

FHS Oral History Project — Melissa Jest

Description:

Melissa Jest was born on September 20, 1964, in Savannah, Georgia, but lived her childhood in Harlem, New York. She recounted her mixed experience growing up in Harlem, remembering how uplifting it felt being around a historically significant Black enclave, but also the pain of seeing her mother struggling to support two young children as a single parent. She briefly recalled her perspective on the 1976 Bicentennial, noting the lack of Black involvement and remembrance during the historical anniversary. Melissa attended the University of Florida (UF) during the late 1980s. In addition to describing her general experience at UF, she discussed in detail the student protests against the South African apartheid regime and how conflicting and revealing it proved for her as a Broadcasting Journalism major. Additionally, Melissa shared her time working as an Associate Producer of a consumer educational segment titled “12 On Your Side” for Channel 12 WTLV in Jacksonville after college. Lastly, Melissa explained her current (as of the interview’s recording) position with the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund for the National Trust of Historic Preservation, specifically their efforts in supporting the Association to Preserve Eatonville Community (PEC).

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: [This is Sebastian Garcia] interviewing Melissa Jest on January 31st, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. So, Melissa, can you please tell me, where were you born?

00;00;17 - 00;00;19

MELISSA JEST: I was born in Savannah, Georgia.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Savannah, Georgia. And did you grow up there, for your entire childhood or your entire life? Just talk to me about that.

00;00;27 - 00;01;08

MELISSA JEST: My family was a part of that last tail end of the Great Migration. And so we left Savannah, Georgia, when I was about four months old, four to six months old. So that was in 1964, and we moved to New York City. And we settled in Harlem, and my mom was able to receive training to become a tailor. And she worked in several shops in the fashion district there. And then fast forward to 1978, when we moved back to Savannah, when I was about eleven, twelve years old.

00;01;08 - 00;01;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about your experiences as a child in Harlem from ‘64 to ‘78. What was that like?

00;01;16 - 00;02;22

MELISSA JEST: It was a very...mixed time of mixed feelings. You know, as a child, everything is magical. I didn't know that we were poor. I didn't know that we were living in the, quote unquote projects. I didn't know about my mom's struggles. The time when that became more real was when she would cry at the dinner table trying to figure out how to make ends meet as a single mother, you know, with two young children. So, you know on the other hand, it was magical. I mean, in Harlem, being a Black enclave, you know, Black businesses and just activity constantly on the streets, everything you could possibly want as a child, you know, to eat candies and cotton candy and hot dog stands and, you know, Italian ices and shaved ice in the summer. And, so, yeah, it was a...it was a very, I guess, diverse, set of feelings.

00;02;22 - 00;02;35

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And so you moved back to Savannah in '78...do you know why? And also, just talk to me about that transition in that aspect of your life.

00;02;35 - 00;03;07

MELISSA JEST: Yes. Harlem started changing with the introduction of drugs, and the proliferation of drugs, heroin, cocaine and, street violence came with the drugs and the drug sales. And my mom, had saved up her money, you know, from working as a tailor. And so we were able to move back to Savannah, Georgia, and she was able to buy a fixer upper, and, she was able to take her girls to what she thought was a safer place.

00;03;07 - 00;03;12

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And so, by '78, you were around fourteen years old?

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MELISSA JEST: Yeah. So I guess we would back it up because I was about twelve. So I guess that would be '76.

00;03;16 - 00;03;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: '76 around—

00;03;18 - 00;03;19

MELISSA JEST: The year of the Centennial. Bicentennial.

00;03;19 - 00;03;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay. Yeah. Bicentennial. Do you remember anything about the Bicentennial?

00;03;23 - 00;03;54

MELISSA JEST: I remember a lot of hype on the television, you know. And you know, we, as you know, working class black folks we was like, that don't have anything to do with us. But, yeah, plenty of flags and, you know, hoopla on television. But that didn't have anything to do with our reality, and my mom's effort to get us back to a safe place where we could play in the front yard or play in the street again without worries of being shot or that kind of thing.

00;03;54 - 00;04;05

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And, so talk to me about some of those, those teenagers, pre adult years back in Savannah.

