

## **FHS Oral History Project – Desmond Reid**

### **Description:**

Desmond A. Reid was born in 1945 and spent the first twenty years of his life in Jamaica. He recounted his formative years in Jamaica, particularly his mother's influence. He immigrated to the New York City in 1965, printing and selling books primarily on Black literature and heritage. Desmond moved to Orlando in 2009, in which he shifted his bookselling approach from a mainly economic endeavor to a more philanthropic pursuit for the Black community. Desmond has sold books from his Longwood bookstore, DARE, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities since 2011, and he explained how the festival has changed over the past decade. Relatedly, Desmond highlighted how race relations more broadly have fluctuated in the US since the late 1960s, from a particularly harrowing incident during his military service to the recent state and national efforts to restrict certain books from schools.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;00 - 00;00;29

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Desmond Reid on January 31st, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. So before we begin talking about you know your life more explicitly, can you please talk to me about, this tent. Is this a publishing company or how are you involved with selling these books?

00;00;29 - 00;02;11

**DESMOND REID:** I do a number of things. I started out as a printer, and, then someone asked us to, you know, print, publish a book for them—and we did. Then my, my business was closed because they sold the building, turned it into a warehouse, and we were evicted. So I got into, I started a book business where I went out and sold books, mostly, to the New York City Department of Education and to daycare centers and what have you, and so that's how we built the business. In the meantime, I still continue to publish, one or two things for, for folks, and then I publish one for myself—a couple I publish a couple of books that I wrote. And then, and 2009, Mayor Bloomberg canceled all the so called “minority and women business enterprise contracts,” because supposedly they wanted to buy at scale, to save money for the city. So that, having happened, my wife had wanted to move to Orlando, and I had, you know, bought a house in Orlando, and she said, let's go. So, at the end of 2009, we came down here and, we opened the bookstore in Longwood, the DARE Books.

00;02;11 - 00;02;12

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What was that?

00;02;12 - 00;02;15

**DESMOND REID:** DARE—D.A.R.E. Books. DARE Bookstore.

00;02;15 - 00;02;27

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. And so you've been here since 2009. Can you just talk to me about your experiences more broadly living in Orlando for the past fourteen, fifteen years?

00;02;28 - 00;04;22

**DESMOND REID:** It's not fair, you should ask my wife because I came down here involuntarily. I'm a, I'm a Jamaican and New Yorker. So, I bought the house only because she wanted to move here. And by buying the house, I delayed by five years our moving from New York. But when the contract went, it would not have been profitable to stay in New York. And so, you know. But I've made the most of here. I've been trying to promote Black literature for the most part, but I sell all types of literature, you know, like, books on the Latino experience, the Caribbean experience, the African American experience. And I have other books religious books, children's books of all sorts, you know, and books written by and about, African Americans. I have books written by President Clinton and what have you, because my whole idea is to have people properly informed. You know, there are people who say, "well, this is wrong. This is right, this is good, this is bad," and they have no idea except what they hear other people say. And, and so my, my whole bent is to inform the world. So if you make a decision to dislike me or to hate me, then you going to have a reason for it. Okay. And I'm not saying people won't dislike me—a lot of people will, it doesn't matter who you are. They're going to be people who love you, hate you, whatever it is. But it should be from a position of knowledge and understanding. And so that's what I'm trying to promote.

00;04;22 - 00;04;31

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And where did you get that that belief from? Like was it through early in your life when you were in New York? Like where did you get that from?

00;04;30 - 00;06;37

**DESMOND REID:** Well, I grew up in Jamaica in my first 20 years. I came here three days before my 20th birthday. But I had the belief instilled in me, and and by the way, I learned about Marcus Garvey, and I learned about a lot of the other people that, much later were learned about in history. Okay. I learned about Mansa Musa, who was the richest man in the world, you know, an African man who went to Mecca every year, and he gave money away along the way. You know, I learned about the pyramids and the pharaohs and all of that, because we learn about world history, you know, not just American history, but world history. We learn about the mountains where they were located, the rivers of the world. You know, the the reason why trade and commerce were found around the ports because it was easier transport by water, you know, all of that. When I went to college, they were teaching me that again, you know. So anyway, my mother, set the example for us. She raised nine children. Well, eight, because our grandparents raised the oldest daughter, but she raised eight children by herself. And after we were grown, she went to college. I graduated with a nurse's degree, and she was an RN when she retired. Okay. So she told us, whatever we want to do, we can do. And seven of her nine children finished high school, eight of her nine children have at least two years of college and six of our nine children have at least a bachelor's degree. Okay. She insisted that's what we had to do.

00;06;38 - 00;06;47

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what was life like growing up in Jamaica in the 1950s? You know, that was around the time that you were growing up. What was that like?

00;06;48 - 00;08;01

**DESMOND REID:** Well, it was hard for us because we were poor. And as I said, my mother raised us by herself, so things were hard. But she impressed upon us that where you begin in life is not where you should end up. Okay. So, she promoted learning. And I'm not talking about education because education is not necessarily learning. But she promoted learning since we were very early. And she also promoted analytic thinking, okay, which I practice. I would ask my sons, you know, to tell me the answer to so and so and so and they tell me the right answer and I said, "No, you're wrong." "But, dad, this is what I—" You're wrong, okay? If you think you're right, explain it to me. So they were right when they explained it to me. But just learning by rote doesn't mean anything. And and that's what I learned. And that's what I taught my my sons. Okay.

