



DREAM

Vickie OLDHAM

UNITY IS POWER

**Storyteller,
Sarasota Native
and Director of the
Newtown Conservation
Historic District Project**

She was a regular on local TV news for 15 years before departing for Georgia where she worked for two universities. In 2004 she was the historic preservationist in the “Looking for Angola” project, producing a documentary on the archaeological findings of Angola, a colony on the Manatee River cohabited in the 1800s by maroons (escaped slaves) and Seminole Indians.

Vickie has returned to her roots—where she was born and raised—to document Newtown’s history from 1914 to 2014 as Director of the city-funded Newtown Conservation Historic District Project.

“I am a storyteller who shares history through any format I can. Angola is a story. So is Newtown,” she says.... “We need to instill a sense of identity and place for those of us who were raised there. Newtown has been unfairly maligned.”

Her motivation for the Newtown Conservation Historic District project derives from her ancestors who were pioneers of Newtown. She saw their sacrifice, their courage, and their creativity of finding ways to get things done.

Many will remember when Vickie Oldham was on WWSB (now ABC7) for 15 years then left the area to work at two universities in Georgia. She bought a house in Ellenton shortly before being offered the first job in Georgia and commuted as frequently as she could. While still working in Georgia, Vickie assumed the role of historic preservationist in the “Looking for Angola” project by producing a documentary on the archaeological findings of Angola, a colony on the Manatee River harmoniously cohabited in the 1800s by maroons (escaped slaves) and Seminole Indians.

At the start of the project in 2004, she assembled a team of researchers from anthropology and ethnography disciplines. Years later she is still working on the project and has produced the documentary, a website, and a program for teachers and students in Florida and the Bahamas where maroons lived in Red Bays on Andros Island in the 1820s. Now as Director of the city-funded Newtown Conservation Historic District Project, Vickie has returned to her roots—where she was born and raised—to document Newtown’s history from 1914 to 2014.

“I am a storyteller who shares history through any format I can. Angola is a story. So is Newtown,” she says, “I want to tell a couple stories about two special people. The first is Sheila Sanders Brown, a current accountant, who listened to her third grade teacher tell the children how to save money with a passbook account. When the class visited a bank, African-American children were not allowed to tour the vault. So little Sheila Sanders Brown organized her classmates to take their savings out of that bank and place their pennies and nickels in another bank. That was the beginning of a lifetime of activism. In her teen years after requesting that the agenda be mailed to her, she took the bus to School Board meetings. She became the plaintiff in a lawsuit against the City of Sarasota for representation from Newtown on the City Commission—and won.”

The second story is about Ed James. “Ed was a college student at FAMU when he came home and had to do research for a paper. Since there was only a small library in Newtown, he went to the main library where he was refused entry. The librarian called City Manager Ken Thompson who said Ed should come to his office. Shortly thereafter the libraries were opened to African Americans. You can see that the common denominator of both of these stories is young people taking a stance to make a difference in the lives of others.”

In 2015 Vickie returned to live full-time in Sarasota. She was raised in a house at 35th Street and Orange Avenue in Newtown and attended Riverview High School. She says, “I had an idyllic childhood. I was raised by my grandmother with my cousin. I lived near where Booker High School is now. I had such loving and caring teachers—the majority of whom were black—who lived in the community. With just an eighth grade education, my grandmother Viola Sanders encouraged my cousin and me to become involved in school as much as possible and to focus on clubs and band, which we did. Now Newtown has historic buildings that are in need of preservation. I attended a code hearing with an owner to get historic designation on Martin Luther King Way for the former Miss Susie’s Social Club. We need

to instill a sense of identity and place for those of us who were raised there. Newtown has been unfairly maligned.”

As project manager of “Newtown Alive!,” Vickie conducted over 40 oral history interviews; examined photographs, maps, and other items that residents had preserved; and identified 151 historic buildings. Hearing the stories of discrimination, values that kept the community alive, the pride that older persons still have in the community, and their struggles and challenges, Vickie says, “I am proud of the report we have published, and am now working on a book, a website, historic markers, and a mobile app. I am very, very proud of the resilience of Newtown residents. My reward is having people read or learn of this history at presentations and hearing from people on Facebook who are from the area, but are now living away. People are so appreciative of the work we are doing.”

Dr. Rosalyn Howard, retired professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Central Florida, has worked with Vickie since 2004 on the Angola project and continues as a team member on the Newtown project. She says, “Vickie is passionate about Sarasota and bringing out unknown details about African-Americans in the region. All people have contributed to Florida’s success and to say that African-Americans are not important in the growth of Florida’s economy is not true. Vickie is fortunate in that she has intimate knowledge of the community and connected with the people she interviewed for the Newtown project. She threw herself into the project and formed a strong team of people who had experience in community ethnography. She wanted the story told as best she could.”

Driving past the house she called home during her childhood and teen years, Vickie says she is sad to see it boarded up. She tried to buy the property when she returned to Sarasota, but lost out. She talks about the gentrification of Newtown where over 60 percent of property is owned by absentee owners who live all over the country. Her motivation for the Newtown Conservation Historic District project derives from her ancestors who were pioneers of Newtown. She saw their sacrifice, their courage, and their creativity of finding ways to get things done.

Vickie’s grandmother was a cook for a family and her grandfather was in the nursery business. Vickie’s sister Sharon Hardaway lives in Lakeland with her husband Larry where they both work in Larry’s law firm. With a Bachelor’s degree in journalism and communications from the University of Florida and a Master of Fine Arts degree in film, television, and recording arts from Florida State University at Asolo Conservatory, Vickie worked in higher education marketing before returning to Sarasota. Vickie’s favorite non-work activities are attending indie movies, traveling to New York for live theatre once a year, baking food for other people, attending concerts, and dancing.

Vickie says it is possible to reinvent and retool one’s career as she did after a start as a journalist, moving into public relations and marketing, and now as a community scholar and historic preservationist. Her new career is shedding light on the dimmed history of Newtown—the place she calls home. ☺

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