr. Buzzard live at? Where Dr. Buzzard livin at?" And I'm talkin about his son now. I know his son, Gregory... Oh boy, I can't think of. What was his first?

AA: Buzzy was what we call him.

EA: Yeah we call him Buzzy.

AA: I don't remember his real name.

EA: But he...

AA: You would come to him and you would ask... they would ask him to help them through situations. A lot of them had to do with women or they wanted to get someone out of their life and he would give em a bag of roots or something like that. It was a root doctor. Very... I'm sure, very similar to the practices in New Orleans. And witchcraft voodoo. But he was a Christian and he was a member of our church. His children are members of the church. And it was just that he listened and gave advice. And people paid him for it.

DC (offscreen): Did he get criticism from the church folks?

AA: Not to my knowledge. Some people laughed that people would actually come and pay him for that. But I mean, a bunch of men standing around. He might would tell them something. Ya know, to him in a group that... I just looked at. He's a witch doctor. Ya know. He's Dr. Buzzard. Okay. But I wouldn't ever go to him because that's where I am in my faith and where my belief is. I wouldn't seek out a person like that. But there's several books written on it. Now whether or not... He printed one. I wanna say one of his grandchildren was practicing it after he passed. But I don't know whether or not people still come and see him or not.

EA: Yeah. Well yeah, he was just a good listener and gave you good advice. And uh, he was a World War II veteran - the one I'd known. And he just listened and give advice that he'd know and it worked for years and years and years. So.

DJ (offscreen): So there was some success?

EA: Yes, He had success yes. (nods head). He was just...

AA: I didn't listen to the stories (points at EA). (Everyone laughs.)

EA: I knew 'em and I used to talk to 'em and sit down and talk to 'em. That's how I met friends.

DJ (offscreen): Mm hm.

EA: Sittin and talkin to 'em and listen to 'em and he used to talk to me and tell me uh that's all he did. Was a good listener and he figured things out and he was without a college degree. And he was just very good listener.

DJ (offscreen): It's spiritual but it's a thin line. Like, people don't wanna cross over that line. Ya know? It's interesting.

EA: Yeah we was on the same usher board at church and he served well.

DC (offscreen): Speaking of the churches, um how's the church you went to in New Jersey different from church down here?

AA: He didn't go! (Everyone laughs.)

EA: I went sometime!

AA: I grew up Methodist. So um, it's just... it's different. The music is different, it's livelier. The message was... the message that was given when I was growin up in New Jersey... have to realize when I left I was just 20 somethin years old, I really ya know didn't... I was just goin because I had to go, was... This is how it was. It was more of a history lesson, but it didn't teach me how to use that history to live my everyday life. And I found that the worship service here, um going, taught me how to use that scripture to live my life. And it was spoken to me... just the message always was a part. Something that I could use. How to get along with other people. How to really use what the word of God says, to be able to go to work the next day and know that really that scripture was appropriate for my living today. I didn't get that when I was in church. Even the music during that day in the early 70s, late 60s early 70s, was not the music like you hear today where people were really making it. So that that word and that song was really what you need to do... it's gonna make life more comfortable for you. I mean... And yes the hymns are appropriate, but they didn't have value to me. The words are the same and now I can listen to the words of those songs and isolate the tempo, isolate the music and just look at the words. And they really... and it was there then, but it just didn't reach me. Because the message from the pulpit wasn't teaching me, it wasn't reaching my heart. And maybe it was because I was divided in where I wanted to go with my life. I wanted to be more worldly than Christian. Um, you have to realize the community that I grew up in... the minorities, we were truly a minority. Ya know, I just didn't have it. So, and growing up in the Methodist church really

strictly doctrine... you do this, you do this, there's a certain time in your life you do... I wasn't feelin it... it was dictated to me. And that's not the way it is now. So...

DJ (offscreen): Ms. Alberta, was it a United Methodist or was it AME?

AA: Yes, United Methodist. Yes. Really strict doctrine.

DJ (offscreen): Yeah.

DC (offscreen): And when you came down here, did you get baptized?

AA: No. No, I did not get baptized. I don't feel as though that I was... I was read into the church and I went through all those ceremonies. I joined on my Christian fellowship and have not yet felt the need... My mother asked me the same thing. I did not feel the need to be baptized. I didn't think I'd strayed that far away that I actually needed to be baptized.

