

Interviewee: Lorraine Stone

Interviewer: Jenna DeNicolo

102 H3

Professor Ziobro

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Teaching History Through Performing

Lorraine Stone was born into a little bungalow in Asbury Park in 1951. She was her parent's only child, and her parents split so it was just her and her mom in the household. She started elementary school at a segregated school in Asbury Park. Then in 4th grade, she moved to Neptune, which was also segregated. For 7th and 8th grade she went to an intermediate school and that was her first experience with school integration. She said it was kind of tough because the white kids who never went to school with African Americans, were not happy to have them around. She graduated high school, went off to Hampton Institute in Virginia, and enrolled in the nursing program. Eventually, with the inspiration of a faculty member, she changed her major to communication, arts, and science major. That led her into becoming a journalist.

Her relationship with Asbury Park is that she is a founding board member of the Asbury Park Museum. She also worked as a community outreach worker with the black infant mortality reduction program. So, a lot of her work ended up being in Asbury Park. She went into neighborhoods and homes and taught new mothers how to have better outcomes with pregnancies and deliveries. Her favorite project that she has done with the museum was opening a temporary space on the Asbury Park boardwalk. They set it up how they would want the museum to be, and they had it operating as a real museum. They had various programs take place there like special guests coming in and reading books to children. Another project she did was

the Segregated Seashore Project, which looked at Asbury Park through the decades and represented what was and was not tolerated in those years. She says the music is her favorite part of Asbury Park history. Being a part of Bethel AME Church opened her eyes to all the music because there was so much music played there. When I asked her about Springwood Avenue, she said, “You could buy anything on Springwood Avenue in my childhood.” There were live chicken markets, restaurants, beauty parlors, barbershops, hardware stores, pharmacies, and record shops. Of course, bars, clubs, and music. All on Springwood Avenue. It was just an open and exciting world! Clearly, Springwood Ave means a lot to her. It has broken her heart consistently to see it just all gone.

She was away at college when the 1970 unrest occurred in Asbury Park. She remembers hearing the radio say, “The seaside town of Asbury Park erupted.” Immediately, she ran down the hall to the payphone to call her family, see what had happened, and make sure everyone was okay. She says, “It was not a riot it was a civil disturbance.” She says I think it’s important to take the things that happened in context and understand that people were sick and tired of being sick and tired. I asked Lorraine about her opinions about Bruce Springsteen being highly known in Asbury Park. She states that Bruce Springsteen is NOT from Asbury Park. He certainly connects to Asbury Park because he was popular for his music, and he performed at Stone Pony. You can’t take that away from him.

I asked her “What do you wish more people knew about Asbury Park history?” She responded, “Wow, that it’s complicated.” In general, it was an uncomfortable place for African Americans to live; but they worked hard anyway. Asbury Park has changed because it is not as segregated as it was. There is more of a mix in housing, the political aspects changed because there were no black or brown people in local politics, but now that has changed. I see a change in

the religious function. But there is still a long way to go. She says people need to be educated on Asbury Park's history because it's still here. Similar occurrences are still happening, 150 years later. Asbury Park is still here, and it is still growing. The public perception of Asbury Park is just going to the beach or going to have fun, but that's not all Asbury Park is. She says, "Know your history, and know where you are." Lorraine believes that people must be open to learning about things other than what they perceive or what is in their minds about what Asbury Park is. "If people want to learn they have to look out of the little shell they are sitting in."

I asked about some of the biggest challenges that Asbury Park faces today, and she said unfortunately some of the biggest challenges haven't changed. Jobs and business ownership among minorities are not as great as they should be. She also wants more children to know of more opportunities educationally and culturally. "I don't think our children get exposed enough to see what else is in the world." In 2019, Lorraine co-signed a letter suggesting that Asbury Park creates a human rights commission. Although, it didn't end up happening. She felt this was necessary to sign because people were not being heard or treated fairly.

I asked what we as a generation can do to help with this; she said, "if you're not seeing what the issue is, it is very hard to stand up and do something about it." But she suggests going to city consular meetings, getting involved, and seeking to find out what is going on in the town of Asbury Park. Next, I asked her about what the future holds for Asbury Park, she said "Well Asbury Park certainly has a future. She does not want to see a segregated Asbury Park. She wants to see people being concerned for all people, people getting involved, making a change, etc. This is what will make a different future for Asbury Park.

Lorraine does a lot of acting and costume interpretation. I asked her how she got into acting and she told me it all started at Bethel AME church. She read and recited poems and was very good

at it. She knew this was a passion of hers. Then after she had children and moved back to Asbury Park, someone had asked her to make a presentation at a school board meeting. She kept getting asked to make these presentations and it went off from there. In these presentations, she acts as Harriet Tubman, sojourner truth, or rosa parks. She says she likes it because she gets to become that woman. She gets to emerge herself in history. “I love bringing the stories and I love people understanding what America is. The stories are American history, not just African American history. Her acting allows her to tell stories that people don’t know and that aren’t told.

All in all, Lorraine says Asbury Park “beats her heart.” Not only did she grow up there, but she still is involved in the town to this day. She works with the Asbury Park Museum, and with organizations to get the untold stories of Asbury Park told and she hopes to see a bright future for Asbury Park.