

## **FHS Oral History Project – Guenet Gittens-Roberts**

### **Description:**

Guenet Gittens-Roberts was born in Guyana in 1975. She recollected her upbringing in Guyana during the 1980s, particularly how the country's multicultural and diverse religious landscape influenced her profoundly. Guenet recalled memories of her parents owning a screen printing company and the intertwined relationship between work and life. Despite not explicitly realizing it then, Guenet reflected on the unique experience of being born only nine years after Guyana achieved independence from the British. Guenet spent her summers in Brooklyn, New York, and even attended Louis D. Brandeis High School in the Upper West Side. She emigrated permanently to the US around 2000, settling briefly in New York and then in Miami, Florida. Guenet recounted her experience living in Miami, particularly how she resonated with the deep Caribbean influences in the region. She then moved to Orlando with a mission to unite Caribbean peoples living in the City Beautiful, as she identified a lack of connections between the various but separate peoples of Caribbean origin living in the area. As a result, she served as the President of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Orlando while establishing a print and digital newspaper titled Caribbean American Passport NewsMagazine to bolster the intracultural connections of Caribbean peoples in Orlando. She discussed her roles in both of these endeavors extensively. Lastly, Guenet shared broader observations about the immigrant experience in Florida and America, challenges Central Florida faces today (c. 2025), and how to maintain the tenuous American experiment.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;09 - 00;00;28

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Guenet Gittens-Roberts on May 12th, 2025, in Guenet's home residence in Orlando, Florida, for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, your date of birth and where you were born?

00;00;28 - 00;00;37

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Guenet Gittens-Roberts, born on April 17th, 1975, in Georgetown, Guyana.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Can you tell me about your childhood growing up in Georgetown, Guyana, during the 1980s?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** 80s. Yeah, child of the 80s. We like to explain that it sets the tone for how we live here. Very much a multicultural existence in Guyana. Guyana has many races, so lots of folks from different backgrounds. And growing up it was like everyone did everyone else's thing. So it didn't matter if you were Christian, Hindu or Muslim, you really just practiced what everyone was doing. So Hindus would be celebrating Christmas. We would celebrate Ramadan, we'd celebrate Holi, which is the [Hindu's] Color Festival and all of that. And so that really was how I grew up, that I didn't even realize was special until I left it.

00;01;34 - 00;01;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Were you an only child?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** No. I was an eldest child, which of course has its own advantages and disadvantages. So, yeah, I'm the eldest of three.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What did your parents do for a living?

00;01;46 - 00;02;26

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So my parents had a screen printing company. We had a woodworking factory and a garment factory. So at the time, we produced a lot of things because Guyana was not importing a lot of things. And so we would think of creative ways to print material, creative ways of actually making the jig, as we would call it, to print. So I know how to screen print, I know how to cut, I know how to sew. [I] don't have much experience for the woodworking piece, but the others I can definitely. [I can] print hats [and] everything now.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Wow. Can you share any specific memories of working with your parents in that regard?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Absolutely. Working with my parents was actually folded in with me growing up. And I tell folks all the time, "include your children in your business" because it gives them a layer of skill sets that they don't even know when they will tap into that it is part of the DNA. So for us, we would spend the days just being at my parents office. On the weekends, our family would go out to the—we call them creeks, rivers—with the staff and the entire family. So it was really just all layered—work and living. It was all layered together, which I think is where I learned to do what you love because essentially that was just life for me. What we did didn't feel like work was separate from life. It felt like we created this family, and living and working was just part of your existence. It actually pushed me to do sales, though, because we were in advertising sales and, from very early, from probably about fifteen, I started creating ad campaigns. And so [I] looked at the client and then [I] figured out, all right, "what do I do? What do I sell them?" And [I had] to sell something that they can't see. And so that was a big underlying of my growing up for me in the business.

00;04;04 - 00;04;23

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. I'm curious, you were born basically a decade after Guyana got independence. Can you recall sort of the atmosphere at the time of a newly independent country?