EA: Yes. And yeah ya know I should say... I didn't go to church every Sunday but I knew the word of God and I understood it. And it carried me from then to now. And a much greater need and pressure that I enjoy now fellowshipin with the word. I can speak the word and talk the word.

DJ (offscreen): There's a lot of people that go to church every Sunday and you don't... they don't act like it.

EA: Monday morning they raisin hell!

DJ (offscreen): Yup. (Laughs). It's all about your spirituality. Now, but that's just Baptist.

EA: Yes.

DJ (offscreen): Okay, so there was a change from the Methodist to the Baptist. Got you.

AA: For me. He was raised Baptist.

EA: I was raised Baptist.

AA: I mean it's really ironic. I always... when I was in college I always felt that there was something missing. And I was always running. It was God that was missing. Um, we had been to a Marine Corp ball here. And I just woke up that Sunday morning... we'd been out all night, ya know also drinking. But something was missing. And um, I got up that morning and I shook him awake and I said "Let's find a church. Let's go to church." And there were several people he worked with, people of course there were members of different churches over here. And Mr.

Rivers, who was one of the mail carriers, he came in. And he would always come in Monday morning with oh just a smile on his face and he would say “Oh, I got the word yesterday and everything has to be good!” And I said “Well, I need to go to that church where he went to.” (Everyone laughs). And of course we went to that church. And we didn’t join right away. We went to that church. And the minister was new. And he was young, my - our age. Um, a brief 15 minute lesson but I got something out of it and if I thought really hard I might remember what it was. And he talked to the youth. It was a youth Sunday. And he brought it down to their level and I understood it. And I’m like, “Wow, I could do that.” And of course, he was a little hesitant (points at EA). He said, “Well we don’t wanna join church right away.” And so we visited a couple other churches and we kept going back to that one.

EA: Back to that (chuckles).

AA: Back to that for the messages. That was the Lord. I know it was. And then he got orders to go overseas (points to EA). They didn’t even realize that we were not even a member of the church. But I was constantly invited to different things, I was asked to help. I just felt like... okay, I’m just a member here. Um, and while he was gone, I joined the church. I didn’t want to have to ask his permission (EA and DJ chuckles). I joined the church. So while he was gone, I became a member. And then when he came back, he joined. And I want to say that he was afraid to ask me to join thinking that my Methodist background, I wouldn’t want to join that church. It was unspoken and we probably should’ve spoken it and we wasted a lot of time. But anyway, the end result was the same. We both became...

DC (offscreen): And you were living on the base at the time?

AA: Yes.

DC (offscreen): And so, instead of going to a church...

EA: on base (chuckles).

DC (offscreen): ... on base or in Beaufort even, you came out here?

AA: No. I came out here. And it was mainly because of the people that we work with. I’m sure of that. Most certain of that. Most of the people that... most of the civilians that we worked with lived either on Lady’s Island or St. Helena. Beaufort itself was a lot of retired military people and then the younger ones.

DJ (offscreen): Is Mr. Rivers still around today?

EA and AA: No. He’s not. He’s gone on. He’s passed away.

AA: Daughter still living. Called him Catfish.

DJ (offscreen): They called him Catfish?

AA: Mm hm. They called him Catfish.

EA: Yes, but I would never call him Catfish. I had respect for him. I would call him Brother Rivers. But he want you to call him Catfish to relax you. But I couldn't. As my growin... growin up, I could never call an older person by nickname or something like that. So due respect, I call him Mr. Rivers or Brother Rivers.

AA: Of course the pastor still there. (Laughs). We still have the same pastor.

DJ (offscreen): So in a lot of respects, you all grew up with that pastor?

EA and AA: Yes.

DJ (offscreen): He was young and you all came in young.

EA: Right. Yes.

DJ (offscreen): And what's the pastor's name?

AA: Doe. D-O-E. Hennessy Doe.

EA: And ya know like, he's so down to earth person. Ya know? He has a doctor's degree but ya know, he don't go lettin everybody know he's a doctor of religion. He just go Pastor Doe. He's type of person. You know when some of these ministers get they doctor degree...

AA: (To EA) Don't you criticize them.

EA: They just start talkin. I'm Doctor so-and-so, ya know?

DJ (offscreen): Doctor!

EA: Yeah. He wasn't that type person. You could always talk to him. So...

HP (offscreen): Could I quickly ask you a question since you're talking about growing up and ya know kinda growing up in the face of the church. Wondering since you've been here since '75, what have you seen that's changed over the years? What has your experience been like now versus what you saw then.