00;04;05 - 00;05;19

MELISSA JEST: Oh, wow. So again, a lot of mixed feelings. Moved back to Savannah where it was hot, and you had bugs that were the size of your hand. However, you also had fruit trees that grew in the lanes. I mean, we could just walk the lanes and there were pear trees and peach trees and pecan trees and, you know, wild raspberries and mulberry bushes. And it was magical. It was like, wow, we could just leave home and have food to eat. And, you know, plenty of things to see. And however the, the bittersweet side was we quote unquote, we talked funny, according to the Savannahians and our neighbors, our cousins, even, because we, you know, had grown up in New York, and so we didn't have that southern twang and we didn't use a lot of those, local terminologies and so we got picked at and, ostracized because of that. And here we were, we thought we were coming home to to family and sold just—and, you know, and you add puberty on top of that. It was it was yeah—once again, a lot of feelings.

00;05;19 - 00;05;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you went to the University of Central [sic] Florida for college. Talk to me about that experience coming to Florida and some of the differences, you know, you noticed even though Savannah isn't that far from Gainesville.

00;05;33 - 00;06;40

MELISSA JEST: Exactly. That was really exciting because that's one thing I knew I wanted to do, I wanted to go to college. And again, it, it brushed up against the quote unquote reality that we were poor. And my mom was like, I don't know, how are you going to figure that out. But her brother, my uncle, who had moved to Jacksonville and had fallen in love with the Gators, said you just apply and we'll figure it out from there. And, it was great. I mean, I grew to like the heat and being in the sun and and coming to Gainesville, it it was a paradise. You know, it was warm all year round. And you had other first time college attendees coming from families that were really excited to have sent them, and we just were really happy to be there and to be together. So it was it was it was a good time. My professors would say I was having way too good of a time.

00;06;36 - 00;06;40

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What did you major in?

00;06;40 - 00;07;06

MELISSA JEST: Broadcasting. Broadcast journalism. I wanted to be a reporter, and so yeah. And ended up going into production for TV and radio, and it was a perfect place because the University of Florida had its own television station, its own radio station. And it was, I think, number seven in the country in terms of broadcast education, so.

00;07;06 - 00;07;10

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What inspired that, that decision to do that major?

00;07;10 - 00;07;11

MELISSA JEST: You want me to be honest?

00;07;11 - 00;07;12

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah.

00;07;12 - 00;07;16

MELISSA JEST: Mary Tyler Moore, do you remember her on TV?

00;07;16 - 00;07;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I I'd be lying to you if I said yes.

00;07;18 - 00;08;25

MELISSA JEST: Oh my goodness. That's where she worked. She worked at a television station. And so watching her show and just it's like, I want to do that. And, Yeah. And so there was this wonderful opening on her show, and she just loved being single and in the big city, and, and she would throw up her beret, you know, at the end of the show. And I was like, that's the life I want. And so she really was one of my first introductions as a kid to, to broadcasting, you know, as work and...And then in high school, the local radio station, the black radio station would let teenagers come and put on a radio show on Saturday, and we were called Teen Timers. And so we would go into the local radio station on Saturdays, and from nine to noon, we were allowed to report the news, report the sports. We even have [*sic*] a segment, about the, zodiac signs and just and that kind of really sealed it.

00;08;25 - 00;08;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what were some of your your favorite, coverages, new news report broadcasts, either from those that time in high school or finally, when you were studying in college?

00;08;37 - 00;09;49

MELISSA JEST: I was really intimidated when I was working for the radio station at the University of Florida, and they sent us out, to cover the student protest against apartheid in South Africa. And they were like, go out and get some man on the street interviews. And my classmates, you know, my crew folks that I hung out with, they were protesting, they were like, we're not talking to you...you need to be here, you know, protesting with us. And I was just like, you know, I'm just, you know, I'm trying to do my work here, which is what I'm studying. And I thought, you know, us being friends, you would, you know, help me out. And I just saw where it kind of drew the line in the sand. They were like, no, you need to be here, you know, protesting with us. We're not going to help you, you know, help the white man tell tell about this this, struggle. And I was like, wow. So that really stuck out. And then and I knew my producer wasn't going to fall for that, but that was the truth. I was like, nobody would talk to me. So...

00;09;49 - 00;10;06

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow. And, since you mentioned it, talk to me a little bit more about that being it being at UF during that time of those protests, because those protests, you know, there were historic, especially the ones that were happening at UF. Just talk to me about that experience.

