

Victoria Smalls



Have you ever felt like an outsider, even among people who seem similar? Victoria Smalls grew up on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, in the Gullah Geechee culture. Gullah people are descendants of Central and West Africans who were enslaved in the southern U.S. Their language combines African languages and English. When Victoria visited the nearest city seven miles away, she was "devastated" when people laughed at her way of speaking.

Victoria stayed strong. She became equally fluent in formal English and Gullah and earned a master's degree in education. While teaching, she began to express her Gullah heritage through paintings. In 2012, she went to work at Penn Center, an organization focused on Gullah culture.

She now combines her passions in her work for the Zinn Education Project, visiting South Carolina schools to share African American history. Victoria lives on St. Helena Island with her daughter, Layla.

Q: What's your favorite childhood memory?

A: People coming to visit . . . our farm . . . it was a great place for Bahá'ís who were traveling to come and stay or camp . . . My fondest . . . memory growing up is being surrounded . . . by Bahá'ís from everywhere.

Q: Your parents had the first interracial marriage on St. Helena Island. Did they face racism?

A: In the Bahá'í Faith, you have to have permission to get married . . . My mother's . . . parents . . . refused [at first, but] finally . . . granted her permission after two years of her asking. Some of her siblings disowned her . . . They couldn't get married in South Carolina. It was against the law . . . They [got] married in Michigan . . .



Left: On their farm on St. Helena Island, Victoria (age 13) helped her family raise most of their own food.

Right: At 17, Victoria (no. 55) was a star varsity player on her high school basketball team.

Q: What was your most challenging experience when you were a kid, and how did you handle it?

A: I was . . . about 14 . . . and on St. Helena Island, at that time . . . it was about 95–98% African-American Gullah people . . . Even though my father is black and my mother is white . . . we never really faced any racism at all on the island . . . [But] I remember going into Beaufort [seven miles inland] . . . and I spoke . . . in my Gullah accent, and someone laughed at me . . . I soon realized, oh, they are laughing at the way that I talk, and it hurt me so much . . . Being an African American . . . person on St. Helena Island is different from the experience just seven miles on the mainland . . . And the little Gullah girl wanted to come out so badly that I would stutter . . .

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Victoria encourages her kids to appreciate their culture. Left to right are Christopher, Layla, Julian, and Victoria in South Carolina in 2014.



In her former job as Director of History, Art and Culture at Penn Center, Victoria examined art depicting Penn officials meeting with educator Booker T. Washington and others around the early 1900s.

Q: How does the Bahá'í Faith influence you in your work?

A: There's not a time that I don't talk about the Faith when I'm doing a presentation . . . When I'm talking about . . . anything regarding the Gullah culture . . . I'm always bringing in the Faith somehow . . . It's just who I am . . . Penn Center [was] . . . one of two sites in the South where whites and blacks could come together during segregation . . . I talk about Bahá'í . . . schools [held there] . . . That's where my parents met . . .

Q: What advice do you have for kids who want to be artists?

A: Create something every day. It doesn't matter if it's a stick figure, if you're cutting out images [from] a magazine and . . . making a collage, writing something . . . Do something every day to help spark that, and don't keep it to yourself. Share it with someone.

Q: What is something you find interesting about Gullah Geechee culture?

A: Gullah Geechee people are the people that have most of their Africanisms still intact. They have much of their African culture . . . being passed on from generation to generation . . . So I feel like I'm one of those culture keepers to help keep the culture alive, because there are people that are still living the Gullah ways . . .

Q: Why are you passionate about this culture?

A: When I was working at Penn Center, I realized so many people . . . [had] never heard of the Gullah Geechee culture . . . And there's so much beauty in it . . . The people are beautiful. They are welcoming . . . loving . . . giving . . . I like to educate people about things . . . that have not been told . . . but are so important . . . to the total story of America.

Q: This issue of *Brilliant Star* is about life skills. What three skills are most important for kids to develop?

A: Well, compassion, number one. [And] believing in yourself . . . And sharing . . . Whenever we would grow crops . . . or . . . go fishing . . . [we would share with] the elders in the community . . . My father . . . would go from house to house . . . and take them food . . . I had that happen to me four years ago when my 16-year-old [son] Julian passed away [after an illness in 2014]. A young person . . . left a bag of squash and zucchini and vegetables on my doorstep, and . . . it reminded me of what my father did.