

TRANSCRIPT- COREY CLAYTON

Interviewee: COREY CLAYTON

Interviewer: AZI WEAVER

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AZI WEAVER: All right, so it should be recording now. I'm here with—you could introduce yourself.

COREY CLAYTON: I'm Corey Clayton, College of Charleston graduate, University of Alabama Birmingham graduate, a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., and I work for Brownstone Construction Group. I have the unique pleasure of building the African-American Museum, the International African-American Museum.

AW: I'm cadet Azi Weaver. I'll be interviewing you today. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to sit here with me and interview, just for my own sake and editing we're outside of the Basic Science Building here at MUSC. So you're going to hear like car horns and all kinds of loud noises, but it is what it is. You've got to have this interview, make it work somehow.

CC: We could possibly try to find us a....

AW: I think overall, this would be fine. And if not, it'll be all right.

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CC: If not, we'll make it. We'll make it though.

AW: I'll make it work. But, so we're going to slowly ease into the interview. I'm going to start with just some basic questions. Get both of us warmed up. If you could tell me about your first day at your first job, if you can remember it.

CC: Hmm. My first job with Brownstone or first day, first job, period?

AW: The first day that you can remember at your earliest job.

CC: First day on first job would have to be in high school working for a grocery store. So that first day was real exciting. I think still bring that same type of excitement to work every day. Just happy to go make some money legally you know what I'm saying. So full day. Interesting. Ever since I've always had a pretty decent work ethic that was instilled in me from early on. If you don't work, you don't eat. So I was always held that in consideration. And I've always tried to do something I enjoy to do never like fast food. So I've never worked at a fast-food place. So, yeah, my first day of working in high school was pretty much indicative of the rest of your life and you show up and you suit up and you go get it done.

AW: Can I ask where you worked?

CC: Yeah, it was, Consumer Foods is a bulk food source, basically what the prerequisite to you Costco's and things like that back in the day, but it was way before that, you know what I mean? Super huge grocery store, I started out as a sacker or a bagger and a stocker. I ended up being a bulk food manager. So, Yeah. Start from the bottom, work your way up far as you can.

AW: Can you describe what you do now and what got you here? Like education...

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CC: The quality assurance quality control manager for Brownstone. I actually decided to work for Brownstone when I found out that they were the project managers for the African American Museum. I only took the job with Brownstone to work on the African American Museum. Consequently, I found that they were, I already knew they were, a good company. However, working for them proved to be a godsend. So I ended up, as you see, after finishing the project, I'm on, I'm still with them and I don't see me going anywhere no time soon. So it's a good organization, allowed me to develop myself. My education background is — I got my bachelor's in economics from College of Charleston. And I got my master's in engineering from University of Alabama. My background in construction goes back to my great granddad, who was a general contractor and my dad was a general contractor. So all my summers were spent measuring, cutting tape, doing stuff I did not like doing at the time. It was always a pain in the butt for that time, but those soft skills translated into me learning, how to being able to read plans and do things like that. And I always enjoyed taking nothing and making something. But my impetus, like I said, was the International African American Museum. I always had a deep desire to know more, more about our history. That's, you know, most times either omitted or just outright cut out, just not put in there at all. So from an early age, I've always had the support of my parents and my immediate surrounding to always give me access to information about myself. So I always knew about myself. So it, it always caused me to go further down the rabbit hole, now going to the College of Charleston, that being the oldest municipal college in the country. So much history on the one hand is so little history on the other hand. So while I was there, they actually started the African Studies Program with Dr. Bach and they had, they started, a minor African-American studies minor. There were under Dr. [Bernard] Powers and the other brother. I can't believe that it's escaping my mind at this point, but it'll come to me in a minute. But, those two brothers Dr. Powers and Dr. uh, I can't believe, I can't think of a brother's name right now. And I see him all the time at their ASALH

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conference, the Association of the Study of African-American Life and History. I saw him the last time it was here in Charleston a couple of years ago.

