

The Ongoing Fight for the Historic City's Real History

by Lara O'Dell

AS CITIZENS OF CHARLESTON, we know well the cobblestone streets and historic architecture that bring tourists in flocks to our city—but it's a well-manicured distortion of the truth. We pass moments in history on our way to class, and some of us live in historic buildings. This pride that Charleston takes in its history is admirable, and the city feels like a romantic walk into the past to an outsider. However, the grim reality is that Charleston's historic preservation is a strategic choice of picking only the parts, the people and the culture they want to remember. This erasure of South Carolina's history is an incredible threat to our growth as a state and a community.

We see this image of a white society deeply ingrained in our legislature, with bills such as H.4325 encroaching on curriculum out of fear of indoctrinating Critical Race Theory into youth. In more obvious ways, we see it literally towering above us all: the John C. Calhoun statue in Marion Square that was removed in 2020, and the confederate flag that flew high above the South Carolina state capitol until 2015.

There have always been inspiring people speaking out in opposition of this conscious obliviousness towards Charleston's past. One modern voice that we should all know is Mika Gadsden. Gadsden is a local Charleston activist working to dismantle the Antebellum image of Charleston to "liberate the black, indigenous and Gullah communities" that hold deep roots in our city.

Gadsden's parents experienced and survived Jim Crow law in the American South. After retiring, her father moved her family back down to Charleston during her early teen years. This move was pivotal to her career and her activism. Her first-hand experience of the city's "refusal to not confront its past" truly shaped her role in southern justice. Gadsden later founded the Charlest

on Activist Network, a platform that hosts minority voices and speaks loudly on the consequences of crossing out important history with black ink. The network hosts Twitch streams and podcasts as their primary path of relaying this information to their viewers. They cover an amalgamation of different issues, from connecting with people who are intertwined with local Charleston businesses to deciphering police habits and reports.

Gadsden also helped to found *The People's Beat*: a BIPOC-owned journalistic website. South Carolina has a deep history of Black-owned newspapers and journalistic reports. Gadsden says, "Contemporary black, independent journalism is what the community is missing." This absolutely rings true in an age where white supremacist violence is being 'justified' through 88 million dollar settlements, instead of policy change.

Prior to the foundation of the Charleston Activist Network, Gadsden aided in the fight for women's equality through her time with the Women's March. A space is now an inclusive and intersectional space for women's rights, but had beginnings of racist white feminism. In her interview with Katie Hopewell, Gadsden spoke about how dangerous white feminism can be to BIPOC and the fight for racial equality. White feminism conceals its white supremacy under a sheer veil of progressive social justice work and in some ways can be detrimental to the fight for equality. Some white liberal women feel entitled to a "comfort and convenience," reluctant to face or admit their own privilege.

This dangerous ignorance mirrors that of white supremacists and is why platforms such as *The People's Beat* are so important to Charleston's community. BIPOC voices are and have always been an essential part of our community, even if they have been quieted by fear or forces that continue to shout over them. Now, it is vital to listen to people in the

Gullah-Geechee, Indigenous and Black communities.

Listen to these voices by tuning into Mic'd Up by the Charleston Activist network. Begin reading the articles written on The People's Beat. Pay attention to Mika Gadsden, especially when her campaign begins for

Mayor of the City of Charleston! Charleston's past is not something to paint over with pastel paints and tour in horse-drawn carriages; it is something to acknowledge, learn from, teach future generations about (factually), and let it inform our community's priorities.

Q&A WITH MIKA

Conducted, transcribed and edited for clarity by Katie Hopewell

Q: How long have you lived in Charleston?

It's a zig-zaggy story. I was born in north central New Jersey. When I was 14, my dad moved back to Charleston, which is where he's from. Then, I graduated from St. Andrews High in 1999 and I hauled a** out of here. I would come back during summers, after graduating high school, to work at the aquarium when it first opened. I realized I didn't have that connection with Charleston that residents did, and that's when I decided to move here permanently after graduating from undergrad. So, it's been about 8 years. It was really jarring to move as an adolescent when my dad retired. My move to Charleston was easily the single-most politicizing event of my life, because it was such a big culture shock—even in the 90's.

Q: What would you say is the overall exigence of your work?

First and foremost: Black and Gullah-Geechee liberation—it's at the core of everything that I do. Additionally, dismantling white supremacy and elevating and amplifying Black and Indigenous and Gullah Geechee historical figures. I can go on and on, so that's my short answer.

Q: What drove you to the work you do now?

I experienced the ramifications of not confronting your past and the City of Charleston's failure and refusal to confront its past. It impacts my life, it impacts policy, it impacts the way I engage with the city—whether I want to have fun with my friends or entertain my family. What drives me to do the work I do now is this constant running up against the vestiges of the enslavement of Africans and the city's refusal to confront that history in a way that is substantive.

Q: So you're considering mayoral candidacy for Charleston; any updates on that?

I don't have the exact timeline set, but I will say this: I have every intention of running for Mayor of Charleston. I want it to be powered by people, mostly by young people, and really push back on the things we've seen. I want to make this something very disruptive, in a way that's regenerative, that brings about positive change. I'm excited. The last guy that held the presidency down broke shit in such a way that made me see: 'there's something we can do with this.' We can use some of it to our advantage, and that's what I intend on doing.

Q: What other activist channels are you involved in?