00;10;06 - 00;11;27

MELISSA JEST: Oh, wow. Yeah, it was, kind of a head scratcher because, I mean, here we are just trying to go to school, just trying to get a degree. I mean, that's what our parents always told us. Just get a good job. You'll be fine. You know, we're working our butts off here to support you in school, so don't mess up, you know, don't get arrested, don't—you know. And so when those protests started happening, I was just like, wow, I don't know if I want to put myself on the line. And so it really made you think about what you claim to be about. So it was, again, a lot of a diversity of feelings. And so yeah, I did kind of wimp out and, I would ask them to share what it felt like. What was it like being out there in front of Tigert Hall, which was, you know, the main administration building and, and just had to vicariously live through, you know, my classmates and my buddies and, and then trying to think about how I could participate. There was a letter writing campaign at one point, so I did participate in that. So just trying to get in where I could fit in, and not necessarily be on the front line.

00;11;27 - 00;11;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And did that...Did that experience sort of reinforced or perhaps demonstrate how, you know, the struggle for racial equality is so much global? You know, it's not just something in the United States like how—did that event make you come to terms with that or not really, you knew that from before?

00;11;53 - 00;12;53

MELISSA JEST: Yes. I think you're right. I think it did bring conditions elsewhere to the front of my mind. It did caused me to think about how people in Africa, the different countries there, and specifically South Africa, were experiencing oppression. And it did get me to think about how I could, support. One thing I remember coming out of those protests was to boycott certain companies, that shall remain nameless, but that did that just like, okay, well, I can stop buying that. I can do that part. And, so I really I did get to broaden my view that there were people around the globe that weren't, you know, meeting, you know, their own needs or, and were in a much different place, yeah.

00;12;53 - 00;13;05

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So did you you mentioned how after your degree, you entered the workforce. Did you enter it in Florida or did you go back to Georgia? What was that like?

00;13;05 - 00;13;48

MELISSA JEST: I did go back to Savannah. I did go back to Savannah after graduation and, I didn't get a job right out of college, which is the optimal thing, right? You go home and saying, hey, I got a job at X, Y, and, it took me a couple of months. I think I was back home, maybe about, four to six months. And, yeah, I felt a little disappointed. And then my mom was like, you went through all of that just to come back here and work at the Pizza Inn and, an opportunity—I kept looking, and I did. I was able and I found an opportunity that brought me back to Jacksonville, Florida for my first, professional broadcasting job, so.

00;13;48 - 00;13;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. And talk to me about that experience in Jacksonville, working for for your first time in a professional setting.

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MELISSA JEST: Totally intimidated, totally horrified of making a mistake. And I just remember kind of, turning down certain opportunities, because I didn't think I had a strong enough skill set. You know, I didn't want to be... I didn't want to be in front of the camera. I knew that. I got my degree in production. And learning—I had to learn. I had to create my own kind of niche with the skill set that I had. So I ended up becoming an associate producer who stayed in and who identified the stories, who vetted the stories and then supported the reporter with background researching, after they went out and investigated the stories. So, yeah, I was—I had to get it together. It's like you spent, you know, four and a half years trying to get this degree, now use it. So I really had to talk myself into a place of confidence. So...

00;15;03 - 00;15;07

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what station in Jacksonville did you work at?

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MELISSA JEST: Channel 12 WTLV. I was, associate assistant producer for a segment, a consumer ed segment called “12 On Your Side.” Kevin Dooley was the reporter. And so I was, his associate producer and helped him identify the various consumer stories that he would investigate around Jacksonville.

00;15;33 - 00;15;43

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And can you share a specific memory of some of maybe the most noteworthy or your favorite or the most maybe alarming, you know?

00;15;43 - 00;16;36

MELISSA JEST: Yeah, yeah. There was one particular constituent who contacted us who was having trouble with, a used car. And, and so Kevin investigated the story and gave information about The Lemon Laws in Florida. I thought it was a really good educational piece. And, our managing producer came and had a talk with us as a team and said, you know, we may want to think twice about the various stories because they're an advertiser, that particular dealership, and now they're pulling, pulling out their advertising. And so that's when I got to see the direct connection between the quote unquote journalism and, you know, advertising and the control that corporations might have over what messages get out.