AW: It's alright, we can come back to it.

CC: Anyway, I'll come back to that. But nonetheless, those cats really helped set the pace with the studies that they, they provided an even deeper reading list, if you will, a different set of references that we could go from that took me all over the place. You know, (00:06:55) got the D OP, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, (00:07:00), list goes on and on. Carter G. Woodson was my frat brother. Just opened up a whole world of information. So, to find out that they were going to build the African-American Museum here. I couldn't see nothing else other than having a part in that. I didn't care if I had this dig dirt, dig ditches, it'd be a part of it. But yeah, it was a quite exciting, life altering. Different disposition about working with people to get that done and everything that it took to get to this point with it. So to go through the opposition, to go through the naysayers, to people who don't understand why that even is a necessity. But, yeah, it's crucial to me that I be a part of that. So, in a nutshell, that's it.

AW: Right, so can I ask you who, who directly introduce you go to—Never mind, because you found out about Brownstone and all that, can ask then what it like to work at the museum?

CC: At times it was extremely humbling. Especially when you think about where that museum is. Cause that museum has more than just a symbolic meaning. It's built on the site of Wharf G [Gadsden's Wharf], where was where we were originally brought to this country. There was a holding house where they kept our people until they were sold. Right there. That's hallowed ground. That's why it's not built on the ground. If you noticed that that museum was built on piles, columns, and that's specifically because the

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ground is hallowed and there's a lot of souls that are unrested there. So every day that was a humbling, all-inspired situation. Especially when you see it sitting on the water and every day the sunrise, you can only imagine, and that was just another day closer to bringing this to fruition for one. And number two, I always pictured my ancestors being that much happier every day that sunrise when we were out there on that site, erecting something to their behalf, something that'll be here long after I'm gone. That will still stand as a symbol of what is. No matter how you try to erase it, deny it, omit it, there are definite distinct contributions that we have made to this society. Period. I'm not a fan of the divisiveness that's used to determine one way or the other, whether it's relevant. All history is relevant, you can't just pick and choose the parts of history that you decide to tell and, not tell you, you can't just always show yourself in a light where you're a hero, and everybody else is just-sub part that supports a philosophy of supremacy that I don't adhere to at all, nor do I give credence to at all. I think it's a travesty that we still have so many bastions that lend toward it, when we got institutions like the one we're building, so many people out there that a-don't know about it, two; don't care to know about it, or three; see it as something as pointless or futile. But to me, and teach to people who truly understand the significance of it, and that's a lifetime effort that was long overdue, but I think will help, definitely help benefit future generations and help hopefully close some of this gap, this chasm that's being created by, by divisive people.

AW: So...

CC: And, not to cut you off, but Dr. Dulaney. You knew I wasn't gonna stop until I figured out who that was. Dr. Marvin Dulaney, Dr. Powers, and Dr. Bach. Those three cats kind of channeled my passion and desire for the truth to be told and kind of helped me parallel them. You can only understand what's missing if you know what's there. So you got to know history that as it's presented to know what's missing, but if you don't

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know history, you won't know that you're missing any. So that makes it even more important for that story in the African American Museum, because that presents the part of the story that, like I said, compliments history. It's not just a showcase of (00:12:18), it's the ups, the downs, the ins, the outs. That's history. So in order for us to ensure that we don't, have some of the same pitfalls as previous generations, we got to know what all they went through and not just, not just the ups, what downs did they make, what kind of trials did they really have and how did we really overcome such situations, good times don't necessarily always fix things. It aids in things, but it doesn't always fix it by itself. You got to do things to create that. History is in my opinion, you being a history major you understand the significance of it, without history, you don't know your future. Without history, knowing it, you're bound to repeat it. Which is the scary part to me, because I see so much of history repeating itself, and people acting like, it's something new. We go back to see the predecessors. One of the things that we are looking like to me is the Roman Republic. Moments like the last of the Republic prior to, you know, the longest living Republic lived four hundred something years. America is built on the same premise. We're going through the same, same types of situations that caused, that preempted, the fall of the Roman Republic. We're going through the same things right now. We're not trusting another government; we're not validating facts. We're using a bunch of fear mongering, doing the same types of things. We're not learning from the lessons from the past. A lot of that is because that whole past ain't there. You know, the highlight, they have it points. So again, yeah, that's about how that is. But...