00;04;23 - 00;05;53

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** You're right. I mean like for me growing up I didn't even think of that. Right. It's only now I realize we are so young in our independence like my husband was born on the exact year that Guyana gained independence. So our parents still pronounce Guyana different way. They say Guyana, which is the British way. What we saw was

just a lot of folks who—and now I look back and I see it—they had come home. They went away to school whether it was to Britain or to America. And they'd come home, and they were actually creating this country on their own. And looking back, I can't say there was a lot of pride, but what we saw was people who look like us with their own agency because they're running the country. And so, it was just really part of...I didn't know it was special until now, but in looking back, what I can say it give me was this confidence of being surrounded by people who looked like me running everything. And now that I'm in America, I kind of understand how special that was and how important that could be to someone's psyche. But I didn't know that was just what we had.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. Well said. Were there any particular challenges or triumphs your family faced during this time?

00;06;04 - 00;07;42

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** I actually would summer in the US. So for me growing up, my parents worked hard, but we also made a lot of money. And so we lived in the US in the summer. So for me, Brooklyn summers are like a big part of my life. And I could actually speak like if I lived in the US because I would spend every summer there. But smaller countries are very tied into politics. And so while my father was not a big friend or supporter or party person with the first president, [Forbes] Burnham, he was with the second president, President [Hugh Desmond] Hoyte. And so president Hoyte spent time at our home. And so when that government changed, we became part of, "Oh, they are the government. They were a big part of the government that was in power, there [were] benefits and everything." And so that was a time of having to leave because really and truly, you are in a lot of ways in smaller countries targeted if you are seen as part of the other government. And so that was a big change and that that's really a big reason as to why I left Guyana.

00;07;42 - 00;07;55

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Okay. Yeah. I had a question about that later on. But before we get there, you attended Queens College? When did you attend? What years?

00;07;55 - 00;09;01

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Oh, gosh. I am horrible with years, but I went to Queens College when I was eleven or twelve years old because in the Caribbean we write something called CXCs, which is a national—actually across the Caribbean—exam. And so I went into Queens College, it would have had to have been around '86. And that was just—if you have seen Harry Potter, [that] kind of thing. It is based on the British system. So every morning we would have assembly, we would have to sing our school song. We had badminton courts, we did lunch. I was in what's called E House. So we had our houses and everything, just similar to the Harry Potter kind of vibe. And it was wonderful, absolutely an amazing time of life for me. All of my best friends are still from that moment in time. I could still sing the school song for you right now. It was absolutely magical.

00;09;01 - 00;09;02

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Sing it.

00;09;02 - 00;09;09

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** [*Guenet sang the school song*]. It was in Latin as well.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** That's awesome. In sort of my last question in this early life section. You know, you mentioned how in your country, it was very multicultural. So I'm curious. In what ways did that multiculturalism impact you personally and also professionally working with your parents in that business?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So for me personally, I didn't realize it at the time. But what it laid the foundation for is that we could actually be very different, and there's really nothing wrong with that. And no one has to change anyone for being different. So if you celebrate your culture in a certain way, I just look at it and say, "Oh, well, let me see how I fit in." But it does not in any way mean that I need to dominate it or make it any different. That is your way and that is absolutely fine. So coming out here and growing up after a while and realizing that is not how the world necessarily sees things, religions try to dominate other religions, some cultures try to dominate others. But for us, it was just generally this is what these folks do. And we are part of it, but it does not mean we have to be entirely it. We are enjoying what they do in that moment. And so I think what it did is allowed me to have a lot of respect for it, and for just helping folks who need to stay connected to that cultural piece, because I believe it forms a big part of your why and your root and, for anyone to flourish, they need to know where they are from, and have that, because it gives them just a sense of belonging that is strong. And in Guyana, a lot of our folks were brought over as slaves or indentured servants. And so for us it was literally Indian, African, Portuguese, Chinese. So we actually had all of those folks now coming together and saying, "this is where I'm from, and this is what we do." And that is how they really kept that connection. Because of course, there is no internet, there is phone. But they really kept it. And it is stunning to see how closely it still kept over all those years.