EA: Now or back then, the youth were uh.... They didn't go places as we have been as young people. And you know, when like specially when our pastor got here and he got grounded, yeah they took us places. Took us out...

AA: We were exposed.

EA: Exposed to different things. Ya know, to Florida and different parts... Tennessee and New York and Philadelphia and ... on uh church trips. You made sure the kids got out and saw things like that now and uh... you didn't have the Internet at that time. So ya know, you couldn't... you had to go to these places and see 'em. And that was really a good inspiration to the youth. And now today they can go on the Internet and get anything they want. And specially like uh... when we got over here you could leave your doors open. But now things have changed. So, little things like that.

HP (offscreen): What about the uh, you've seen... I've been here for... I came here 15 years ago with Kenyon and then I've been here several times for just different projects. And I've seen more and more...

AA: Commercial?

HP (offscreen): signs of ya know... or just real estate signs. And ya know? And I've heard more about people wanting to buy the land here. What's going on right now, do you see...?

AA: I just think it's really the sign of the economy. And people are just... rather than trying to hold on to it because or possibly because the heirs are not going to be able to afford it the way it is now because of the economy. So that they're trying to sell and don't really know the reason why there's so many. People that have come in the area that's behind us maybe have been military and they choose not to stay here thinking that they can sell it as an investment but people are not buying over here on the island like they used to. I'm not really sure why um... that you see so many signs. A lot coming down 21 is they wanna commercialize it more so thinking that people... They can develop it and it can be another Hilton Head or Myrtle Beach. And I don't know that that will ever be.

HP (offscreen): And in terms of the demographics of the island...

AA: Mm hm.

HP (offscreen): I've noticed that there is definitely a population of Latino people that are in the area. Do you see others kind of mixtures in terms of... I don't know. I mean maybe they were out here fifteen years ago. I don't know? What are the demographics?

AA: I don't know. It's just black and whites, isn't it?

EA: What it is uh... years ago, these plantations and farms. They had... the blacks used to do the summer work, harvesting the crops and stuff now. Now that the blacks are finishing high schools and leaving the area. And so they have to have someone to harvest the crops. So the Latinos coming down and working I guess... like in shifts. They comes down and they got a certain time to be here in Beaufort, Beaufort County, uh St. Helena, around this area here. And then after the harvest is... they move on up, they go North, uh 95. So that's where... kinda how they develop.

AA: Yeah and you may see more of 'em now but they're just... temporary migrant workers that are waiting for the season. Uh huh.

HP (offscreen): So some do have communities live here [Note: unclear].

AA: Maybe more so. Not to my knowledge now. I do understand, based on what I read in the paper that there are more staying over in the Blufton area and Hilton Head area than they had in the past because the school system over there now has more of a younger Hispanic mix than in years past. Yeah. Not having any children in the school system, I don't really know what that mix is so much anymore. Yeah.

HP (offscreen): What was the mix like when your children were in school?

AA: It was just predominantly black and white.

HP (offscreen): What were the numbers... what were the percentages? Did they go to school on the island?

AA: Yes they went here at St. Helena. It was minority black. Very few. I wanna say Elijah's class, maybe one or two in his class.

EA: Maybe two.

AA: Maybe two at the most. John's class might have had three or four more than that. That was... now they graduated in 2000 and 2002. But now when they went on to the middle school and the high school, the population on Lady's Island and Beaufort itself, ya know? Still...

HP (offscreen): And were you familiar... and so there were only a couple of white families in your children's classes.

AA: No.

HP (offscreen): Did you know those families somehow? Did you know... did they have properties? They just did not at all?

AA: I did not know 'em. They did not live around here. This is a relatively big island so I did not know where they were from. I wanna say John never had a White teacher.

EA: Uh uh.

AA: No. Um, except ya know, when they were in the military school on the other side, ya know? In the daycare. Not until they got to the middle school did they ever see a white... have a white teacher. There were white teachers at the school. But they did not have them, ya know blacks... I don't know if that was good or bad.

DJ (offscreen): I was thinking... so as far as like African American history and Gullah traditions, their upbringing is a lot more richer than yours would be.

EA: Yes. And they have, uh the accent. Especially my baby...

AA: John more so than Elijah. He can turn it on and turn it off as we like to say.

HP (offscreen): Where do they live now?