AW: Alright, quick sidebar; if you could, if you have a way to verify the spelling of everybody's names, because we're going to transcribe this interview too. So that way they can get their just credit for bringing you to where you are now, make sure they're not some other random guy who has a similar name gets credit.

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CC: No worries. No worries. I'll do that. Heavy hitters, man, heavy hitters. Now way back in the day, it would have been my track coach, basketball coach, seventh grade teachers is Dr. Bell. We call him Dr. Bell. He's not a real doctor by the way, David Bell, but we call him Doc Bell. He's a Marine veteran from the Vietnam era. But was the most thorough fellow, as far as making sure you knew who you were. He wasn't taking no shortcuts on that. That stepping and fetching it. He went out, none of that. You are going to stand up right, you are going to look at a man in his eyes, you're going to be confident in who you are, and you're going to know that you come from more than just people who were turned into slaves. Because we didn't come here slaves. That was a process that took about seventy plus years. I always want to attribute that to 1619, but that's when we had already come to terms that slavery was going to be around. What you figured early 1500s when the first of that process of dehumanization began to create that slave. It's been a lifetime thing for men. To be honest, my life was filled with anger and frustration, with the status of how things were. Telling me on the one hand all the virtuous things, but on the other hand I'm seeing the underbelly of all that; and it doesn't always add up. And you tell me to keep my head down and keep pushing it and I'll eventually work through it; that's not true either. You either become numb to it and just allow that, accept that as how it is, or you buy into it and you feel like you deserve it. Which all of those are false. So this was my life coming full circle, and the almighty giving me the opportunity to see that. Be into you, knowing who you are, will get you to some form of contentment. With knowing that we're going in the right direction, as opposed to just spinning our wheels, I don't know if this will relieve us of the tenants of the things that create the division in the society, but it's a step in the right direction.

AW: Over the next question—and now there's a truck

CC: (Laughs) The beauties of outdoors.

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CC: Yeah. So I understand that they've been working on the museum for around twenty years now? Is that correct? Or at least from...

CC: Concept?

AW: From Mayor Riley's first public announcement of the concept to where we are now? Has it been about a twenty-year process?

CC: It's been a twenty-year process overall. To be honest, Mayor Riley kind of chimed in afterwards. It was a community call for that, for a long time. Dr. Brown, Millicent Brown, was one of the, one of the founders of that situation. Millicent Brown, she was a history teacher from, I think she taught up at, South Carolina State or Claflin [University]. I can't remember exactly which one it was, but Dr. Millicent Brown, who ironically the Brown of Brown vs Board of Education, that's the Millicent Brown. So it ain't haphazard that these things came about. No, this wasn't a concept that came outside of our community, but grassroots, but it took twenty years to try to develop and raise money. We couldn't do it, and now once Mayor Riley stepped in, and we credit him for stepping in, and providing some financial backing and bringing more in, I'm not sure who brought who in with that, but I know it was something dear to Mayor Riley to do, and then wanted to send us Robert Smalls Moore who brought his fundraising expertise in, and that's how they put muscle behind it. It was always a grassroots yearning, but they never had the capital. Now once Mayor Riley and Moore got involved, they raised the money, and I credit them for doing an amazing job, raising the money to complete such a project. But yeah, that was an internally derived concept, and it's been needed. So I'm definitely thankful for Mayor Riley for helping spearhead the finances behind it. But like I said, that was purely driven from grassroots, and I credit people like Dr. Brown.