00;11;39 - 00;11;50

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. So I know you said you're bad with years, but I need to ask, when did you emigrate to the United States? Like permanently? Because I know you traveled over the summers.

00;11;50 - 00;12;30

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So when I was sixteen and I finished with what we call CXC—so at sixteen in the Caribbean, we write a very huge exam. Again, the entire Caribbean writes it. So, at that time, government was changing, and I came out here to go to college, and I was still too young and so I actually went to Louis D. Brandeis High School in New York, Upper West Side. And I had a great time there, too, [it was such a] wonderful experience. So I had a year of high school here, and then I was like, I miss Guyana a lot and went back.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Okay.

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** And then when I had my kids a little later in life, then I came back to America.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Okay. So when was that—when you came back?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Gosh, y'all are really testing my boundaries of thinking. Let me think. I would have been twenty-three or twenty-four when I came back to America.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Okay. So like mid-1990s?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Yeah, yeah.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Almost 2000?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Yeah. [I] came and went to New York again and then one of my best friends lived in Miami. And so we drove down and we were like, “We do not want to raise our kids in New York,” and went to Miami instead. [We] lived in Homestead for a long time, and then Miramar area.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Interesting. Did you ever envision leaving your home country initially, like before you came here at sixteen?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** No. Never. Not at all.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** In what ways did your perceptions about the United States change or remain the same when you did come over?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So when I did come over, I would say in those first years, I do not think anything really changed. I had been accustomed to a New York kind of experience and even more so a Brooklyn, Manhattan, like the Village in Manhattan kind of thing. And so Florida seemed very Caribbean as well, in a different way, because [of] the [warmth]. It felt like a whole different country. I was not expecting the fruit trees because in Miami we could get all of the same fruits and everything, I mean, down to things like Gwinnett, which is a very small little fruit that we would not get in New York. So, in those early years, nothing. America, for

me, always felt like an extension of Guyana in a lot of ways. A lot of our friends, just due to brain drain, actually lived in the US. And so it is interesting that it really did not feel like there was anything missing, funnily enough. I would say it was a lot of later in American society, I would say almost in the last ten years that I felt any different in America. It is kind of interesting.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, absolutely. And before we get to that, just talk to me about your experience in Miami, in South Florida. Just so you know, I am also from Miami.

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Which part of Miami?

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Kendall. So Homestead is not that far—

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** I know exactly where Kendall is, oh my gosh. Yeah.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah.

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Kendall is like the big city area outside of Homestead.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah. Exactly. So just talk to me about your experience in Miami and your observations about South Florida.

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** What is funny is my husband is, his family is of Portuguese and Black and German and English descent. So when we got to Miami, we were like, “Wait a second, so many people look like him, what is this?” That was different. But what was lovely for us—what was the mall closest to the Kendall area? It starts with a “D.”

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Dadeland.