I've had to scale back a bit for capacity purposes recently, but Friends of Gadsden Creek is my highest priority out of the work that I do. We recently did a mutual aid effort with them. We bring them hot meals, some kids crafts and teach folk about the history there and try to help people make contact with the issue that is trying to revitalize and repair the Gadsden Creek. We know that by saving the creek, we are, in a sense, advocating for the Black populations—past and present—of the Gadsden Green Housing Projects.

Q: I saw you helped to found *The People's Beat*, how would you describe that entity?

I see it as critically important work. It's contemporary Immigrant and Black-led work, it's independent journalism and it's what Charleston has been missing for quite some time. Now I'm not erasing the legacy of Black independent media, specifically *The Charleston Chronicle*, which I know recently shut its doors, and it wasn't just them. We want to emulate that work because Charleston needs it.

So many reporters have left *The Post and Courier*, especially in the last two years. Some of them have gone on to do independent journalism, and others to do something more in their wheelhouse. At their core, they were an arm of white nationalism as a sort of propaganda mechanism. They can write as many pieces on slavery as they want, because the fact that they only have white journalists covering it only further proves my point.

Q: What is your proudest accomplishment regarding your activism?

Can I be real? It's like talking to you. For me, this work is very lonesome because a lot of times I feel really alone in my ideas. Like when I go so hard against something, I usually don't have a lot of people behind me. So whenever I get to sit and discuss with someone, whether it's virtual or in-person, and actually talk to them, even if we disagree, it means a lot to me. I don't enjoy virality, and I know I'm not as popular—I know people know me, and I've got a following—but I'm not popular. So when I connect with students and other stakeholders and they want to hear what I have to say, that's huge.

Because what I really value is community. I have my twitch fam and I don't call them 'followers,' I call them 'community members' because I don't want followers. Creating community and connection—getting us out of the comment sections and out of the Twittersphere for a second—that's my biggest goal. I want to create more spaces like that. It may not sound like an accomplishment, but it is to me.

Q: How would you describe the climate of Charleston's municipal government?

Well it's supposed to be non-partisan, but I think we can all see who's who in there. But, unfortunately, too many of our current elected officials have an agenda that does not keep their constituents at the forefront of their priorities—not all of them, but many of them. We've specifically got newly elected Councilmember Parker; she has a political agenda, she has aspirations and ambitions and a lot of the things that she does are performed by outsiders, who are feeding her information and using her as a talking piece. She's emblematic of what happens when you don't really model courageous leadership. Right now, I feel we're seeing the fruit that is born of the tree that lacks courageous leadership.

Q: Any advice for people who are new to this type of political involvement?

If it's white people, I would say: buckle up and get ready for uncomfortable moments where you will have to check your own privilege and sit with some difficult feelings, and anticipate that. A lot of times, I tell white people to stop showing up to Black-led causes, Black-led movements and treating it as a therapeutic space to work out your own bulls**t. Whether it's your own trauma, or your own learning and unlearning, we're not here to give you political education. Stop acting entitled to Black labor and attending these events in hopes of Black people will dispense some magic that will solve centuries of racism—know that you're the solution. Become white accomplices—not just allies—in order to actually make substantive changes.

Black folk, I would just say: do the best you can with what you've got. I don't usually instruct Black people too much, because they already know what's got to be done. Question whiteness, question the history you've been taught, question your own privilege.

Q: What do you love about Charleston, despite the things you're fighting to change?

That's the thing: I love Charleston so much. That's the reason why I fight so hard. But what I love specifically is encountering what my ancestors, what indigenous folk, what they built, how they led, their engineering brilliance, their customs and traditions. I love so much of the history and culture that is Black, Brown, Immigrant, Gullah Geechee; while white nationalism has worked so hard to erase that culture, it's so durable and insistent that you can't help but encounter it in the city. Whether I am excavating the stacks at the library, or just taking a walk down the street, you can't escape that profound history. It's not just downtown, it's everywhere. We are a historic city and we should be proud of that, and I would like to promote that part, but I want to promote accurate history.

I know I complicate people's relationship with Charleston, but I'm a Black person in America—my relationship with this country is complicated. Dual consciousness is something I have to struggle with everyday, due to my blackness, so why can't others? To keep things, like this side of history, in the dark only perpetuates the harm of Black and Brown folk. You can enjoy Charleston Wine and Food and all of the other wonders of Charleston, while still keeping a healthy skepticism of oppressive systems at play and I want more people to understand that.

Q: Which issues have your attention right now in Charleston and the state?

The real question is: which don't? *We both laugh a little too hard* But for real, I would say environmental racism, the development that has been spearheaded by our past and current mayor, and white nationalism being promoted through members of our city council.

In the state, I'm definitely focused on education and, specifically, the ongoing efforts to attack public school systems and, I would say, philanthrocapitalism—philanthropy and capitalism joining forces to do f**k s**t—you can quote me on that. So many people profit from being humane and it's ridiculous, just like disaster capitalism but with a smile attached.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

Everyday, both of my parents inspire me. They're Jim Crow refugees and they've survived a lot and they downplay a lot. But my parents inspire me because, like I mentioned, black culture is durable, and black culture is only durable because its people are durable. My parents are two of the hardest working people I know. Just like everyone else, they're imperfect, but I know that many of their imperfections were shaped by their lived experiences of being Black, and living and existing and surviving the Jim Crow South, so they inspire me everyday.

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