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AW: When we went down to the museum, he talked to us and, if I'm not mistaken, he said they raised close to a hundred million dollars in getting the museum funded and getting everything to where it is now. And I'm just really impressed by how much money has gone into it.

CC: Money, time, blood, sweat, tears, the whole nine. I mean, Brownstone being a black-owned firm and having the capacity to work like we did. I don't think. I know I've never been on a project that was like that. That had that much meaning for me, that had that much future impact. And, frankly, I can't wait to go see it myself. I already bought a membership. So I get kind of giddy about that. You know what I mean. Because that's realization of a life's work. You got a lot of people that didn't live to see it, wanted to see it, but now we got it. I believe our ancestors would be proud of what we put through. Now, to be honest and fair, it's not a true museum because it won't house exhibits. However, it will provide a lot of primary resource material. It will allow us to have a lot of primary data to fill in some of those gaps. I know people today, the hot topic is "Critical Race Theory this; Critical Race Theory that" so many people are off base on what that truly entails, but the one thing that is certain: it's not a divisive means to be included in respectful commentary district. I don't understand why that's such a divisive element. Some people even say "why you need an African-American Museum, we got the Charleston Museum." But there's nothing about us in it other than the fact that we were slaves and they are so much more to not only our accomplishments, but our attributes, the things that we attributed to this country, the things that we can contribute to this country go further than slavery. And if that's the only representation you going to give us, it's ludicrous.

AW: Yeah

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CC: Particularly when you want to use the defense that speaking in all honesty that to tell the truth will make somebody feel bad or to not tell the truth makes other people feel bad. It's not about feelings at this point, in my opinion, it's about the fact that we gotta deal with what is, it's not a matter of sensitivity. I always trip when you have racist issues come on, they give you sensitivity training. I'm not understanding; is it that I'm too sensitive or are you too insensitive, but neither one of those really deal with the crux of the matter. The crux of the matter is a human being is being treated not like a human being. If we had the Constitution and the Declaration, these are perfect, as close to perfect documents as you're going to get. All we got to do is honor the words, "all men are created equal." I shouldn't have to prove to you that I'm a man when it's apparent that I am. And you shouldn't expect that I ain't, just because you don't want it to be, or because it'll infringe, somehow, on your liberties for me to have liberties. So, these are simple things, I think. Simple, however, we make them hard.

AW: How long had you been on the project in total from joining Brownstone to I guess within the past week or two, is that right?

CC: Well, I still kind of deal with it a little bit, but I got hired Brownstone February, 2019. I came on February of 2019. At that time, Bobby Teachey and some other guys had been working on it for probably a year prior to that. So I came on to give the ability for Bobby to leave a project, to go head that one up. So I went over to the Children's Hospital at MUSC. I worked there probably from February until we closed that part of the project out in July, maybe. And I wanted to go finish up a school in the interim. I finished up Dunston Elementary school over in North Charleston, off of Remount Avenue.

CC: After we finished that, I started on the project, and they had the skeleton coming out of the ground. When I got there, we were coming out of the ground. Braid

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beams and pile caps, driving piles and stuff like that. I guess I started in February and started in February of 2020. I worked there from February of 2020 until just a couple of months ago, really, until May, June. Excuse me, May. Until May. Cause I graduated in May. Graduated and came right here. So, until May. So I got to see everything from taking it out of the ground, swinging all the steel, putting it together. I'm curious to see the final, final result, which I hadn't walked the property in a little bit. So I'm going to go by there within the next week or two and go see where we are.

But it was supposed to be open to the public in April. So Brownstone is actually on the other side of the table. We helped build it, and now we're on the side of helping with the exhibit. Helping the museum get the exhibits and stuff. That's what Bobby is doing while I'm over here with this. I'm still associated with the project. It's kind of more of my focus is over here, but trust me, I keep tabs on that daily. I'm not ever going to not know what's going on with the African American Museum and I'm definitely looking forward to going up there to check it out.

