

FHS Oral History Project – Drasa Brown

Description:

Drasa C. Brown was born in Orlando, Florida, on March 30, 1976. He remembered growing up in Orlando during the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly how central Christianity proved for his family and attending Edgewater High School. Drasa also shared his incarceration experience and how transformative it remains for him. He explained what drew him to attend the 2025 Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities, highlighting its significance and how the festival has changed even in recent years. As a lifelong resident, he briefly discussed how Orlando has changed generally and within a racial context specifically.

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: [This is Sebastian Garcia] interviewing Drasa Brown on February 2nd, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. So, Drasa, to start off, can you please tell me where you were born?

00;00;16 - 00;00;26

DRASA BROWN: My name is Drasa Brown. I was born right here in Orlando, Florida in 1976. So I'm at the age of 48 years old right now.

00;00;26 - 00;00;31

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. And, And you grew up specifically here in Eatonville, correct?

00;00;31 - 00;00;35

DRASA BROWN: Well, I grew up right on the outside of Eatonville.

00;00;35 - 00;00;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay.

00;00;36 - 00;00;51

DRASA BROWN: Well, maybe five minutes right on outside of Eatonville, I grew up. But I went to school—attended high school with with everyone that, in my era or whatever stuff that went to high school the same year I did.

00;00;51 - 00;01;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you share a little bit with me about your experiences growing up, you know, in the late 70s, early 80s here in Orlando.

00;01;00 - 00;01;45

DRASA BROWN: Growing up in the early 80s, things was as, as we see right now, things was a whole lot, a whole lot simpler. There wasn't—I didn't grow up to say like, sort of like with a silver spoon in my mouth so to say—we grew up on a budget thing was, a little bit...I can't really I can't really even say, rough, but like I say, very, very simple and standard. No, not a

whole lot extras and stuff like that right there, but, for the main part of it, I'm grateful. Yeah. I'm grateful. And things wasn't as bad as, for me or something.

00;01;45 - 00;01;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: For sure. And, you know, you said you you you went to high school here close by?

00;01;52 - 00;01;53

DRASA BROWN: Edgewater.

00;01;53 - 00;01;56

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Edgewater. Talk to me about that experience.

00;01;56 - 00;02;58

DRASA BROWN: Edgewater High School. I went out to Edgewater, had my first year Edgewater. Edgewater High School was 1990. I went there to from 1990 to 93. The experience that Edgewater—Edgewater was it's I think it's considered to be one of the most interracial, schools, high schools, that, at my time when I went to Edgewater that, that I think it was. So, it was, it was a good experience, multicultural like I say, or whatever stuff. And then me, myself, I never, I never did see color or anything like that, so I had Hispanic friends. I have white friends, you know, just as well as my Black brothers and sisters and stuff like that. So, you know, we all kind of, you know, got along good and stuff, even though had some, some, some incidents that, you know, people kind of got riled out here and there, but for the most part of it and stuff, the education part of it was, well. So, yeah, I, I enjoyed, I enjoyed going to Edgewater. I wouldn't, I wouldn't choose another school over Edgewater. I'm an Eagle for life.

00;02;58 - 00;03;13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Oh, there you go. And did your—did your parents instill that that belief of not seeing color? Like, where did that come from?

00;03;13 - 00;04;14

DRASA BROWN: It's hard to...I don't think it, I thought, I don't think it really came from from my parents like instilling anything of the, like, the multicultural thing or whatever stuff. What led me into being diverse, and dealing with people and not seeing color was, I was raised in a—I was raised in the Christian home, you know, we went to, we went to church three times a week. We had Sunday school, we had Sunday school then we had church service on Sundays, went to church twice on Sundays. We went to, to, to the youth service on Mondays. We had prayer service Wednesday, and every Thursday was back in prayer service again. So I think, I think having that Christianity religious background, I think that just taught me to just make it well-rounded my horizons, or whatever, as far as growing up as a young adult.

00;04;14 - 00;04;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And what, what church did you attend?