AA: John is in New York and Elijah is in D.C.. Yeah.

EA: John uh... My oldest son Elijah, he was born in California. And we came down here, it was 6 months after he was born. And then we had John and he's true Gullah. True Geeche! (EA and AA laugh).

HP (offscreen): Did you notice the difference between... I'm assuming that you liked this school on the island, the elementary school, I'm assuming you liked it. Did you have the same feeling about the middle school... the middle school when they went to middle school? As happy with the school and the transition?

AA: It was okay. Any school has its drawback I would say but it is what your children want out of it. There was a difference in both of our children and what they got out of the school. So, I can't fault the school. I can't lay a blame anywhere. Yeah.

DC (offscreen): You guys have used the term "Gullah" and "Geeche?" Is there a difference between those two?

EA: No, it's not. No. That's just the uh... the Gullah, the language. The language they talk. And the Geeche... that's the people. And anything on the coastline... that's called the Gullah-Geeche. So that's all that is.

AA: My mother... my parents had a rooming house in New Jersey so that was another side income that was right next door to us. And we had people that roomed in those houses from those same areas he was saying...

EA: Georgetown.

AA: Yeah Georgetown area. And they always referred to themselves as Geeches. And they talked a lot faster. Really, really, really chopped up as opposed to what I detect in the language here. But of course, I heard it then when I was eleven and twelve and thirteen. And coming here, having worked with people that can turn it on and turn it off. If you're in a group of them where they're just around their own kind and talking their own language. It is different.

EA: Oh yes.

AA: Um, you definitely would be just listening. Trying to pick up a word here and there. Ya know? And where it was different between those two so when I say "Geeche," it's the way they talk in Georgetown area which is so much different from here. And of course I work in Brunswick, Georgia. They don't refer to it either. But it is an accent. It is the dialect. It is from where they are accustomed to that migrated to that area. So it's different. Charleston is different from here, as close as it is. Um... yeah.

DJ (offscreen): And people don't realize that, because you can switch. That's a talent. Like I remember, Mr. Elijah saying earlier. He would hear people and he was told not to laugh because the history... earlier in history it was like frowned upon to celebrate your heritage and celebrate the way you talk. But now... now that you have professors and linguists go to Africa and come back and acknowledge it as a true language, now it's starting to be something that you should celebrate and be proud of.

EA: Proud of, yes.

AA: Learn how to turn it on and turn it off. You wanna get a job - turn it off. (DJ laughs). You wanna go to a family reunion - you can turn it on. Yeah, you leave it on.

HP (offscreen): So we haven't interviewed very many people like yourselves who come to the island. And because of that, we've talked to many people who talk about learning about the history of their heritage through their families. I'm curious to know how you learned about the history, the origins of the people in this area. How did you learn about the Gullah history?

AA and EA: Penn Center.

AA: Penn Center and the pastor. Um, and the people that I work with.

HP (offscreen): What was at Penn Center? What did you do at Penn Center? Like the events that they had there?

AA: The events. Going visiting the museum, um listening to Pearlie Sue. Going to the different plays. And then like I said, with people that I work with and asking them if I didn't understand something. Then I'd go and ask them and they'd kinda break it down to me or the people I met at church.

EA: Ya know, and then Penn Center is like the hub of the island. And uh when I was a little boy, my sisters... my sister and aunts came down to Penn Center and they were midwives. And uh they used to talk about Penn Center. Penn Center... it didn't register. It didn't dawn on me where this place was at until I came down here. And realize "Oh, that's my sister. That's my aunt." From uh... they took a midwife class down here. And funniest thing about it... my sister and my niece, they used to fight for the babies.

DC (offscreen): Ooooooh.

EA: Not physical fight. Just arguing... "That's my baby!" "That's my child!" Ya know? And they got all the training from Penn Center. Penn Center was the hub of the Gullah-Geechee and the uh things and education that my sister and my aunt... I keep saying niece, I mean aunt. That they learned from and they came all the way from Marion and came down here to Penn Center cause that's where Blacks went to school at. So that was our helping.

DJ (offscreen): So you feel that Penn is a great place that captures that tradition and is able to make that connection throughout the island, and up 95 and out, and wherever.

EA: Yes, Penn Center, is like I said the hub. And the uh... you get the understanding of uh...

AA: what it was like.

