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*Paradoxical Paradise* Interview with Susan Skokos

Asbury Park, New Jersey is a city nestled on the Shore. Filled with restaurants, music venues, and local businesses, the destination is known to many from Bruce Springsteen as a cultural symbol. Beyond the lyrics, lies a deep history of protests and gentrification. In this segment of the *Paradoxical Paradise* project, I interviewed Susan Skokos, a business owner and member of the Asbury Park Historical Society, who explains her experiences and the development of the city after the riots of 1970.

In the beginning of the interview, Mrs. Skokos introduced herself and began to go through her background. She was born on September 2nd, 1949, and lived on the west side of Asbury Park, or known as the other side of the railroad. Her ties to Asbury Park go back to her grandparents, who had a store named Conte's Market. A student of the public school system, Susan attended Asbury Park High School and graduated in 1967, where she met her husband Andy Skokos. The couple married in 1970. She did not go to college, but instead used real-life experiences as her education. Susan ran a day-care out of their home for over 20 years. Some of her hobbies include cooking, playing piano, and going to concerts. Her favorite dish to cook is Pastichio, a Greek dish, inspired by her husband's heritage. Andy and Susan's favorite genre of music is Doowop, and they enjoy listening to artists like The Four Seasons and The Temptations.

Besides attending music events, Susan enjoys working at the family business, Gifts By Tina, which is owned by her and Andy. The shop, a continuation of her mother-in-law's legacy,

was originally on Cookman Ave. After Andy's mother passed away, Andy and Susan decided to keep the piece of history running in Ocean Grove. The business is still open today and is often visited in the summer by tourists.

Apart from her background, Susan experienced a piece of history firsthand. She was driving on Springwood Ave, unaware of the protests, and faced a wave of smoke, whistles, and police officers. Though these sounds and sights were just the beginning, she described an unfortunate occurrence; Her fuel pump broke in the convertible. Luckily, a police officer was able to push the car and she returned home safely. The 1970's protests were a turning point in the history of Asbury Park, and even though Susan was stuck in the thick of it, she also watched the movement affect the labels and image of the city.

The protests placed a negative perception of the city on society, and it hurt the area for over 5 decades. It was seen as violent, and an undesirable tourist destination. Besides these assumptions, the aftermath of the protests led to racial divides across the board. Blacks were highly-affected, and most of the jobs available had lower salaries. It was hard for the Black community to rebound, even if a person had his or her own business. Less people visited Black-owned businesses, and it became increasingly difficult for the population to survive. Though this image harmed Asbury Park, the city was able to come back and bring its tourism industry to life through gentrification.

The process of gentrification took decades. Susan said the LGBTQIA+ community was the key factor in returning Asbury to its original state. The group bought low-income homes and turned them into fixer-uppers. This attracted renters in the summer and had a positive impact on the economy. Since the LGBTQIA+ community has settled in Asbury Park and Ocean Grove, more small businesses have become tenants. The city is overflowing with trendy eateries,

expensive apartments with ocean views, and music venues like the House of Independents and the Stone Pony. Cookman Avenue, a new strip of niche cafes, restaurants, and beach shops, has become the heart of Asbury for locals. Susan's favorite restaurant called Belmontees is on Cookman Avenue, and Taka, a sushi joint, is also a well-frequented place by the Skokos.

Adding to the positive image, Bruce Springsteen also played a part in making Asbury Park what it is today. He was able to portray it as he grew up, and build upon the musical history. Most notably, his album Greetings from Asbury Park is a famous element of the city. Andy and Susan's favorite songs are Jersey Girl and Born to Run in which they talked about during the interview. They were lucky enough to see Bruce perform at the Stone Pony multiple times. The venue became a cultural icon, and it still is relevant to other artists like the Jonas Brothers and Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes. Though gentrification has certainly taken a positive direction, it has affected the old-town locals who have been there for generations.

Mrs. Skokos runs a scholarship fund for graduating high school seniors as a part of her role at the historical society. The enrollment at the high school has decreased because of gentrification. Most of the students are Black, and could not afford to stay in Asbury Park because of the racial divides from 50 years ago. Susan explained that gentrification has not negatively impacted the White population in comparison to the Black community. She said that gentrification is "surrounding us, but doesn't affect us." Though gentrification has changed Asbury Park for the better, her job at the Historical society revolves around preserving the roots of the city.

Susan's goals at the Historical Society involve growing membership and making others aware of what it was like back then. In addition to this, she wants to continue her high school class reunions. There is still high attendance at the reunion, and she hopes this will resume after

the pandemic. The reunions allow the class to come together, and share memories of the past in a changed Asbury Park.

Most locals think of Asbury Park in relation to the riots or Bruce Springsteen, and she wants to protect both the good and bad parts of the past. The main mission of her work is to keep local residents and visitors aware of the past and present history. Though Asbury Park has changed since her grandparents' store, the history is still being created, and will be preserved through the *Paradoxical Paradise* project.