00;04;17;19 - 00;05;04;06

DRASA BROWN: I attend The Church of God of Prophecy that's on Orange [?] Boulevard. It's a Pentecostal Church. So back in those days, things have changed now but back in those days or whatever stuff, you know, the women, you know, really was never allowed to wear pants and jewelry. I done gotten in trouble too many times of putting the earring in my ear or whatever stuff at the age of 13 and 14 or whatever wouldn't have allowed wear jewelry and stuff like that, because I guess they they figured that, you know, would do just like people do these days is, it's not it's not—we love the gifts and the material things more than the giver. And God gives us everything, you know, so we supposed to be loving the giver instead of the gifts you know what I'm saying? So that's how I was basically. Yeah, that's how I was basically raised up.

00;05;04 - 00;05;14

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And do you think for you, for your community, for your family—how central was religion in your, in your community and for your family?

00;05;14 - 00;06;44

DRASA BROWN: Religious was—the religious I wouldn't say I wouldn't even give it a community thing because I had a lot of friends that I played with, we know hung out and talked and, they wasn't really, I had to go in at a certain time because we had to go get to church and stuff like that. So it was just a household thing that I'm mostly grateful, grateful for. It wasn't really a community, okay, a community thing or whatever. So yeah, I was basically, if I can remember, I think I was like the only one that had to kind of make sure I got back home in time enough, you know, to get cleaned up and dress for church. Yeah. It wasn't really a community, a community thing. We know we need more of that going on. And and I'm on a—I just start a new, a new journey myself in Christ and stuff. I just got baptized last month and stuff like, there are just so my horizons and my thoughts and, and and then I'm gonna share one another thing, sometime that when we're thinking that like, it's our mind, you know, we we we like, we thinking we think like a thought come to our mind. Well, sometime those thoughts, I don't really think it'd be us really thinking about it. I think there'd be a higher power talking and talking to us. So I've been thinking about, you know, doing more. I want to, I think my purpose is going to be more into, reaching out to the youth and, and, being involved more into that that well-rounded and having a community thing, you know, with these, with the younger generation.

00;06;44 - 00;06;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And you know. And what in what ways are you already thinking about that? Like what specific maybe plans or programs do you have?

00;06;53 - 00;07;49

DRASA BROWN: Well, right now it's just three classes. I go to Saint John. Saint John's Church, here in Orlando, up on the Pastor Frazier and—I have three classes I have to go—because I just became a member. I have three classes I have to finish before I can start doing any type of outreach. But I don't have to wait for that to do, you know, what my higher power will tell me to do. So, me and my girl we was talking or whatever stuff. And I say, you know, on Saturdays or whatever. So after church Sunday or whatever stuff, we we don't do nothing but, open a door for somebody when they're going into, into a business or whatever stuff to buy, you

know, being consumers or whatever stuff. Just open door for them, you know, and tell them how good God is and have a good day and just throw on with the small stuff until I can, finish my classes and then get some mentorship and and learn more about how to introduce myself, know to people, on that level.

00;07;49 - 00;07;57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And what did you do after high school? What was that aspect of your life?

00;07;57 - 00;09;37

DRASA BROWN: After high after I, I was, I was—I got myself into some trouble in my last years of high school. So I never did finish high school. I got my, I got my G.E.D. when and did a little time in jail—that's where I really got my G.E.D. from being incarcerated. I just figured that, you know, if I'm be incarcerated, get something out of it. Don't come out the same way I went in or whatever stuff. So I always been that type of person or whatever stuff that, recognize my wrongs, even though I was told not to do it or whatever stuff and recognize if it didn't feel good, it's almost retard to keep doing the same, going down the same path or whatever. So I always wanted to try to—I'm, I'm a I'm a malleable person. I would always try to change things or whatever my routine. I'm not a I'm not afraid of change or whatever stuff. So after high school or whatever, I got into a little bit of trouble. I was supposed to go to the Marines or whatever stuff, and I didn't. I ended up not no, not being qualified for that. So I started working with my dad, but whatever stuff, he owned the business and stuff. So I worked with him and then climbed the ladder and climbed the ladder or whatever. Worked with him, I guess, that was 93. I worked on my dad up until maybe 2000, 2001, about six or seven years, and I kind of reached my pinnacle with that, and I started working with other, other bigger businesses, in construction and masonry. And so, I did that for over ten years and then started my own business. And now I've been in business now, about six years. But it was it was hard coming up through the ranks or whatever I learned and stuff like that, but I stuck to it, and it's being prosperous for me now. Yeah.

