

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 80 – Cyndee Patterson – True Believer

The Charlotte Way

And now a personal word,

Cyndee Patterson grew up in Carol City, a blue-collar, working-class neighborhood of Miami Gardens northwest of the city of Miami. When Cyndee was a teenager, much of Carol City was farmland. It soon attracted public housing. White flight followed. The neighborhood became predominantly black, Hispanic, and poor. Crime statistics soared. An underclass solidified. Carol City would become one of the most underprivileged places in Greater Miami to live.

Cyndee left Carol City in 1968. I arrived in Miami in 1974. My family had lived in Brazil for two years and returned to the United States. I was twelve years old. My dad had to start his business from scratch and didn't have much money. My parents rented a house on 52nd Street in Morningside, long before gentrification, at the time a forlorn neighborhood just north of downtown Miami. Our house was a couple blocks from a rough patch of Biscayne Boulevard, dotted with run-down motels. I rode the city bus alone when I was twelve years old, where every kind of sex offender had me in their sights. Within a year we moved thirty streets north to 82nd Street, just past 79th Street, a major commercial artery that changed its name to the JFK Causeway as it crossed into the wealthy and exclusive North Bay Village on its way to North Beach. My sisters took me to Baskin-Robbins at the 79th Street Shopping Center, a collection of down-market stores that went into decline. My dad's one-man business as an importer-exporter eventually improved. We moved again as my parents sought a safer and more stable place for us to live. My dad bought a small home on 103rd Street in Miami Shores, a middle-class bedroom community. That's where I spent my junior high and high school years.

Here is what I remember about Miami at the time. It was a crazy place to live. Neighborhoods were either completely segregated or a complete mash-up of every ethnicity in the world. New residents and immigrants poured in. Politics were corrupt. There were stark divides between wealth and poverty. And every night newscasters reported the most spectacular and blood-thirsty crimes like the weather.

In May 1980, when I was junior in high school, an all-white jury acquitted five Miami police officers of the murder of a black insurance agent named Arthur McDuffie. It was the latest of a number of police killings of black citizens. Years of resentment about

racial oppression broke loose. The city went up in flames. Over three nights, eighteen people died, 400 people were treated for severe injuries, seventy-one businesses were destroyed, 3,000 people lost jobs, and residents claimed over \$100 million in property damage. Violent civil disturbances broke out again in Miami in 1982 and 1984. I was away at college at the time. *Miami Vice* debuted on network television, documenting the drug wars that were further tearing the city apart. I would go on to live in Boston, Houston, Orlando, Tallahassee, and Washington, DC, before living again in Miami and Fort Lauderdale during the 1990s.

Our lived experience shapes how we view a city. Who we are and what we know attract us to a place. Cyndee would find her way to Charlotte in 1978. I would find my way to Charlotte in 1999. I suspect we both encountered a city that seemed so wide open and inviting relative to places we had been.

When my wife and I arrived in Charlotte, we were struck by the clean and modern skyline (far from filled-in but bursting with plans), the decency of its people, respect for law and order, and values of family, faith, prosperity, and ambition. Charlotte wanted to make more of itself, and it welcomed newcomers who rolled up their sleeves.

The narrative of a city matters. It determines what happens and how we feel about it. I heard about “the Charlotte way”: the code of the city that got things done. Think big, unite public and private interests, invest, and do. It is a code that is attractive to bold thinkers and those who want to serve. There is a Mount Rushmore of people who in my mind represent the Charlotte way: Hugh McColl Jr., Harvey Gantt, Michael Marsicano, and Cyndee Patterson. Cyndee has devoted herself over a forty-year career to countless initiatives large and small to create a more vital and inclusive city.

I know that other people in Charlotte have a different lived experience of the city. I know that the Charlotte way means something entirely different to them: exclusion, privilege, institutional power, and other very real grievances. I know how I am perceived and received, because of my identity and what I do, is different than how other people are treated in Charlotte. There is much in the ground that is cause for civil disturbance. But any fair reading of the city is that we are making progress: with promise and pragmatism, sometimes belatedly and begrudgingly, the city is addressing issues of equity and access. Cyndee Patterson and people of goodwill are making the city one of the great places to live.

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