00;08;04 - 00;08;11

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you said you arrived to New York three days short of your 20th birthday. So that was around, you know, mid 1960s.

00;08;12 - 00;08;13

**DESMOND REID:** '65.

00;08;13 - 00;08;16

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** '65. So you arrived in New York in '65.

00;08;16 - 00;08;17

**DESMOND REID:** And I'm 79.

00;08;17 - 00;08;21

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What was that like when you first came to United States for you?

00;08;22 - 00;09;28

**DESMOND REID:** Well, it wasn't really hard for me because by then I had gone to printing school and I had become a journeyman printer. So, when I came here, I had a little experience in life. The only thing is that they wanted to underpay me, and, I can't get into all of it now, but let's suffice it to say that I went to this job, and they advertised the the pay at a certain amount. And when I went and they said, okay, we're going to hire you, they told me a significant amount less. And, and so I told them goodbye, and I got another job and four or five days that paid me much more than they wanted to pay me. Yeah, but I learned to value my worth and not allow anyone to, you know, underpay me.

00;09;29 - 00;09;34

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what else did you learn during your time up there in New York about being a Black businessman?

00;09;36 - 00;10;14

**DESMOND REID:** Well, you know, there are a number of example of Black business people. So I, I consider myself a Black bookseller, but not a Black businessman. Because, you know, I studied—my bachelor's degree is in economics. And Africana studies, as a, as a secondary major. So, I wanted to do something. I wanted to go in business. So I took my degree and that.

The whole thing is to be prepared for whatever you're going to do. And, and the other thing is that you're always going to get pushback regardless of whoever does it or for whatever reason they do it. You're always going to get pushback. So you need to have alternative plans. And that's what I...

00;10;34 - 00;10;40

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And so you mentioned earlier that, coming to Orlando was sort of like a reset for you, for your—

00;10;40 - 00;10;41

**DESMOND REID:** Total. Total reset.

00;10;41 - 00;10;49

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Total reset. So talk to me a little bit about that process of, of restarting again, your bookselling and your printing journey.

00;10;50 - 00;12;21

**DESMOND REID:** Well, when I was in New York, it was basically about profit along with, doing good for the community. Here, it's doing good for the community, not profit, even though I want to make a profit. But, it's—It's most for the community welfare and and thankfully, I don't have to rely on this to pay my bills. Okay. There are times I sell a few bucks. But most of the time it's just a matter of, the satisfaction of getting this, into the community. Giving them a chance to read the real history of of not only, people in general, but Black people in particular and, that's critically important. And that's what we're missing because we've been contributing more than our share to several to civilization all these thousands of years. And as a matter of fact, most of the things that other people have done, people have people have learned or stolen from Africans. And so it is important that Africans, and the descendants of Africans know about it. And that's why I'm still doing this.

00;12;22 - 00;12;39

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And can you talk to me a little bit more specifically about, since you mentioned how when your time here in Orlando has been more focused on community involvement, can you just talk to me more about the experiences you've had connecting with community members, community leaders?

00;12;39 - 00;12;57

**DESMOND REID:** Well, I guess I guess I, might not have used a right term, because my concentration is on getting people to know, I didn't say I'm necessarily succeeding.

00;12;57 - 00;13;00

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I think you are. Being here, you know, in the festivals.

00;13;00 - 00;13;29

**DESMOND REID:** Well, not on the level that I need to succeed. Okay. Because, you know, the the rewards to me is seeing people willing and able to learn and learning. Okay. And and having

it make a difference. And, don't get me wrong there, I've been I've influenced a few people. Okay. But I'm disappointed how few.

00;13;31 - 00;13;41

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And how involved have you been in this particular community in Eatonville? How long have you been doing this at the Zora Festival?

00;13;41 - 00;14;03

**DESMOND REID:** I've been doing the Zora Fest from the second year after I got here. So 2011, I think the first time. And then I didn't come back 2012 and 2013, I think. And then they called me and invited me back. Yeah. So that's how long I've been doing that.

00;14;03 - 00;14;11

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what—have you seen any changes over that time since 2012 to 2025, being involved with this festival?

00;14;13 - 00;14;48

**DESMOND REID:** The participation has lessened tremendously. And that's, that's tragic because when I first came, all the street from end to end, were vendors and, and people, you know, you couldn't get place to walk during that time. And now it's maybe one third, one quarter of what it used to be. So I'm disappointed with that because this is a very important, thing. So, like I said, I'm disappointed.

00;14;49 - 00;15;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And speaking a little bit more broadly, what have you seen or what have you experienced, in being here in Orlando now for fifteen-plus years, in terms of racial relations in Central Florida?

