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Smalls, Victoria

Portia Morgan

Zakiyyah Bergen
Roxboro Middle School

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Gullah Project
Victoria Smalls
Zakiyyah Bergen, David Slutzky, Portia Morgan
July 26, 2012
Penn Center, St. Helena Island, South Carolina

PM: Good afternoon. Today is July the 26th, 2012. And my name is Portia Morgan. And I'm here with Zakiyyah Bergen and David Slutzky. And we are interviewing Victoria Smalls at the Penn Center. And she will introduce and tell you a little bit more about herself.

VS: Hello, I'm Victoria Smalls?

PM (offscreen): Yes you are. (Laughs).

VS: And I've been fortunate to be asked to come on here at Penn Center. The historic Penn Center to initially help coordinate the 150th anniversary commemoration of Penn. We're celebrating 150 years this year. And we're commemorating it in three years. And so I'm coordinating all the events for that. And that entails this year, 2012, we're celebrating the Penn School founding through Reconstruction era. In 2013, we're celebrating the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King's stays here at Penn Center and the Southern Christian Leadership conferences that were held here. And also, it's the 50th anniversary of Peace Corp. A lot of people do not realize that Peace Corp volunteers trained here first. And before they went over to Western Africa, because this area... because it was so heavily into agriculture and it mimicked the western parts of West Africa the most. And in 2014, we're celebrating a new Penn Center. A new and sustainable future for Penn Center in incorporating a huge youth component. So, that's what I was brought on initially to do. And I've been doing a pretty good job. And so therefore they've asked me to serve as the History and Culture Coordinator. And I coordinate the Heritage Days Festival that we have annually. Along with the committee and many staff people, a few staff people we have and many community members. I also coordinate the, well the 150th anniversary through 1862 circle. I serve as a liaison between those committees and Penn Center. Also coordinate Gullah studies symposiums. Those are institutes or symposiums that educate the larger community which would incorporate higher education institutions, other agencies and groups that would be interested in learning about the Gullah culture and how they can incorporate it into, whether it's a curriculum or into libraries. Just giving a broader education here. Spreading the word about the Gullah culture and heritage. That's people, music, food, spirituality, superstitions, folklore and the storytelling aspects. Everything encompassing the Gullah culture. And so I compressed those, all those features into either scholarly lectures; cultural excursions off of the campus, on the campus; cultural workshops, whether it's a sweetgrass basket weaver, that kind of thing; and we have people from all the way that come from Wisconsin, Colorado, Connecticut. We have Vanderbilt coming in and we have a special group called the Friends of Sierra Leone that are coming in very shortly. And that just helps us...

they're gonna help us also bridge the divide that has been present. And showing more of a connection between the Gullah and Sierra Leone. Just tryna build a connection more. Sound connection.

PM (offscreen): Victoria, you always live on St. Helena?

VS: I have! I have. I love St. Helena. I'm born and raised here in 1970. I'm a baby. I came from a very not-so-typical family here on St. Helena.

ZB (offscreen): How so?

VS: Most of the islanders at that time that I was growing up, it was pretty isolated on the island. And that's how we were able to keep a lot of our African-isms. I'm not the typical Gullah face or voice because my mother is Irish and German. And she met a Gullah man here at Penn Center in the 60s, in mid-60s. And during a religious conference was held here. And they fell in love. And they were the first biracial couple to integrate St. Helena. And I say that they weren't typical because most families here are all Gullah on the island. We were so isolated that outsiders were highly recognizable at that time. But one of the special things about that union, was I was a product of it. But also, my mother was married prior to marrying my father. She was married to a White gentleman in Michigan. And they had four children. They were coming down, planning on coming to a religious conference here at Penn Center during the summer months. But they were planning this for years, to come and experience life in the South. Not to move permanently, but just to come to a conference that was held here. And during that time it was special because Penn Center was the only place where Whites and Blacks could congregate together, safely. It was a safe haven. And then also, parting to that, my father was also... he's also from here. And he was married prior to meeting my mother. And he was married to a Penn School graduate, also. They had six children from their union and my mother had four children from her first marriage. And both of their spouses passed. And met here, fell in love, started corny. And when it was time to get married, they soon found out it was against the law to get married here in South Carolina.

ZB (offscreen): What year was that?