AW: I don't think I have any more questions for you. I do really appreciate your time. Do you have any questions for me?

CC: No. I'm just glad you decided to do it. I appreciate you for having me. Definitely glad to be a part of anything and everything has got to do with the preservation of our history and culture. Anything that could help bring mankind back together, for real, you know? I'm of the volition that there is only one race of people and that's the human race of people. Anything else is a dynamic that's not for us, and solely created for the purposes of being divisive. I'm not with that by any stretch of imagination. Appreciate you brother.

AW: I appreciate you too, sir.

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CC: Spears up.

PAUSE

AW: All right, so this is part two. So you said that Brownstone is a black owned business. Can you tell me about some of the other companies that are working on the project as well?

CC: It's actually a Turner is the general contractor that we partnered with to provide the services. A lot of good companies, a good mix. Not as much as I would have liked to see. However, that's an ongoing issue that we're constantly trying to tackle, which is converting some of the skilled labor into qualified labor. Skilled and qualified are not necessarily synonymous. We have more than enough skilled so-called minority people to do things. However, that skill level don't always equate to qualifications i.e. proper bonding, proper insurance, and whatnot. So in that regard, I think we met our small women minority and disadvantaged business owned quota. However, that quote is way too small in my opinion. Especially on something of that magnitude, but it's no different than any other project. Good, good working relationship with everybody, didn't experience more than the normal levels of American life.

So that's a daily part of it. Contrary to a lot of people's belief but, I think we're very resilient people to deal with but we deal with them regularly. And I know, you know what I'm talking about, going to the Citadel. So it makes us a lot better people. I feel, you're definitely going to be tested on every front. There is. You just gotta work twice as hard and half the time be twice as smart. So you don't get yourself in a whole lot of mixed-up "this" situation. I'd have to say it was a pretty good mix of contractors. I wouldn't change anything. Even the trouble ones, even the ones that probably troublesome, you're still learning things. If you can overcome adversity to still achieve a

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common goal, I think whatever you got to go through most times is worth it to get to that. As long as you didn't have to kill anybody, no foolishness, but by and large though a good mix people.

AW: I guess more specifically then, just tell me a little bit about like the history of Brownstone as a company.

CC: Yeah, fifteen years old, Dale Collier president. Good, good brother, man. Best president of a company I've ever worked for because he shows that he really cares. He cares about the development, cares by the family-work balance. We have a good situation. I, personally the only company that I work for that is that I care as much about this one is my own. So, when you get to that point where you can feel like that about it, that's, optimal for me. And I've worked for big companies, small companies, but mostly for myself, I've always pretty much worked for myself. The entire time. Every now and then if stuff gets real hard, I'll go grab another job. However, I worked for myself. But I took this job, like I said, for the African-American Museum and fell in love with the company.

CC: So I felt like LeBron, just take my talents down to South Beach. I didn't need to recreate the wheel if I got a whole—my thing was trying to recruit these kinds of people that I'm already working for. So, I worked with them. So when you got a structure where you can work with them, as opposed to for them, that's the mentality that I set out for all my people I've ever worked with. Instead of work for me, work with me. This concept; work with me, not for me. Because I'm a work with you, so we can get what we got to go. And that's Brownstone in a nutshell. Outside of me, myself, working with people; I've never seen an owner of a company come and work with the people. No matter what it is, no job too big or small that he won't step in and roll his sleeves up and get down with us. So how could I not do the same for him? So, we've developed that type

