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Carmen Griffith
Debbie Frost
July 13th, 2013
6355 Jonathan Francis Senior Road
St. Helena Island, SC 29920

DF: Good morning, today is July 13th 2013 and we're at St. Helena Branch Library and we're interviewing Ms. Carmen uh Griffith. Ms. Carmen Griffith is also the um Data Specialist at St. Helena Elementary School and she also works at the library branch. Good morning thank you for allowing us...

CG: Good morning.

DF: Could tell us a little bit about uh St. Helena's school and your experience at the school?

CG: Well, I have been working at St. Helena Elementary School for the last 19 years. I started off as a sub and I thought I'd sub one or two days a week but I ended up subbing everyday for a year and they hired me on after that I worked in a math lab as a math lab assistant. I did that for a year. I was a kindergarten assistant for a year and after that we um, we had a program called "Accelerated Reading" and it's a lab where the kids would read books and they'd come in and answer questions and they'd get little incentives for reading; and I did that for about 9- 9 years and I really really loved that. Um, and then from there I became a Data Specialist and that is what I'm doing now.

DF: Very good, now your children also attend the St. Helena schools too, as well?

CG: Yes.

DF: And uh, tell us a little about-about the progression with your son, you son is Otis. A little bit about him and your daughter.

CG: Well we moved back here, uh when my son was in kindergarten. We moved here from Morganton, North Carolina and um my son attended St. Helena from first grade- from kindergarten to fifth grade. Uh, he was involved in the Cub Scouts which I sent him to be a part of a- you know a group to bond with other boys and men but it ended up happening that um I was extremely involved in Cub Scouts. (laughter) I was a cub scout, no (laughs). Uh, he was also a part of the One Hundred Voices um boys choir and um they sang all over South Carolina. They even went to Africa a few years ago- well more than a few years ago, and um I was involved with helping with that and um, I was PTO president for a few years at St. Helena. So as a parent and as um- as a worker I was very involved and still am very involved in this school.

DF: Very good. Now I heard about the One Hundred Voice Choir that traveled, and it seemed that the community really got behind that group.

CG: Yes.

DF: Because to take a hundred young children across the globe – to another continent – to another continent. How was that process then?

CG: Um well not all of the children were able to go. Which they, um, they really wanted to be able to but that's, that's *a lot* of money (laughs) to take that many kids. But the kids that were able to go they did fundraisers some of the churches supported them, and um so um um I'm not sure of an exact number that were able to go but um, that was a once in a lifetime experience for them.

DF: Good, good. And the fact that the community came together to support that: those kids in school; and then when your daughter went to school was the situation pretty or um supports pretty much the same as well?

CG: Well there's a five years difference between my son and my daughter. And I would say things started changing just a little bit but St. Helena has always been a community school. Where the community has always been involved in whatever goes on at the school. The school- the school is just like a hub for the community. Um I guess as the age of parents start to change, you dealing with younger parents and they're not quite as involved as some of the older... Like my daughter told me one day "You're older than all of my friends' (laughs) all of my friends' parents." And I-I guess it's just a dif- it's just a different generation a different mindset, different values. Um, but for the most part um she had just as many advantages of going to St. Helena as he did, but when she came along I decided that she needed to be away from me. So she was with me until first grade and I sent her to Lady's Island Elementary. And my reason for that was because I guess my son, by me being there all the time it was like you know *your son did this* or you know the kids *oh well your mom's here so you can't do* – you know it was a lot of pressure on him, and it was a lot of pressure on me too. Because as a parent you want your child to be the best and on the top of everything so it was like I didn't give him a lot of room to breathe. So (laughs)

DF: Okay, okay.

CG: And I didn't want to do that to her. So um she went – she attended Lady's Island Elementary, and um and they are an art-infused school. So she's been playing the violin since second grade. She's been um taking piano lessons, she's been involved in um ballet and tap and um theater, things like that. So that was a good fit for her.

DF: I initially met you at the school and was interested because I was invited to the library for this "Chopped" competition it's uh a cooking club, and when I ran into you it was just like this this is *déjà vu*, I really need to talk to you. So talk a little bit about, you mentioned that you were um uh you were hired to be part of the library and it took a little – it was a process for that. So maybe a little about um how the library came about and how did - what impact did it make in that community – or this library coming into St. Helena's?

CG: Okay well the library was shared space. The county library was shared space with the school library; um and we were experiencing growing pains. The library needed to grow, the school library needed to grow so when they hired me back in 1999 it was because they were going to build a new library.

DF: 1999?

CG: 1999. This is two thirteen (laughs) twenty-thirteen (laughs). But this, they had to go through um trying to find land, getting funding, and things like that so it took a lot longer than um than we anticipated but it was well worth the wait.

DF: Yes it's beautiful here, it's beautiful.

CG: We love it. We love it. (laughs)

DF: Um and you mentioned that there were several community meetings that were leading up to the development of this?

CG: Right. When um the plans were being made and we knew that uh the library was actually going to be built they held a series of community meetings to find out what the people in the community were looking for in a library. And um, the meetings were held at Penn Center and uh they had different um architectural drawings of the library and the community got to choose. And um they had presenters that would um, would tell them um you know what the library would look like, um it was a lot of input from the community because they really wanted a place where they could take ownership where they could feel you know a part of, and um it was really interesting. This is – I think they had to scale down on some of it (laughs) on some of the designs because everybody had individual things that were more important to them. You know, it was important to us that they had a great teen space and a great children's space because by coming from the school, we know how important the library was to the kids there at the school. So we were hoping that, we didn't care about the adults, we just cared about a wonderful children's you know section. You know, when they learn to read they become a part of, they continue to use the library and they grow up in the library. My kids grew up in the library. Even before I started working we spent a lot of time going to different programs and stuff that they had there. Summer reading programs, Family Reading Night, we'd have scavenger hunts at the library, we'd have library sleepovers... (laughs)

DF: So then it was more geared towards children in the school because this was really connected to the school.