VS: That was in 1965.

PM (offscreen): Has that law since been changed?

VS: Well, actually no. It hasn't been changed. It's just been a law that has been overlooked. It's still in the lawbook, says that interracial marriages... yeah. (Nods). It's still written. Yeah, but there've been amendments to that but the law still stands. It hasn't been taken out of the lawbooks. So my mother and father actually had to go back to Michigan, to back her community

in Michigan to get married. Sadly, it took my mother five years, four years... (Shakes head). Approximately four years to get permission to marry my father. In my religion, regardless of your age, you're always asked to get permission from your living parents. For the sake of family unity and harmony. And it took her quite a long time to get permission to get married to a Black man.

Unknown (offscreen): So what religion are you?

VS: Um, I'm a Bahá'í. I'm a Bahá'í. And that was the religious conference that was being held here on Penn Center's campus when my parents met. It was a conference held here and it was really sad because a few of her family members disowned her. Coming to St. Helena Island, my mom always expressed how much she was embraced by the people of St. Helena. That not only is it a special place to live and how beautiful it is. But she was just overwhelmed with the beauty of people's hearts that were the native here. And still... and you would think because you're living on such an isolated island that people would shut you out. But I guess because my father was such a well-respected person on St. Helena, that it... they didn't question his actions much. And my mother very soon proved to be someone who was for the people on the island. She spoke up for many, for their rights. For education and land ownership. And primarily education; she was an educational advocate. And really fought for better curriculum for the students here on St. Helena. She was also really concerned about the widening of our highways. And a lot of the negative elders here on the island are very concerned about too much change. About too much change and that's one good thing because if there is too much change, then you're at risk of losing a lot of your culture and heritage, where so many people are striving to fight to keep that heritage alive. And so my mother was really kind of early on in that battle. And she took a loot of flack for it. (Chuckles). But a lot of people started to love her and respect her even more. Because they saw that she's on our side. The islanders' side. And not just the islander's side, the African-American islanders' side. And our, like I was saying, our house isn't the typical house because we had White brothers and sisters. All Black brothers and sisters. And then this biracial set. And then because of being a Bahá'í, we had... we shared our home with a lot of people. We've had people from the Middle East, from Iran and Israel. And Iran sounds like a scary word... (Chuckles). But Israel. We've had... I remember having a Native American Indian chief in our house. And he came in with his full headdress on. And it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my entire life. Then, at the same moment, just after that, we had this beautiful supermodel from the 70s. I remember her from Johnsons and Johnsons' video, I mean commercial. Blonde, blue eyes, and that was even beautiful. I mean, all these people coming into our homes was not the typical life of a Gullah girl on St. Helena Island. Not at all. And in our house, you hear people chanting prayers in Farsi. Or you hear the Native American chanting a prayer. Or you hear someone saying a prayer in German or another language, so it wasn't typical. It wasn't typical. We got a world education, became world citizens, just right here on St. Helena into our little tiny, on Tom Fripp plantation. We were able to get a world education. Growing up, my mother didn't speak Gullah. Of course. And with my father being educated here