00;15;10 - 00;16;46

**DESMOND REID:** I've had people of all stripes who have been nice and supportive. But I've had, on quite a number of occasions people walk in my store and, and look and murmured to themselves and walk back out. Yeah. And, and I'm not satisfied with the number of people of color who actually come in, but, but I'm going to chalk that up to the lack of interest in books, caused by many things, including the internet. You know, people don't want to spend the money to buy the book number one, when they can go online and read the book. And, and also, younger people don't have the time to read books because they can just what's you call it scan the net and, and get whatever information they, they think they want. But the other side of the coin is that there's a whole lot of misinformation. There's more misinformation than there is true information, you know, real truth going around because anybody now can just get online and propagandize anything.

00;16;47 - 00;17;06

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. As someone who prints and sells books, what are your thoughts and observations about the attempts from the state and even the nation to restrict certain books that talk about...

00;17;06 - 00;18;22

**DESMOND REID:** Okay, so what I'll say is, because I grew up, mostly in the 50s and 60s, I am well aware of how things were and, and more specifically because I came here in 1965, although I was away three years in the military, I still saw the, the struggle for liberation. And I was very hopeful when I saw things changing and, and people, racially interacting. I was very encouraged. Unfortunately, over the last few years, we've seen a total reverse, and we've seen where people are, not only victimizing people who they don't like, but, they're willing to tell lies about whether they're eating the cats and the dogs. Okay. All right. That's how far they'll go. So, yeah, I'm I'm discouraged, but I know I have to continue doing what I'm doing.

00;18;22 - 00;18;28

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And you just mentioned right now that you served in the military, can you talk to me a little bit about that experience?

00;18;32 - 00;19;57

**DESMOND REID:** I experienced some racism in the Air Force. The the good thing for me is that I grew up in Jamaica. And so I looked at every man and every woman as a man or a woman, and I pushed back on them. Okay. To the point where, again, back me up in my room one night and decided to teach me a lesson. And I said to them, I said, okay, go ahead. I said, the only thing is, if you put your hands on me, make sure you kill me, because if you don't, I'm going to get you all one by one. And they backed off, okay. And and the other Black guys stayed away from me after that. And I couldn't understand why till years and years later, when I really began to understand the how deeply racism is ingrained and how fearful a lot of Black people still are. That's when I realized exactly what had happened. But I didn't know I should have been afraid. I was dealing one man to another man. You know, our five men to one man, as the case may be. You know.

00;19;57 - 00;20;07

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. Circling back to this event, why is it important for you to be here at the Zora Festival?

00;20;08 - 00;20;33

**DESMOND REID:** Well, there are a couple of reasons. One, is selfishness. I need to promote my business and sell books. But the other thing is, is, because I'm selling the books that I'm selling, I need to have people know about me. And this is one venue to do that. So those are the two reasons.

00;20;34 - 00;20;56

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And given, you know, what we've been talking about now, you know, this sort of regression of liberation, why is it important for cultural events like the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of Arts and Humanities, celebrating Black history, culture and heritage? Why is it important for these events to exist?

00;20;58 - 00;23;04

**DESMOND REID:** They're much more important now than they used to be. Given the regression, the regression and the venom with which these racist have come out and either

destroy or neutralize all the efforts that have been made over the past fifty years, for the past sixty years. Okay, it's all the more important that those of us who realize the jeopardy that we're in as a race. And not only us, I mean, the whole race, the whole human race is in jeopardy. Because if you start killing people, this is not like in the old days where Black folks are going to sit down and say, here I am, you know, I'll be a martyr. This is a time when, people of color are saying, we're not going to let you do this. We're not going to let you harm us. If you harm us, there's a price to pay, okay? More and more people are saying that, you know, and in the 60s, there was Stokely Carmichael, there was Malcolm X and a couple others who were talking about retaliation and all the rest we're talking about liberation only. But now, we have to protect ourselves if something happens. So we're seeking, liberation, true liberation. And we're not going to let it go back to where it was. Okay? It's not going to happen. So my part is, I'm not going to get up there and shoot anybody or what have you because, as a wise man says, the pen is mightier than the sword. So the people at the sword can think that they're all that for a little while. But you cannot lead astray an educated group or an educated nation.

00;23;05 - 00;23;15

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What, what hopes do you see for your business and also this area in Central Florida in the next couple of years?

00;23;17 - 00;24;42

**DESMOND REID:** There's no hope in the next couple of years. What I'm hoping to see is a re-entrenchment. I was going to say retrenchment, but that's going backward. A re-entrenchment, of our cause and, our rights as citizens of the world. There are more people who are getting involved, including white people. Okay. There are a lot of people who have, become very irate about what is, what is being done, you know, to push us back to the Dark ages. So it's going to take a while. It may take till this guy comes out and his successor comes out. But I think a lot of people who have voted for him have buyer's remorse. So I'm looking to see how that plays out, because I think there are millions, maybe, maybe twenty million people, I think, who already have buyer's remorse. And if that's the case, there's hope for a change in four to eight years.

00;24;43- 00;24;48

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. Thank you so much, Desmond, for allowing me to talk to you about your life. I really appreciate it.

00;24;48 - 00;24;49

**DESMOND REID:** Okay. You're welcome.