

## **FHS Oral History Project – Aquanza Cadogan**

### **Description:**

Aquanza Cadogan was born on September 20, 1981, in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York. At around eight years old, Aquanza and his family moved to Pine Hills, Florida. From East Flatbush, where many West Indian cultures resided (Aquanza's parents are originally from Georgetown, Guyana—located in South America), Aquanza recalled his difficulties adjusting to Pine Hills. He attended the University of Florida and explained how his college experience remains another “cultural shock” as it widened his worldview. Aquanza shared his perspectives on race relations since his formative years in the 1990s, notably how the death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, in 2012 prompted his path toward Black activism, currently materialized in his company, “Time Capsule for the Culture.” In that vein, Aquanza viewed the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities as a central space for the Black community, particularly younger Black people, to understand the importance of Black art, culture, and agency.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;00 - 00;00;15

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** [This is] Sebastian Garcia interviewing Aquanza Cadogan on February 2nd, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please tell me where you were born?

00;00;15 - 00;00;19

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I was originally born in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

00;00;19 - 00;00;24

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And did you grew up in Brooklyn, or did you move shortly after you were born?

00;00;24 - 00;00;33

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I spent the first seven years of my life in Brooklyn, New York, and then, moved to Florida when I was around eight, so.

00;00;34 - 00;00;42

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And can you recall from that time any reasons as to why your parents wanted to move to Florida?

00;00;42 - 00;01;04

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Well, it was a lot of reasons. I mean, financially, the weather, opportunity. And then when we did move to Florida, we moved to an area called Pine Hills, which is a little bit of an underserved community. And even though at that time it was underserved, coming from New York, it felt like paradise.

00;01;04 - 00;01;12

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah. And can you talk to me a little bit about what your parents did in New York with their occupation [**AQUANZA:** Of course] and how that changed and possibly changed in Florida?

00;01;12 - 00;01;43

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** So my parents are originally immigrants from Georgetown, Guyana, which is in South America. And they moved to New York in their late 20s, which is when they had me. And my mother was an aspiring dental hygienist. And my father was an aspiring electrical engineer. My father did some time at Con Edison, and my mother was just finishing dental school in Jamaica. So they—Brooklyn, New York felt like the land of opportunity for them. Yeah.

00;01;43 - 00;01;52

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And can you talk to me a little bit about your experiences growing up in Orlando in the 90s, early 2000? What was that like?

00;01;52 - 00;02;37

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Yeah, definitely. So coming from New York, it was a bit of a culture shock, a bit of a culture change. In East Flatbush, for people that aren't familiar, is a melting pot of all West Indian cultures from the West Indies. And so I was constantly surrounded by people that look like me, that talk like me, that sounded like me. And then, you know, coming to Florida, there was a huge difference, in terms of the way people dressed, the way people talked, the way they interacted. And so for me, there was a little bit of, a learning curve, a lot of bullying and trying to find my own space. But, you know, once you find your tribe and you find your people, then Florida becomes home and it becomes comfortable like anywhere else in the world.

00;02;37 - 00;02;40

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And did you attend college in Florida?

00;02;40 - 00;03;08

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I did. Super blessed to attend the University of Florida, which was in Gainesville, which was another culture shock. I had never heard of Gainesville. It's a very small community. But again, that was another moment in life that kind of helped shaped me and opened my eyes to a lot of things happening just in the world. It took me out of my comfort zone of being around the family and all that good stuff, and Gainesville is where you grow a lot. It's where I grew a lot. So. Yeah.

00;03;08 - 00;03;11

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What, what [did you] major in [at the] University of Florida?

00;03;11 - 00;03;40

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Great question. I got accepted to do computer science, and then after two years of Trig and Calc and all of those insane classes, I ended up changing my major to journalism, which actually fit more of my speed because I, I love communicating with people. I

love getting back into the community and talking to people. And so it just felt like a perfect fit of journalism being the the road that I ended up taking in life.

00;03;40 - 00;03;46

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And did you find a job right after college in the journalism field? What was that like?

00;03;46 - 00;04;23

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I—actually my 9 to 5 job is back in computer science, so I do web development, which is awkwardly funny that life came full circle for me. But, once I, I check out of work at, you know, 5-5:30, that's when I get it to do the second job of doing what I really love and what fulfills my purpose. And that's, you know, going back into the communities, talking to young people, getting my story out, just getting heard. And so, although, I don't do journalism day to day, I do get to use my power of communication every day. So I'm really happy about that.