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Dadeland mall. So they [did] so many events there where people [danced] in the square. That reminded me of home. As much as we did not have the dancing, but the Cuban culture and the Hispanic culture down there, which to be honest, I think the main folks we got was Cuba. It was not until I got to Orlando, I [met] anybody else that was of a different culture, but it just felt so similar. And that felt good in that it felt familiar. The food is the same. So we could actually find the rice and the plantains and then the basis of how stuff is seasoned, so similar. And so it really felt very comfortable. Miami really felt like home.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** That makes sense, as someone that was born and raised there. The Caribbean [cultural] influence is very strong because you have Cubans that are the predominant culture down there. But then the other South American countries that are on the coast of the Caribbean. So for example, my family, were from Colombia, from Barranquilla, so that is the coast of Colombia. So we also have a lot of the Caribbean Sea. So that is very interesting that you put it that way because it is true. But to that point, when you left Miami and you came here to Central Florida, it was different, right?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** It was. Yeah, it really was. After leaving Homestead, we went up to like Miramar, which once you hit that point where Miami changes into Fort Lauderdale, it gets even more Caribbean. And so that was nice as well, because it was really that English speaking, that Jamaican influence, that was like, "Whoa, this is beautiful." And so we did that for four or five years, but when we came to Orlando, my husband's company was actually in Orlando. And I always have to tell folks that story because we would come to Orlando. And the only route that we took into Orlando somehow just brought us up OBT [Orange Blossom Trail]. All I kept seeing was that part of Orange Blossom Trail, which was horrible when we moved here. And so I never wanted to move to Orlando at all, but his company was transferring him here. I would say that once we got here, we kind of asked around and we went to the East side. So we went to Waterford Lakes, we went to Econ area and then Waterford Lakes. As much as we knew at the time, the Caribbean community was primarily on the West side, we felt more comfortable on the East side. I don't know why, but we went to Waterford and, so our kids grew up to that Waterford, Discovery, Timber Creek system over there. And I will tell you, what has happened here is the culture was not connected, the Caribbean community. And so we set about trying to connect that, because I would go down to Miami for my fix. I would see I would call it my fix. And I was in Miami probably once a week or twice a week, even though we lived here. And then we realized there is a whole bunch of Caribbean people here, they just were not connecting. And so we really set about trying to connect them, trying to find these associations and highlight them. And once we did there was a whole bunch of folks here who had always lived here, but it was more under the radar than Miami. But I would say that Orlando crept upon me in a way that it was absolutely different. I think this city is so amazing, because I do not know if it is because we were able to contribute to a growth here. But what I love about it is that Orlando, to me, always had the best intentions and was trying, if I could put it that way. So our mayors, our commissioners, they have a vision. And as much as the public might not really see how much they have tried, they have tried to be receptive, to be culturally open to be what I thought Guyana actually had as the magic, I found Orlando was actively striving for that. And so this city is like, I think it is an amazing frickin city that folks who do not even necessarily live here do not really understand the magic, because you are really able to be so authentically yourself and find your food and find your culture in a very authentic way that a lot of cities do not necessarily have. And then you could also then jump into everybody else's and still be comfortable and welcomed. And I don't know if you have experienced that, but.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, I absolutely have—

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Okay.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Especially you know, more recently through my job, and learning more about this region's history and how diverse Orlando is. Because to your point, Orlando is not cast as that type of city, like a Miami, like New York, like Los Angeles, you know, these major metropolitan areas. But Orlando certainly has that, and, you know, you mentioned how you contributed, and you served as the president of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce. So, you kind of explained already why you wanted to be involved, but just explain to me what is the mission of that Chamber of Commerce and what were or what are your responsibilities as president?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So, I'll even give you a little bit backstory as to what I was thinking. I was actually thinking I wanted to create a space where my kids felt like this was a piece of the home that we had taken them out of. So, we wanted to share with them that the people we met, who were doing major things, like folks might not realize, but one of the youngest convention services managers was a Guyanese guy, the owners of Puffin Stuff are Trinidadian. And they are one of the biggest catering companies here. There is so many Caribbean people who do not necessarily lead with being Caribbean. They lead with, "I'm from Orlando." And that is valid. That's good. But they are of Caribbean heritage. And we wanted to let people know these are the Caribbean folks here. And for them to really have the best experience, they still had to get a bit of their culture. And that is the music, the food, that little bit of, you know, we are business, but we love to hear our music at the same time. So, you know, the traditional chamber never would fit them, like you'd be conforming. You would be thinking before you speak, it is almost like you are speaking in a second language and you have to think to fit a box in order to proceed. But the chamber offered them this opportunity to just be, they could just prattle and talk and dance while they were doing work. And it was okay, because that is the culture. And so we really did a lot. We actually pulled together the nonprofits in the area that were also working, introduced them to each other, supported the different nonprofits by, you know, we had about fifteen Caribbean associations, ten to fifteen, and each one would buy a table at each person's fundraiser. Those things just help to uplift. And then, you know, our Caribbean students associations helped them out and at the same time connect with each other, network, get them primed into opportunities that were coming around. So that was the role of the chamber, helping our festivals to grow because again, we are very aware we have this orange economy, which is creative folks, and they make money at events. And we connected at events. So festivals are a big piece of life for us because it does the economic piece as well as the connectivity piece. And so all of that the chamber helped to support and connect. And so that was it—mission driven. To really just connect us and to help translate whatever they were missing.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And how similar or different is that experience with your Caribbean American Passport newspaper that you published since 2010?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Yeah. So I used to actually be a realtor here in this market. And when the economy crashed, you look back at the time I started that paper, I felt like no one was making money anyway. Like the times were dark at that time. No one was making money. If I'm not making money, what do I want to do anyway? And that led me to [wanting] to tell our stories. And so that was where the newspaper came out of, it was telling the stories of the people who lived here and not just Caribbean people. So that is why as much as it says Caribbean America, we really play up, it is Caribbean *and* America because we are now this new person who are not just Caribbean people. And it is important for us to really tell these American parts of our stories. And so that was the platform. So in a lot of ways, the newspaper is in Orlando paper for community that is kind of more focused on the Caribbean person's perspective, but more on Orlando people. And so it was meant to give that support. And it actually shined a light to folks in South Florida about what was happening here [in Orlando] [that those] folks would not have really realized. Now, in recent times, we have gone more digital, but at our core it is still telling our community stories.