EA: What it was like and what are we trying to get to. And they keep it in a respectful way of your heritage. And make sure your heritage is recognized. So... and like I said I do a lot of work for Penn... and uh, volunteer work. And I am a Penn club member and I enjoy it. Just listen to the people and talkin to the older people that still here and they tell me about Penn and the ins and outs about it. So... that's it. Understanding (chuckles).

DJ (offscreen): We're all teachers. And she's in DC and we're in Cleveland. Is there something you can leave our students with. Something that would be helpful to them since you all have grown and become successful and you have two boys that are successful doing their thing. Is there anything you can tell the young people that we teach?

AA: If they can't go to their original birthplace of their parents or their grandparents, make sure that they go right where they are and know the history of what is around them. There is some history to it. There's something to know. And if it's hard for them to grasp it... have someone from outside come. And then take them and share it with them. And then they will understand that really where they are is just as important as where their parents were. Um, I didn't realize really so much of what was so great around here. I knew I liked it. I knew I liked it better, I felt more at home here than where I was in New Jersey. But it wasn't until family came and you wanted to show it and share it, that it started to become more important. So that your students, where they are. Especially in DC, but ya know I don't know that much about Cleveland. I've been there... but your museums, your libraries, the plaques on the walls at different places if you read them. I didn't do that when I was young. You go by 'em and you take things for granted. Um, talk to your grandparents. Find out just how they spent a Sunday afternoon. Develop a history. Develop something with your families that you will remember, that you can tell and share with your children as you grow up. Because God willing, you will all grow up. But you have to have... nobody can take that memory from you. Ya know, that time, that quality time. Spend it with family. Friends are important, but family will always be there so that should be shared with kids. I mean, I know when I was... my senior year thinking about, "I'm gonna graduate. I'm gonna go off to school. I'm gonna go off to school." You go off. Those friends and things that you made in college... you might stay in touch with one or two. But you will always have family so you always want to be able to click with your family. Know where you came from and share something with 'em. Create a history there. Create your own history with your... in your family. That's what I would share with.

EA: Yeah. What I'm thinking about is uh... to share with the young people. Like she said, make sure you know where you're coming and know where you're going. And know your people. We get so these days we don't know our own people and we end up marrying the sister and the brother. Just know your family. Family is most important... it's more important than anything else. Then just do what you have to do and make sure you do it right. And decent and in order.. And the expression when I'm down here, they told me they said hey, "You're down here in one of the richest areas in the country." But uh, that says once you cross the Whales Branch Bridge, you are out of the United States. Did you know that? You are out of the United States when you cross the Whales Branch Bridge. There's a territory. And I said, "Oh, that's history I didn't know." And we have people now in jail because they didn't want to pay taxes because this is a territory. We still have it today and they has been forgotten and people want it to be forgotten. The fight, they fight for. It's there and that's history that we understandin. And plus he tells me, hey "Do you know the first slave ship came to Beaufort... to St. Helena's?" First slave ship in

America. And of course it came to St. Helena's ya know, like two plantations down from us. And ya know, that's history. That's history that they'll never know. That is Coffin Point, the first slave ship that came to America. And people don't know. And uh, President Lincoln made his speech, January 1st. What's it called? The...

AA: Emancipation Proclamation.

EA: Emancipation Proclamation. Was made in Port Royal. A lot of people don't know that. Slaves. Freed slaves right here. And this is most... the little piece of property I got. I wanna hold on to it. As much as possible, ya know. And that's why all my children, and my children's children. The feel, the little property that we got, we'll never own it because in America, you pay taxes. You never own it but ya know, you feel a little ownership with the little property you got. And you'd be surprised how many people come by, askin do you want a sale. Or callin, the real estate people calls ya, "Do you wanna sell this property?" "Do you see a for sale sign on my property?" Ya know, you get frustrated. What you gone do, push me out of here? Want me to go to Hampton County? You don't want me in Beaufort County?

AA: Alright now, calm down.

EA: Ya know... it's just a little help. Funny advice that you leave your children. Let your children know, "This your property. While you here, take care of it. Don't sell everything you got. Cause God might not make you no more property. No more land. This is it, so take care of it." That's all I want them to know.

DJ (offscreen): Thank you Mr. Abrams. Thank you Mrs. Abrams.

EA: Yes, that fly keep buggin me. I keep seeing that! We had kids over yesterday and they had the door open (laughs). Don't put that on there (laughs).

DC: Too late! (Everyone laughs).

[End]