00;04;23 - 00;04;31

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And talk to me a little bit more about about that passion. You know, you say you go back to the community. So what does that, what does that specifically entail?

00;04;31 - 00;05;24

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Yeah. So I think that taps back into me being born in Brooklyn, New York, which is a very big community based on culture, music, fashion, art, when I did come to Florida and decided that those were things I wanted to pursue, I didn't find a community of people that shared that same interest at the time. Since then, people have kind of channeled and gone towards that. But, trying to find my tribe that did that and creating that, and that was really how I found my why. And my purpose was, how do I create an art community? How do I create a Black community for young creatives? And that's kind of been my purpose, you know, over the last 7 or 8 years now is how do I create this community of young creatives and people that want to take Black art and Black creativity to another platform.

00;05;24 - 00;05;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And kind of going back a little bit, did your parents also experience that similar type of cultural shock in the move from Brooklyn to Pine Hills?

00;05;36 - 00;06;11

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** It's interesting you asked that because, at the time, Pine Hills was a place where a lot of West Indian people were flocking. I believe housing was very affordable at that time. It was a very large Black community at the time as well. And so for them, it wasn't as shocking. There were a lot of restaurants and stores that still cater to West Indians, in the Pine Hills area. And there are still to this day, but for them, it wasn't as bad as it was for me, which I wish it wasn't. But again, that's what shaped me and made me who I am.

00;06;11 - 00;06;13

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And why do you think that is?

00:06:13 - 00:07:02

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I think we grow more out of adversity. I think when you have that silver spoon and you have that, you know, yellow brick road, as they say, things just feel a little bit more, like you didn't earn it. You didn't work hard for it. And for me, I think, you know, I needed to be bullied. I needed to find my why. I needed to talk differently than everyone else to realize that it's not different. I'm just unique. And there is some greatness in uniqueness. And so I go back and I try to tell other young kids that is like being different is your superpower and you want to not be like everyone else despite what, you know, media or television or movies will tell you. And so, yeah, I think that's really it is—being different is your superpower.

00:07:02 - 00:07:36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And, you know, can you talk to me a little bit about some perhaps maybe your experiences, your racial experiences in Central Florida from the 90s onwards? You know, it's interesting, of course, when I talk to older individuals, yeah, they are harkening back to the Civil Rights Era. So there's very explicit examples. But, you know, racial tension never dies down even during the 90s and 2000s, you know. So can you just talk to me a little bit about that?

00:07:36 - 00:08:55

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I think there were a few moments for me where that hit home. I think the first was the Trayvon Martin issue that happened in Sanford, Florida. At that time, I had just had my kids, my son was about three years old. And when that verdict was brought down, I knew that I could no longer be silent. I then kind of found my voice then, because at that point it was safe to be quiet and safe to be unheard. But I could no longer stay quiet at that point. And so that forced me into this world of activism and finding people who were trying to change laws and rules that just seemed unjust. And I think the next one, of course, would be...there's so many that I can think of, but, there's been a lot of moments in history that are really shaping and changing the way America is being constructed now, and I hope our young people are paying attention to what's happening and staying in tune and fighting to be heard. Kind of like I was like, don't be silent, you know? Don't sit back and watch it happen. Find a voice and say something.

00:08:56 - 00:09:01

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** After your time at UF, you came back to Orlando talking about that phase of your life.

00:09:01 - 00:10:10

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Yeah. So you have was another culture shock. If we're talking about race relations, that's where I really learned how to navigate kind of all channels in life. Right? I think New York, Pine Hills, that was very segmented to where I can kind of stick to my community. But you get to UF and then you're a little bit more of a fish out of the pond there. And so trying to find how do I communicate with maybe people that don't look like me. I fell into Toastmasters organizations and things that would kind of help me communicate better. But I would say that you have was a eye opener in a sense that people that aren't open to different cultures and races and religions, that's where I got a real good one-on-one taste of that, right? I, I met the Hispanic organization, I met the Jewish community, and it really helped me open up

my eyes to there's a world of other people in this world that I'm just not privy to and thankfully, that's what UF gave me, was an eye opener to other cultures in this world.

00;10;10 - 00;10;11

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, your worldview broadened.

00;10;11 - 00;10;17

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Oh yeah. Yeah, it opened my horizons. Yeah, yeah.

00;10;17 - 00;10;25

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. So is this your first time being here at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival? What's your what's your own history within this within this event?