00;09;37 - 00;09;42

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what you said, you you have your own business now. What? What is this business that you own?

00;09;42 - 00;10;11

DRASA BROWN: The business is in strategic concrete and masonry. We, we deal with, with all types of concrete: driveways, sidewalks, curb. We do commercial slabs just as well as residential. We also do masonry work, you know, we bring it up from the slab up into a roof. So it's, It's been a little rough. Last year was the most one of the most hardest years, but, we survived it, still in business, account was not shut down and stuff. So we're looking forward to be live in '25. Yeah.

00;10;11 - 00;10;15

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And have you you've you've never left Orlando. You've been here your whole life.

00;10;15 - 00;10;25

DRASA BROWN: Yes. I've visited a whole lot of places. I'm a traveler. I've done visit a whole lot of places. But as far as living, dwelling, I've been right here in Orlando sticking with it.

00;10;25 - 00;10;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And from your observations and your experiences first, more broadly, how has Orlando changed?

00;10;33 - 00;10;35

DRASA BROWN: How has Orlando changed?

00;10;35 - 00;10;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah.

00;10;37 - 00;11;17

DRASA BROWN: I think Orlando it's definitely has gotten a lot more crowded. It definitely has done that. And then I think with from, from my standpoint or whatever it's just really been this, it's a, it's a rough city. There's a whole lot rougher than what it was. So I just try to, you know, handle my business, take care of family, and just kind of stay out of the way. But it's just definitely more, a definitely more congested. And that's about the biggest point. Yeah. That I see of as far as dealing with living in Orlando versus, you know, ten years ago or fifteen years ago.

00;11;17 - 00;11;29

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And more specifically, how have racial relations changed in Orlando specifically, maybe just more broadly in the country since you've been alive?

00;11;29 - 00;12;06

DRASA BROWN: You know, let me be honest with and let me really be honest. I think in my eyes, in my eyes, I think racial I think the racial aspect to things a lot better than what it was back, you know, you know, twenty years ago. And I really do. I think we're, we're we're becoming, I think it's more of a bond between, different cultural—I think we have we've we've learned to come to come closer together. I think maybe, the pandemic probably helped with that, also pushed it along. But even before the pandemic, I can see a little bit more brotherly love between between multiculturals.

00;12;06 - 00;12;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: For sure and, you know, you mentioned and you don't have to go into too much depth, but you mentioned how you were incarcerated and what did that experience, you know, do for you?

00;12;21 - 00;15;26

DRASA BROWN: That incarceration, I did three years. I did time in in the county jail and and I went to prison and I did three years in prison and, it was rough while I was in there, but when I got out, it seemed like it was all a big dream. I don't I don't regret one day of prison. It was rough or whatever stuff, but it taught me values. It let me see just exactly how other men know my age, what their qualities were, what a versus what I possessed, you know, and I didn't really

appreciate, the person you know who really God created me to be. I really didn't have it made me. It made me kind of kind of value and and, and appreciate, you know, the, the type of person that I was, even though, you know, I was doing some crazy thing, but at the end of the day or whatever stuff, I feel like, you know, it's not that's like when a person, you know, does me wrong. I wrote me the wrong way, whatever and stuff. I have enough, how you want to see it? I have enough knowledge and enough wisdom to know that it's really not that person or whatever stuff you know, that's doing me wrong. It's the spirit, that's involved with that person, you know, because we all, know, we all have, you know, have a part of Christ in us. And so, you know, if we're not doing the right thing, then, you know, I feel that, you know, God allowed the devil to play and know and roam within your life and around you or whatever stuff. More so I didn't I learned not to, no, I'm not to really like, dealing with ironfists and wanting to hurt somebody or whatever stuff if they did me wrong. I try to just walk away because I know that's not that true person in the inside, it's, you know, it's just the devil dealing with within their lives at that point. Yeah. So prison? Yeah. Prison was, Yeah, prison. Prison saved me, and I like I say I appreciate it and I thank God for the good and the bad. Yeah. And I do realize and I do know for a fact that, that good things happen in dark places. Yeah. It's like, it's like you take a picture, you know, back in the days and they had the Kodak pictures and stuff, and you always had to go and get your pictures developed and stuff like that. Well, when those pictures develop or whatever stuff, you know, they have to take it to the dark room and then they put it up under that red light or whatever stuff, and then next thing you know, you have something beautiful, you know, so everything that's bad, that happened to me all the misfortunes in life or whatever stuff I know right around the corner, there's got to be something to that I'm going to learn from it or whatever or something going to open my eyes, and then—just like my life right now. I've been through some places, did some things I shouldn't have done, but I learned from those things or whatever stuff. And then now I'm like, no, on my journey or whatever stuff trying to build them is even continuing to try to better myself in Christ and stuff. And, and he's always showing there's stuff to prove in my life. Yeah, yeah.