at Penn School, it was taught that there's a time and a place for the Gullah dialect. And it wasn't in the school setting. And my father did not speak half the Gullah dialect, much at all. Even when he was socializing with his friends after work or after school, I don't remember the school days, but just the couple stories that he's told me, that it just wasn't allowed. So people always ask me, "Well, where did you get your Gullah dialect from?" You don't hear it now. (Chuckles). But I had a very strong Gullah dialect growing up because of my peers and my community and going to school at St. Helena Elementary. I picked it up so strong that whenever we would go across the bridge into Beaufort, people would laugh at me. And they would see my White mother and my White siblings and my brown siblings and they'd look at this little brown girl with the curly hair, and they expect something different to come out. But whenever, every time I would open my mouth, they'd laugh at me. At a certain age, I was unaware of it. I thought they were laughing with me. But when you know, you become nine and ten, you notice that they're laughing at you. Then I noticed, you know, watching the news with my father in the evening, or some of his shows like "Lawrence Welk" and those kind of things, I noticed people didn't speak like I was speaking. And so I was like, oh okay I'm gonna try to be like them. And so I was watching the news religiously with my father in the evening and I came up with what you hear now. (Chuckles). Noncommittal, news commentator voice. But because it was such a departure from my Gullah culture, and my heritage and what I was at the core, I stuttered for like ten years. And I remember when I was going off to college and I still had a little stutter problem, but right before I went off to college, Dr. Buzzy. (Chuckles). Don't know, I'm not sure if you've heard of Dr. Buzzard. There's a Dr. Buzzard but his... the next person underneath him, his son was known as Buzzy and he was the next person in line that after Dr. Buzzard, that you would have to go to for rooting doctorin or uh... I would keep it at that, root doctorin. And he and my father were good friends. And he noticed that I had a really big problem stuttering, and he just said, you know... and he didn't have a Gullah dialect either! He didn't have a Gullah dialect. Um, and he said, "You know, if you just sing your words before you say them, then you're gonna be okay." And ever since then, I haven't had a problem. So I always say he put a little root on me. (Everyone laughs). But it's just common sense. If you think about what you're gonna say and you say it in a beautiful way, or in a beautiful tone, then that is half the battle. Yeah, and I haven't had a problem since. And then it was another instance, an occasion when Buzzy, I call him Mr. Gregory, I never called him Buzzy. It's so disrespectful cause he's an elder on the island, so you call him Mr. Gregory. And I had a really bad acne problem, right before going to school, after the stuttering lesson. He noticed I had a looot of acne on my face. He said, "Oh girl. Ohhh girl! Go in your field. Go in your field and get the watermelon. Bust it open and get that watermelon and just scrub your face. Scrub your face. Then you get the chapstick, not the one with the strawberry or the watermelon flavor. Get the original chapstick! And put it on there." I was like... (rolls eyes). "Yes sir." Because it's disrespectful (chuckles) to say anything otherwise. And I was scared. I thought he was putting something on me. You know, little root doctorin again. But now I know that most of the root doctorin is holistic. Most of it. I mean there are some other things that people do in the witch doctoring practice that aren't so holistic and I

don't know much about. But the things that he was telling me were holistic things. Things that would help me with my whole being. You know, speaking... think about what you're saying before you speak. Or speak in a melodic tone. Or get that watermelon and scrub your face. And those are things that, you know, people will tell you to do today. But I was so frightened that he was putting something on me. That I didn't do it. And so when I saw him, about a month and a half later, he's like, "You didn't do it." (Shakes head). "You didn't do it." And I was like, "Well, how can you tell?" He said, "Have you looked in the mirror?" (Everyone chuckles). And so...

ZB (offscreen): Did you ever try the watermelon?

VS: Later. Later on, tried the watermelon and it does help. However, I still think about Mr. Gregory. (Everyone laughs). And you know, he may still be workin some root beyond the grave. And it's funny how Gullah people have the superstitions, we have 'em. We have 'em. And a lot of the Black community. Whether you consider yourself Gullah who have those really strong African-nisms still present and if you're not, if you don't have all those strong African-nisms present, we still have those superstitions. We still have superstitions that have come over with us.

ZB (offscreen): Coming from the same place. Yes.

VS: Cause we're all coming from the same place. And I have this tree in my yard. It's called a blue bottle tree. And I... (Laughs). I've had my blue bottle tree longer, for a long time, and I've had no problems. And the blue bottle tree is to ward off evil spirits. And it wards off evil spirits in the daytime. But at night, they say, that if the evil spirits are roaming round, they're attracted to this bottle, then they go inside the bottle. Then they clean. They clean in the morning, in the morning time, when the sun rises. The sun and the color blue kills the spirit. I don't think it kills the spirit. I think it keeps them at bay. Because you can't kill a spirit. So I think it keeps them at bay, or keeps them cold. But I also heard if one of the bottles break, then it releases them. And I've been taking special care with my guy that cuts the lawn for me. And my son that cuts the lawn tell him, "Please be careful around my bottles." (VS and ZB laugh). And they're a beautiful cobalt blue color. And they're supposed to represent the color of heaven. And it says... the saying goes: "Heaven blue keeps the hates away." And the hates are those evil spirit you wanna keep away. My island is changing a little bit. My island is changing a little bit to where you can't... when we were younger, we used to keep our doors unlocked and not worry about anyone entering. Now, it's just the times have changed. Not just the island, across the board, times are changing. And, you have to lock your doors now. And I have my blue bottle tree but because other things have been happening in my little area, that you know, I've got an alarm system. But do you know I put more faith in my bottle tree than I do my alarm system. That's really, really funny to me. How I feel like that. I am an educated young lady. (Chuckles). I am. I see myself as a well-educated young lady. But still, I have those superstitions.