00;10;25 - 00;11;37

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** So this is this is not my first time at the festival, but this is my first time bringing my kids. And so, super blessed to have my son is now 14, my daughter's 12. And as they're getting older, it's important for me to expose them to as much cultural things that are happening in our community as possible. A) to get them involved and B) to expand their knowledge of all the amazing things that are happening right here in their backyard. I think Zora Neale Hurston is one of our, what do I say? That she is one of our pillars in terms of greatness in the Black community and the fact that she's right here in our backyard in Eatonville, I needed them to be present, and I needed them to experience it. And so I made sure that I brought them, not only them, my nephews. To me, this festival was important because I needed to share it with my family. I needed them to see what was happening and then educate them a little bit about her legacy as well. We got to pass her museum, which was right there. And then just exposing them to the books and the crafts that happen out here is it was important.

00;11;37 - 00;11;45

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. Yeah. Beautiful said. What was your first time being here? You said it's not your first time. What year was your first time?

00;11;45 - 00;12;28

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Yeah, my first time at Zora Neale Hurston Festival was maybe 5 or 6 years ago. It was a different time then. You know, times are changing in politics and things are getting a little tighter, but a lot more people around, a lot more vendors around. And I was just amazed that we can do something like that in this historic community. And so from that experience, I was like, you know what? I want to bring my family and show them that same experience I had. And so even though it may not be at the same caliber as it was back then, the message is still the same. The community is still the same. And Zora Neale Hurston will always be the same.

00;12;28 - 00;12;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. Well, that was going to lead into my next question. Yeah. In what ways has the festival changed from, you know, your first time being here...

00;12;36 - 00;12;37

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Of course.

00;12;37 - 00;12;39

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** ...about six years ago?

00;12;39 - 00;13;13

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** I think the vendors this year seem to be a little bit more intentional. In years past, I think if you showed up and you had the right kind of credentials, you can kind of set up a booth. But I feel like this year a lot of the vendors are very intentional in terms of the books that I see, the I mean, I made sure I purchased stuff because I want to support these local vendors as well. And so as long as—the food is, well, there's there's so many things that I want to make sure that I put my Black dollar back into the community and make sure that I support, what's happening here in Eatonville.

00;13;14 - 00;13;32

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And, you know, I know you touched on it as well about why it was important for—to bring your family here. And that was an excellent response. But more broadly, why is this event, the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities, important?

00;13;32 - 00;14;15

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** If we don't, if we don't support festivals like this or events like this, eventually they will die. And if there's one thing that I can do as a person, as a father, as a person of the community is show up and support. And when I leave here, my intentions are to promote and show people that this is where you need to be next year. We need to support, we need to bring our money here. We need to bring our families here because we cannot have events like this fizzle off and die. We cannot. And, anything I can do to support that as an individual, I will do and spread the word as much as possible.

00;14;15 - 00;14;30

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what, future plans do you have, you know, in your life, in your career? And, you know, especially regarding these themes of, you know, Black identity, community, activism, what's in store for you?

00;14;30 - 00;15;25

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** So I, I actually have a company called “Time Capsule for the Culture,” which we actually preserve Black culture from, you know, old times to present. And storytelling is something that I love doing. I, in future, would love to figure out how I can get involved and bring young people here to do some storytelling, whether it's on the stage, on a soap box, bring that art of public speaking back. So that is my goal is how can I merge what I do with this festival? And I, I mean, the minute I leave here, I'm going to find out how I can do that, whether it's getting in touch with the organizers. Putting my name in the hat for vendorship. I'm going to do all that I can to make sure that young people specifically are aware of this festival and want to participate.

00;15;25 - 00;15;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Lastly, what what is something from your life observations that you want future generations to know.

00;15;35 - 00;16;21

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** That that we should not be ashamed of our heritage. We should not be ashamed of the color of our skin. We need to be more prideful in the things that we create, the art that we create, the places and spaces, the safe spaces that we create. We need to be more unapologetic about those things. And I think Zora Neale Hurston Festival, in particular, is one of those places where we can come and do those things safely. We need to create more spaces like that. And so, I think that would be it is that we need to be more unapologetic about who we are, what we stand for, and our potential as a community. Yeah.

00;16;21 - 00;16;23

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. I really appreciate it.

00;16;23 - 00;16;26

**AQUANZA CADOGAN:** Man, thank you so much for the opportunity.