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of relationship. And I got that kind of relationship with the majority of the people in that company. So that's a different, that's another difference. And it's not an all-black company, technically. Technically it is because technically everybody on the planet is black, for lack of better words. Scientifically the millimeter cell is the progenitor of all cells, everything isn't mutually exclusive. So if you're a human being, your ass is black, excuse my language. However, white supremacist philosophy is what creates these divisions amongst us, and created these are the social constructs that we now use as race. But there isn't such a thing, that's all a lark. The bad part of it is that it has real consequences. Even though racism and discrimination, all these things are built on lies, those lies have real consequences. And we've been dealing with them for a long time. Even though we try to ignore or evade it a lot of times it's doesn't change the fact. Having entertainers become successful doesn't change the fact. You still—and personally that kind gets on my nerves when people want to point to entertainers as the reason that we don't have issues that you say we have. Caca. Name me people outside of entertainment. Can you name me more than ten? Probably not. Are there more than ten? Yeah. You won't be able to name them. You see what I'm saying. Only people ever presented to us as being successful: entertainers. People are out here to make people entertainment, sports, or some type of performing arts, acting, singing, dancing, or athletic venture. They don't celebrate our scientists, don't celebrate our genius, don't celebrate—Why? Is it not happening? It's happening, it is definitely happening would have been—but it doesn't go noticed, even now. And that's even saying the current contributions to society not a—You would only acknowledge the things that benefit you, or make you feel comfortable in that, that exposition. So that, to me,

AW: And it kind of ties back to what you were saying earlier. Like that's why the museum is so important.

CC: That is precisely why it's important. It's all full circle. So it all ties back in, some people say "and is that all you're talking about?" No! That's all there is. If we don't correct this human problem that we have it ain't going to be much longer. Like, I'm not super convinced that a lot of that don't tie into our abuse of the planet. We don't take care of each other, let alone the planet. If we would understand how to talk to each other, you can take care of the planet, because you wouldn't worry about you. You wouldn't be thinking about just using everything up and not caring about the next generation. The rest of this thing is the same way. And I think this: the importance of that museum is for future generations. It's easier to, you know, I forget who quoted that, but it's like, "it's easier to repair." I mean, "it's easier to fix children than to repair broken men." You know what I'm saying? So that's a true statement. This is for the kids. It's for the future generations. The younger generations, in my opinion already see through the malarkey. That's why they ain't really with it. You know what I mean? It was like the same kind of thing is going on when I was younger. We didn't really, we weren't doing, we weren't feeling the same things that our parents were feeling. Some of the status quo—nobody is trying to deal with the status quo and I ain't trying to go along to get along. And that was the method of operation for a long time, going along to get along. For what? Go along and get along what? What do you mean by that? For real, like, no, because I can't do that. If I do that, then I'm co-signing that and I'm telling you it is alright to do me like that. It ain't alright to do me like that. It ain't going to be alright to do my daughter like that? My son? My nephew? Your children? It ain't going to be alright to do that. So, we need to take a proactive stance. And everything doesn't have to be violent; but I don't understand why. We fight for this. We fight for that. But our most productive time in history, we were creating. Not destroying. We got to get back to that. We need to get back to creation and not destruction. Right now we want to fight about everything. Fight for this right. Fight for that. Okay, once you get it, then what? Can you stop fighting? That's all you know. So, we needed a paradigm shift. We need to go into a point where, "Hey, what can

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we do to build, how are we going to see tomorrow?" My children will see tomorrow. They are concerned about finite things, like making a whole lot of promises you can't keep i.e. climate change, i.e. Yada yada, yada. We've got a lot of issues and they will only get solved by us. Whatever your religious inclinations are, you have a creator or almighty or, or most high, or something that's greater than you. I think we all could, you know, with the exception of folks who claim to be atheist, but even in that they know it's something. Might not have a term for it, however. We need to get to whatever source that is, and try to get right by it. Try to get back in the right, the right frequency. Like a radio, like Marconi figured out, you tune it in, you get it. You know what I mean? We just ain't tuned in to the right frequency yet. So you know how it goes.

AW: Well, I really just had those two extra questions. I really appreciate you taking the time to sit here and talk to me again.

CC: Anytime you got the number, man, I ain't going nowhere. I'll be here, you go to the service. I'll still be here. Pleasure meeting you, brother.

AW: It was a pleasure meeting you too, sir. Thanks.

MLL 8/29/22