ZB (offscreen): It's your culture.

VS: Yeah.

ZB (offscreen): Something we're so curious about. How long has your family been on this island?

VS: Since coming over across the water. Being coming from Africa, we've been on Tom Fripp Plantation. Uh huh. That's right next to the St. Helena Elementary School. The island, as you already know, is still set up in plantations. And I found a map from the book... it was so wonderful, a book on the island. Oh goodness! I can't think of it right now, but inside of this book, it'll come to me, is a beautiful map of all the plantations and how they were parceled. No. It'll come to me. It'll come to me. We have a first edition copy in the safe. It'll come to me. (Shakes head). Oh that's horrible.

ZB (offscreen): That's okay. I understand.

VS: So, and it has all the original names of the plantations. And our family comes from the Tom Fripp Plantation and we still live on that plantation.

PM (offscreen): So, does your family own...?

VS: Our land? We, interesting, the islanders here... we were able to purchase our land after slavery was over. A lot of people were... there's the story of the 40 acres and a mule. And that, in then you had the piece of land and some people were sharecroppers, some people were tenant farmers. St. Helena Islanders were not. We were very fortunate to be educated very early on at Penn School. And people coming with guidance and teaching us the importance of land ownership. And so we were able to buy land at tax sales right after, during, you know, right before Reconstruction and after the war. And so we have owned our land since then.

ZB (offscreen): Since Reconstruction?

VS: Yes.

PM (offscreen): So when your owners, when the owners of the plantation fled from where you live, you bought the land?

VS: Correct.

PM (offscreen): How many family members are on the land?

VS: On our land? Well... (Chuckles). There's a lot of children in our family. There's fourteen

children in our family. We have approximately fourteen acres. Fourteen acres of land. And there are three family members on it now. And each of us have, in the beginning it was heir's property. And have you been familiar with the term heir's property?

Unknown (offscreen): Yes. Uh huh.

VS: That's very similar to the setting in Africa where you have a village setting, where you have your extended family all around you. And honest, people on the island still live that way. As you've been traveling, most everyone lives that way. Right now, I still have land. I have a one portion for me and all of my siblings. And my father had remarried and my stepmother has her portion. And then she has... I have a sister and a brother that live right there on our land. And, I'm thinking about it. (Chuckles). I'm thinkin about maybe building something there. We have farm land. One of the things about having children is that... and having farmland at that. Those times when I was growing up is that you wanna have enough children to work the land. (PM laughs). Well, with all of us together, we were able to do that. And it was a requirement to be in the field. And also, my father would go fishing. And the crops, they're not just for you. The crops were for the elders that could no longer farm and fish. Also, so you share with your community. Well, you share with your neighbors and especially the elders on the island. You took care of them. The times now... a lot of people are moving away from that. They're not taking as good of care of the elders as they should. Yeah.

PM (offscreen): Do you think that... I have a two part question. Do you think that's part of the loss of the culture? And what can Penn Center do cause I understand the public schools are not teaching anything about Gullah tradition or Gullah history so what can Penn Center do with the youth of Penn to get that back as it was?

VS: Well, Penn Center has always been at the forefront of solving community problems. Always. Whether if you're having problems with your land ownership, if you're about to lose it. You can come to Penn Center and they'll assist you in some way. At what time, we had a legal office here. If you had any problems legal, then you could come to Penn Center. If you have problems with childcare or education, you come to Penn Center. Penn Center, we have a land use and retention program. And that helps people. People know that they can call here. Some people will call even if they have a problem with rent and that may not be something that we can help, that Penn Center can help with but we do have the information on helping with land. Land use, which is farming, and we been partnering with USDA in a program they have with showing people how to get back to agriculture and fishing. And how important it is to get back to that. And to use their land for those purposes also. For education, there was a time... well it goes in waves. The education accomplishments and declines are always in a wave. And Penn Center always comes to the call. When there's a call for action, for example, when we found that the island children were not, and myself included cause I had it growing up here on St....

[End]