00;16;36 - 00;16;41

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Ah. That's fascinating. How long did you last at that station or how long did you work at that station?

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MELSSA JEST: No, you said it right “last.” No, because it was very, very fast pace. And it was, a lot of competition even amongst the reporters. And so I think I was there just shy of eighteen months, a year and a half. It felt like a lifetime because it was just so much to consider.

That's one thing that I don't think colleges teach enough is that office dynamic or that those office politics. That should be a class in and of itself.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 100%. I agree. Like that. Inner game. Yes.

00;17;19 - 00;17;19

MELISSA JEST: Yes! The inner game—exactly.

00;17;19 - 00;17;31

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What what did you learn about Florida in your time at UF, and also that brief stint at in Jacksonville?

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MELISSA JEST: Yeah, I definitely got a good foundation in the Spanish founding of Florida and learned about how it was a safe haven for Africans who were self-emancipating from Georgia and South Carolina, and how that led to there being a lot of Black Catholics, because I always wondered, I was like, how do you how are you black and Catholic? And it was through that influence because the Spaniards would say, if you convert to Catholicism, you can be free. And so that's one of the things that definitely stuck with me, was that it was a safe place for, for black folks to come. And then there was, Fort Mosley, if I'm pronouncing it correctly, as kind of a standing example of, of one of those type of African settlements or where Africans were able to come.

00;18;27 - 00;18;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And so once you left Jacksonville, where did you go from there?

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MELISSA JEST: Went back to Savannah. Just touching base there at home. I got a job just briefly with the newspaper in Savannah, and I was only there for a couple of years left there. I went to DC to see if I could make it in the big city. But fortunately, I had a sister there, so, was there, and I just kind of bounced around, you know, touching base at home and then going out and ended up finding myself also in Philadelphia, and, and so forth. And so now I'm back in Savannah.

00;19;04 - 00;19;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And now talk to me about your involvement, with this organization, which what's it called?

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MELISSA JEST: I'm with the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

00;19;15 - 00;19;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. So how did you get involved with them? And talk to me a little about your purpose and your role within that?

00;19;24 - 00;21;03

MELISSA JEST: My mom introduced me to preservation when she moved us back to Savannah and she bought that fixer upper—and that's when it was, 1978 is when she actually bought the fixer upper—and taught us how to appreciate those older buildings and, kind of broadening our view to the neighborhood as a whole that the, the house that she bought contributed to a historic neighborhood and really growing that appreciation. And so when I came back to Savannah, in 1999, the local preservation organization was looking to hire an outreach officer, and they wanted someone of color because most, as you could imagine, Savannah is a majority minority town, and most of the historic neighborhoods where they wanted to move into were majority Black and so they wanted someone of color. They wanted someone who was a native. And I kind of fit the bill with my communications background. And I was recommended to apply and ended up getting the job in 2000 and worked for that local preservation organization in Savannah for eight years. And kind of, as I mentioned, bounced around, worked in Philadelphia, worked in Washington, DC, and, ended up back in Atlanta, in Georgia, working for the state preservation office. And then this opportunity came about to work for the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund at the National Trust. And that is how I became introduced to this effort to save Eatonville.

00;21;03 - 00;21;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And talk to me about those those efforts in particular, how what have you and your team have done to save this historically black community?

00;21;16 - 00;22;08

MELISSA JEST: Well, I'm glad to say that, the National Trust is supporting the town government of Eatonville and more specifically, our local partner, the Association to Preserve Eatonville Community, known as PEC for short. And, looking to bring technical information about the preservation policies and practices that the town can embed in its own practices to ensure that the descendants and those who own homesteads here have the information necessary to preserve those homes and that the town has those policies and information necessary to preserve the economic corridor here on Kennedy Boulevard to even develop the Hungerford track so that it benefits the town rather than create something separate from the town.

00;22;08 - 00;22;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how did you learn of Eatonville first, through this job, or did you know of Eatonville through Zora Neale Hurston? What was your first encounters with Eatonville?