00;15;26 - 00;15;30

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what brought you here today to the Zora Neale Hurston Festival today?

00;15;30 - 00;16;09

DRASA BROWN: Today, I got out of service, got out of church service, and then, that church that I grew up in, they happened to have a flood in the church last week and then. So I really wasn't ready to go home. And then I called one of my partner partners. He say, hey, my wife, I'm going to work with my wife and one of the church partners out to the Zora Neale Festival, and I was like, okay, that's a maybe I need to go. And I asked my girl about it or whatever stuff. She's like, yeah, that sounds good. Let's go out there and, and see what's going on with the culture and stuff. Maybe we can buy some books. See what they have to offer, go to some of the museums and stuff. So that's what got really got me here today.

00;16;10 - 00;16;13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what do you what do you think of it so far? You know, being here.

00;16;13 - 00;16;43

DRASA BROWN: Right now, I, I went to one maybe two years ago, and it was over here in the field or whatever. They had a whole lot more vendors and stuff like that. We didn't had a whole lot more activities and stuff for the kids or whatever stuff. I just see maybe just a few activities. You know, for the kids or whatever. So I think we can, they, we could probably do a little bit better or whatever. So we definitely have dropped over the last few years, but for what reason? I don't know. But, yeah, it's not as good as, as it was a year or two years ago. Yeah.

00;16;43 - 00;16;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And have you have you heard of Zora Neale Hurston before the festival?

00;16;51 - 00;16;55

DRASA BROWN: Yes. Yeah. Yes, I have.

00;16;55 - 00;17;04

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And why do you think preserving her legacy is important or why this event in general is important?

00;17;04 - 00;17;37

DRASA BROWN: I think everyone, I think in order to think that, well, we can all we can all grow or whatever and stuff that there, there we can all grow and and and achieve things or whatever. So but I think once you're grounded, once you're grounded and you know where you come from, it's more easier for you to respect others and so it's, it's more easier for you to respect others and stuff. And then when you, when you're moving and you're growing in the true, in the trueness of your culture, if I should say it like that.

00;17;37 - 00;18;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. And lastly what is something from your observations in life that you want future generations to know? If someone ten, fifteen, twenty, maybe even fifty years from now listens to this recording, what do you want them to know about, you know, what you've experienced or just life in general?

00;18;00 - 00;18;51

DRASA BROWN: If it's one thing that I, that I would if it's one thing that I can that I want to that I want the legacy and the younger people to gravitate towards and take with them. If they want to hear this message right now is, I would tell them to be what they expect. Yeah, I would, I would, I would, I would advise and, and I would advise them to be, to be the change that they really expect to see around them. And yeah, if everyone, you know, you expect things or whatever, you know, you expect, you know, people to respect you and stuff that every day, you know, you, you expect you would. I just I would, I would, I would just say that, people should, if they wanted to take something with them. Yeah. Be what they be what they expect to see better in the community.

00;18;51 - 00;18;58

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. Thank you so much for spending some time with me to share a little bit of your life story. I really appreciate it.

00;18;58 - 00;19;01

DRASA BROWN: Yes, yes, I appreciate you. I enjoy the talk.

00;19;01 - 00;19;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Thank you.

00;19;02 - 00;19;04

DRASA BROWN: Yes.