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you still continue to publish?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** We do. We actually went digital completely because of course, that makes more sense. But our readership and our folks are older, and they really missed it. And so we have brought it back. And so we are doing a hybrid, and we are working, like WellCare is one of our biggest sponsors and I have to say that to even my folks here just because they are senior focus. So we had to go after businesses that are senior focused because our seniors are losing connectivity in the digital space. They actually do want to open and read. And so our events that we do, the newspapers is behind that. It is a way of connecting the community. And then the newspaper still we print a small amount, but we absolutely still print for that reason.

00;27;47 - 00;27;54

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what do you see in the newspapers' future? What future plans do you all have for that?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So I would say what we have done now is we are telling so much more digital stories, and it is so much easier, and it is so much faster and amazing that at first even we had a fight with it. But now you know, again, we are loving it. It is an easier price point for advertisers. So for all the right reasons is the right way to go. But for the seniors who are accustomed to reading, I figure we have got probably, maybe another five to seven years to ease them out of that. And then for us, the newspaper—the Caribbean American Passport—is a product that gets to be even more international. It still remains at its heart an intro to Orlando. Orlando is the place now that is my home. So Orlando is always that special part of everything

we do. But now the Caribbean American Passport is going to speak for that diaspora that actually wants to go and experience travel in the Caribbean, because we get a lot of folks who go to our website who are from Europe and all of those places, looking in to see how they could do something in the Caribbean. So instead of trying to find an audience, we are looking at the audience who has found us and said, “Well, what were you coming to us for?” And we know it is that. So how do they go live, vacation, do business in the Caribbean? That is our next step. Our diaspora, who are older, how do we take them back home to even build effectively, vacation effectively and in a fun way, and experience community now because we are not just Jamaican or Cuban or Colombian, we are [also] American. So how do we take this new group of people that we are and go back home and experience it in a fun way?

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**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. That is incredible. And to that point of Orlando being your home, my final couple questions are about Orlando broadly. So given your deep entrepreneurial and cultural experiences and expertise in Orlando, how has Orlando's business scene and cultural landscape changed since you have been here?

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**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** So, Fusion Fest is one of our happiest thing that we look at and say, “Wow. Imagine that. That came from an idea that we presented. Like how amazing is that?” And that stemmed from my multicultural upbringing, my husband's multicultural upbringing. And us saying what we are talking about with this fusion of cultures and who we are as Caribbean people and how we are different after, so many other people [also] experience that here. And that is all we talked to Terry about and came up with the concept of Fusion Fest. So for a whole festival now to be based around an idea that [we] presented is amazing. And then secondly, we actually do a festival, we do a carnival. And when we took that event over, because that was a thirty-eight year festival, we have only been involved in it less than ten years. But when we did take it over, what we infused was an Orlando festival. And so all of the folks in Orlando come out [and] enjoy it. All the creative people, all the folks who like cosplay and all of that stuff come out and enjoy it. It is your festival. It is just Caribbean in feel. It is done by Caribbean people. But it is not just for Caribbean people. And to see the warmth and the growth and how we have so many folks who are not first gen that are feeling this connection and who are comfortable bringing their friends, and who feel this pride and “this is who I am. This is where my culture is, come and experience it,” we know we have done a good job. And then supporting our Caribbean students in college. But we look at the work and we are actually happy with the impact we have made. And I hope people are encouraged that they can actually make an impact. But I also know that was, again, part of this city being welcoming and looking for it and seeking it and being open to it. If they probably did not have the folks—and I would not say they did not have gatekeepers—but if they did not have people who really were looking for good people to lift, we would not have been able to do that. And so I probably rambled, I forgot the question.