CG: Right. I mean we-we had – we were limited with the space so we couldn't have the um materials that Beaufort or Bluffton or Hilton Head had, um but we could always you know request those materials for them but because um it wasn't... we shared the space with uh a school, we had more resources for children.

DF: With the new facility it seems that a lot of- it's a beautiful facility with a lot of books and I could see the areas that the kids are using but I also see quite a few things that the adults are now using.

CG: Yes

DF: So it's really, maybe the c-uh-community really did get what they wanted.

CG: They did. (laughs)

DF: So could you talk a little bit about the community pieces too?

CG: Well we have all kinds of things going on here. (laughs) Um we have um a book, an adult book club, a mystery poison pen mystery club here. Um they have um computer classes for seniors, for beginners, for whatever level that you have. We have a sound studio here that you can come and record your music, your oral history or whatever it is you know that you're interested in. And we have a mac-lab, and we have a young lady who teaches animation, um with the kids they're um they're producing their own films. Um, we have um, gardening, um we have people that come in and-and help with just about any subject that you can think of. Um and we also have a cooking club that started at the elementary school um when we were located there um I guess maybe about 7, 7 years ago. We just needed programs. We had so many programs for kids we needed some programs geared towards adults so we decided that um we'd start a cooking club, we would have different topics – we started off with different countries and um, we decided that we would research and find out what food was um, you know that they had that was in that country and how it compared to the food that we ate here and we'd bring- we'd make our dishes and share and talk about our experiences and um that's how it started. And we'd have um Scandinavian cuisine, we'd have Irish, we'd have um, what we called um, one we call "Spice it Up" where you take a dish and you'd add a different spice to it and see how it'd change your dish. And this pass Wednesday we had our first chopped, and we had five different ingredients and we had to use all five of the ingredients in our dish. The ingredients were prunes, matzo, feta cheese, chicken, and brussels sprouts. Yeah so.

DF: Nice combinations. (laughter)

CG: Yeah, they didn't necessarily all go together but interesting how um, how many different dishes we did have. Um, I decided that I would do a play on pulled pork. So I did the pulled chicken and I put the prunes in my barbeque sauce, and it was a homemade barbeque sauce now because you can't buy prune barbeque sauce in a jar. (laughs)

DF: Never heard of it either. (laughs)

CG: So everybody knows a good pulled pork sandwich has coleslaw. So that's what I used the brussel sprouts to make my coleslaw. So I had my pulled chicken, I had my

fantastically wonderful *prune* barbeque sauce, and I had brussel sprouts, and I just sprinkled it with a little feta cheese on the top and I made my own matzo bread. So.

DF: I think you were one of the winners because I did enjoy that dish myself.

CG: (whispers: Actually I was one of the winners) (laughter)

DF: Yes you were, yes you were. (laughter). Now you talk about food because I think that's a major um piece component to this island and I notice when we come we are always looking for good food. So traditional dishes, you mentioned you would change the spices, what is some of this traditional dishes that you use or have say for different occasions or something.

CG: Well, I've lived just about everywhere and living in New York, I mean you just, you learn a little bit about a lot of things, you're introduced to a lot dishes a lot of cultures and things like that. But here, even growing up, well let me tell you a little bit. I was born here. I lived here until I was in the fourth grade and we moved to New York. While I lived here I spent my summers

[End clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

CG: ... in New York, when I moved to New York I spent my summers here. So there was not a time where I did not have a connection with the island. So um, I know there were dif- the dishes that um, that we always had, I mean we might have – we might have had other things but um during the holidays it was always a tradition to – we made something with sweet potatoes. That's just a given. (laughter) So you could have sweet potato pie, or candy yams, or what they call sweet potato poon, and um and that's just um like ground sweet potatoes you use you know you whip it up and it's like a casserole, just about a casserole so sweet potatoes is something you always had. You always had greens. Collards, um turnips, mustard, um a mixture of one and the other, but you always had greens. And you had some type of pork. (laughs) Always. Always had a – if your pot didn't have pork in it, it wasn't a pot. It was not, you know something that you had on your plate because you - you were being stingy. You were not (laughter) you were not giving your best to your um to your guest. And um let's see, red rice is something people usually have um during the holidays; peas and rice. You know you have certain traditions that you have at certain holidays.

DF: Yeah I te- I tend to eat well when I'm here and again I thank you so much for your time and sharing your story with us. Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you didn't - that I didn't ask you? Anything that you didn't get the chance to say?

CG: I don't think so. (laughs)

DF: Again, your family has been really wonderful. I loved your daughter's dish as well. Let her know I said that.

CG: Okay.

DF: And uh, I appreciate you giving us your time for this interview. Thank you.

CG: Thank you so much.

DF: No problem.

[End clip 2]

[Begin clip 3] (which seems to be a cut out "bloopers" section)

DF: That's exactly right, I mean you have some traditions when people come to your house there's an expectation and if you don't know the hidden rule then people are going to leave and talk about you and you don't know. So you know if you don't have that in those greens *with no meat on those greens, serving those greens with no meat in them.*

CG: Let me tell you, the first time that I put um smoked turkey wings in some greens that I took to a family gathering they were like "uh-uh no, I don't know where you thought you came from." (laughter)

DF: That's how it goes because

[End clip 3]