00;22;17 - 00;23;02

MELISSA JEST: Yes, my first encounter with Eatonville was reading, *Dust Tracks on the [sic] Road*, which was the autobiography of Zora Neale Hurston, where she talked about her hometown, and the impact that it had on her—coming from an all black town where, yeah, there was black leadership and a strong black economic base and, and that creating a strong foundation for her and, and her humanity, knowing that she had a gift to give and that she had a universe and a town that supported her in doing that.

00;23;02 - 00;23;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how long have you specifically through the National Register of Historic Preservation—[JEST: National Trust]—have been involved with the Zora Neale Hurston Festival. Is this your first year or has you been involved for multiple years?

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MELISSA JEST: This is my second year coming to the festival and manning an information booth to answer questions for passers by about how they can help to preserve Eatonville as a black township and also how they can help support Eatonville in its effort to plan for a future that includes the descendants and does not displace them. Yes.

00;23;45 - 00;24;01

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why is it important for you and your organization specifically, but more broadly, why an event like the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities exist? Why is it important for this place to, to continue to to exist?

00;24;01 - 00;25;00

MELISSA JEST: One of the levels of, of expression that is is important for African descendants is a level of Black joy. And this event allows people to celebrate—celebrate a community where Black people are present in every aspect and where being Black is an asset, where being Black is a good thing. And it's so important for the Zora Festival to continue so that people can come from around the world and experience it and see that for themselves, and not only to garner their support of Eatonville, but also to tap that place within themselves to know that it's okay to feel good, and it's okay to express that in hopes that that's going to inform how they vote and where they put their energies when they go back home.

00;25;00 - 00;25;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Do you feel any more—do you resonate more with your experiences with Eatonville, given that you grew up in Harlem, another historically significant Black community and hub?

00;25;16 - 00;26;10

MELISSA JEST: Yes. I think having grown up in Black enclaves and Black neighborhoods definitely gives me a strong frame of reference when working with Eatonville. And also it it empowers me and gives me confidence to speak to residents about their power to preserve this place. Because I think doing that DIY project in Savannah with my mom, you know, on our homestead, it gave me proof that you roll up your sleeves, you take action, you can preserve, you can make a difference. And so, yes, I think you're very right that having that exposure of seeing people, Black people, taking steps towards their own improvement definitely gives me confidence here in Eatonville.

00;26;10 - 00;26;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You touched on a little bit before, but what what are some of the preservation—future plans to preserve Eatonville? Can you share with that for me a little bit.

00;26;20 - 00;27;51

MELISSA JEST: Of course, yes. The National Trust, and specifically through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, is providing technical support to the town of Eatonville. And we are currently assessing their policies and their practices and giving them recommendations on how to strengthen those in a way that protects the built environment, whether it's through zoning, whether it's through form codes, whether it's through community benefit agreements that they might take on with developers and others who want to come to town, so that they know that every step that they take is always going to be one that makes sure that descendants, homesteaders, those who have a generational tie here can always find home here. We also are encouraging them in their negotiations to restore the Hungerford track and bring that back into the town's coffers, and place it within a community land trust so that if and when there is any development there, there will be a direct line back into the town's coffers so that it can support the services that the descendants deserve. And also, help to support the preservation of the built environment—that's a very important part that, that makes Eatonville special.

00;27;52 - 00;28;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And lastly, you mentioned in a previous answer, you know, growing up in these Black enclaves really sort of strengthen your own identity as a Black woman, you know. Can you just talk to me through, you know, you shared so many phases of your life with me right now, which I really appreciate—can you just talk to me of how have you navigated the world through your Black identity as a woman, a Black woman?

00;28;17 - 00;29;40

MELISSA JEST: Wow, that is a great question. I am very thankful that I came to life as a woman of African descent. And with the mission of showing everyone that I might encounter that life is good...in this black skin, whether it's flashing them a big smile or, you know, a positive word, I think as an African descendant standing on the shoulders, you know, of my ancestors, that they are holding me up high so I can let the world know that it's okay. It's okay to smile. It's okay again to express that Black joy. It's okay again to express that Black resilience. And yeah, seeing and seeing the world through the eyes of a Black woman allows me to be optimistic.

00;29;31 - 00;29;40

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That was an excellent response. This was an excellent oral history. Thank you so much for sharing your life story with me, Melissa. I really appreciate it.

00;29;40 - 00;29;46

MELISSA JEST: Oh, thank you, Sebastian, for stopping by the table. I appreciate you.