00;32;24 - 00;32;46

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** No, you answered it. And you mentioned earlier in our conversation, that it was about ten years ago or so that you living here in the United States or in Florida has made you feel different to a certain extent. In what ways?

00;32;46 - 00;36;17

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** There was always this pride for me of, we are just Caribbean, and we are American, and you do not have to choose anything. And when I say never a thought like, never thought like of anything. But with politics going the way it has, it is almost like you feel like, you are different and that is really sad because before there was so many people who truly fought for equality, they never thought, "Oh, I'm from the Caribbean." I mean, people do not know that Malcolm X's family was from Grenada. They do not know Harry Belafonte is from Jamaica and really helped to support a lot of what was happening in the Civil Rights movement. So people do not know that because you do not have to lead with it, but as Caribbean people, you always know exactly who fought and did [what] because you just do. But we know all of the people who did stuff. We know all of the heroes who have Caribbean roots, but it was just take it for granted. You are both things. But it feels like, and I have gotten over enough hurt now to look at it and say, look, America is also going through a growing pain period that perhaps you have to sort out who they are as an identity. Because one of the things we did is we always said, you do not have to see where you are from. A lot of people say, "Where are you from?" And an American used to feel, I think, a little taken aback. Because if you were not from somewhere, I do not think we realized people felt like a little left out. So one of the things for us, even before we realized this was this was an issue, we would say to folks, "It does not matter where you are from." And yes, we wave our Caribbean flags, but Florida has a flag. Wave your flag and be proud of it. And so I think in a lot of ways, and I always find the silver lining in stuff. So maybe I am finding the silver lining, but I feel like America is coming into their own and saying, "Alright, this is what my identity is." Because as immigrants, we are trying so hard to hold onto our own identity that perhaps it was going roughshod over Americans, and they were losing theirs. And so sometimes a fight could feel overwhelming coming back at you. And that is what we are feeling now. But we also have to be aware that, "Okay, it is not personal." They are having their grown up moment. So what is my culture? Who am I? What is uniquely American? And that is absolutely okay to happen. We just now have to deal with it with respect on both sides. And it took me a long time to figure that out because trust me, I was like, "I don't know. I have always thought Americans were the best folks." And so there was a moment where I did have doubt, but we have so many events and we go out and we keep saying, "We are still seeing beautiful people. It is not as horrible as it seems." And so it is important to keep going out and having these festivals and these events and meeting real people and realizing, "Yeah, somebody online might be ugly," but that is not ninety percent of the people that that we are interacting with, to be honest.

00;36;17 - 00;36;27

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Well said. Very well said. What challenges does Orlando face today, just generally?

00;36;28 - 00;37;57

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Well, I think if you even look at the politics in the situation, Orlando is almost like this little part of Florida that is fighting back. And others might be surprised. But I do not think anybody in Orlando is surprised because we kind of knew that that is who we were. And so I think the biggest challenge we will have is protecting this little gorgeous, just artsy, just amazingly tolerant group of people that are in this space and not

crushing their souls, because that is truly what is happening in a lot of spaces. And so our leadership is trying to do that, you can tell. People need to realize they have got to support them. Because now is not a time to just shrink. We do not have to do much more than getting folks registered to vote and making sure that our elected officials hear from us. But we have got to really be a little bit more than just artsy and nice to each other. We have got to figure out how we support our folks. And so that we push that message of tolerance everywhere because I think we are a little spark, we are a little spark in Florida, and we cannot let that spark go out.

00;37;57 - 00;38;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. And from your perspective, how will Orlando change in the next twenty five years?

00;38;04 - 00;40;48

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** I feel like Orlando is going to be the economic driver for Florida. I mean, listen, Miami [and] Fort Lauderdale is an extension of the Caribbean, that is its own vibe. There is nothing that is going to change that. But certainly with that Brightline, that extension up, the fact that, you know, space is the next frontier, and we have got that right here. You know, our parks, Epic Universe is opening up. Like, I do not think people understand how amazing we do have it. And then now a concern for me was that Orlando was this older kind of area, and my kids would not be able to stay here because it would not be great jobs, [but] there is great jobs, there is great food. There is great energy. I mean, like, we have amazing festivals. FIFA [Fédération Internationale de Football Association] is coming into Orlando. How multicultural is that? And so a lot of people do not even understand the soccer stadium, the naming rights is a Latin American company. That is huge. I think multiculturalism, being tolerant, respectful and embracing all the cultures is at the heart of what Orlando is. We have to thank Disney and the parks for that because it gave our artisans a good living while they probably went out and went in—like, if you look at Mills 50 and you look back, Mills 50 was the Asian community a while ago, it was not that attractive, but it was authentic. Everyone always knew, even when it was not looking great that it had the best food. And so now that other cities are trying to get that, we have got very authentic food. We have got very authentic culture. It is not hard for me to find Steelpan groups here because they get well paid at Disney and the attractions, and they have had that over years. So the culture, everything is very rich and vibrant here. And so I think the more people discover it, they will flock to the outer edges of Orlando. But Orlando is going to be a big economic driver. And our city is looking at that and building on that. And so, the only thing we were missing was high paying jobs, man, and we have got them. So this is going to be the best city in the entire state of Florida.

00;40;48 - 00;41;10

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** That is a great answer. I know we have kind of talked about this throughout the conversation, but just to ask it more explicitly as we close, how has your heritage from Guyana influence your perspective on life generally, but also living in Florida specifically?

00;41;10 - 00;43;02

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** I think tolerance [and] respect most of all. And a way of seeing, again, going right back to seeing people's individualism as a wonderful thing and not a

threat. When folks see it as a threat is when they try to shove it down, fight it, I definitely do not. And so it even allows me to see somebody who, might be seen as a threat, even to somebody, because they are trying to push their American part, so they may come across more aggressive than they intend to. So I see it both sides. I see it as “All righty. They are just trying to find to fight their space here. And what is wrong with that?” We have got to figure it out, because perhaps it was being taken for granted. And so let's see now what that looks like and find spaces for that and help them to come out with that message and to birth what they are trying to get out. And so because for many years, maybe we were the underdog as immigrant cultures coming in and then Americans felt like the underdog. And so that is what this fight is about. And so let's help them to say it eloquently, comfortably. Let's find that common ground to do that. And then we will all look past this moment, “Oh we got past it, and America is an amazing space” because it is a beautifully wonderful experiment. We are all here. We have all enjoyed it and we just have to fight for it. Fall in love again with this whole American experiment and figure it out to move it forward.

00;43;02 - 00;43;12

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Lastly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

00;43;12 - 00;44;11

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** I want them to know that, for me coming as a girl from Guyana, a country of 750,000 people, a very small little dot in South America on that coastline, coming to Florida made me feel that connection with home. And it really was because of people like Mayor [Jerry] Demings, people like Terry Olsen and people like Mayor [Buddy] Dyer, who committed [to even though] this was their home, they were open to being welcoming and making us feel at home. And it allowed them to build a beautiful, bigger city and so just understand that creating change and creating space for people—if you are comfortable in yourself—is never a bad thing. So get comfortable and create space and make something beautiful happen.

00;44;11 - 00;44;20

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Guenet, those were all my questions. Thank you so much for taking some time out of your day to talk to me and share your life story. I really appreciate it.

00;44;20 - 00;44;21

**GUENET GITTENS-ROBERTS:** Thank you. It is my pleasure.