

“Coming here was a breath of fresh air.

I’m originally from Laurens, South Carolina. When I was there, you went to Main Street to go to the ice cream shop, maybe catch a movie. It was a small town back then.

I came to Florence to attend Francis Marion University, and I just fell in love with it and decided to stay here. I made friends, I met my now husband, and for whatever reason, opportunities kept presenting themselves with reasons for me to stay.

When I first came, there wasn’t a lot going on downtown. We pretty much stayed on campus. But after graduating, we moved to different apartments around different parts of town, so we got to know Florence really well.

I’m a go-getter.

I grew up in events. My mom was an event planner. I worked at seven years old making funnel cakes, creating balloon arches, all types of stuff. So, I’ve always had a love for events and bringing people together. I took my first big girl job with the City, working in parks and recreation at the various community centers, which gave me a good look at all of the different communities in Florence. With my job in recreation, I had the chance to work with kids and seniors and had the freedom to create programs and special activities for both. I helped with FMU’s Arts International event when it was downtown—and that was my first real downtown exposure, and I said, ‘wow, this is wonderful,’ and then I got pulled to help with the kids area at the Pecan Festival, and that really opened my eyes to all of the things happening downtown right under our noses, and we had no idea.

After I left my job at the city, I worked in a nursing home programming activities for seniors and then at the Little Gym, coordinating events for kids. People were always asking me where things were, what the best places were, and I sort of became an ambassador for Florence, and for people coming into town who maybe didn’t have any friends yet, or were new parents.

After COVID, and everyone was at home and all the political things were happening, I decided to have a Juneteenth party at my home. Growing up, my family always celebrated Juneteenth, which was interesting because on the town square in my hometown there was a white supremacist store until 2012. But we always celebrated Jubilee Day, and we really enjoyed it. It brought so many people in our community together.

So we decided to bring that tradition to our new home, and we did it with a cookout and pool party. We shifted the context of a cookout as a concept, taking it from this exclusive thing that’s typically invite-only and exclusionary, and we made it open to anyone and everyone. I’ve got a diverse group of friends, so to see everyone coming together to

celebrate this holiday and have meaningful conversations about bigger narratives, it was really special.

And it just grew from there, all starting from a backyard cookout.

After we were successful at home for a few years, we just knew this was something that we could grow, so I quit my job in 2023, a job that I loved, and just knew I had a purpose for something bigger. I was at a friend's farm in Darlington, nothing out there, and I thought 'this would be a great place for a festival.' I had no idea what possessed me to do it at this scale, I had never thrown a whole festival in my life. But my husband and a few friends backed me up and supported me, so I started my event planning businesses, Blacolive, a name which was meant to break up silos, get people to coexist, and celebrate community. So, I started hosting pop-up events, building up to my first festival, Juneteenth Pee Dee: the Cookout.

And people showed up in the hundreds, and I cried.

We did Juneteenth Pee Dee for a few years before deciding to grow and expand into Downtown Florence. We wanted to do something downtown to celebrate all the connections we've made, to help people understand there's so much offered here if you seek it. So the Juneteenth Jubilee, which is on Friday, June 19th this year, was my way of showing that, helping people get into different businesses, experience the diversity of our downtown, and help businesses get new customers, too.

We're in our second year, focusing and leaning into a theme of Art-protunities, creating spaces where people can flourish artistically, creatively, and share their work with others. That connection has been a big goal this year, building off the success of our Downtown Jubilee events last year.

I've stepped out of my comfort zone a lot, I even designed a t-shirt for this year, but all of that has been growth. I love to create.

When my husband was playing basketball overseas for long months, my college friends were gone, and I was just here by myself, I had to make myself get out and explore outside of my work environment. When a friend of mine moved back to town, she suggested we get a drink and ended up at Dolce Vita on Dargan Street, and I started meeting what would become my Florence family. I met new friends who became family, and we did that all over a glass a wine, so when Dolce Vita closed, there was a void for me, because I developed this love of meeting people and connecting through that experience.

But then Cru Wine & Tap opened, and I scoped it out, thinking initially I wasn't going to like this place. But then I came, I observed the owner, how passionate and unpretentious Bryan was—visor and flip flops on, and I was like, this is the vibe.

I feel at home in Cru Wine & Tap.

I bring my laptop here, and do some work. The way this business is operated with love, you can walk in, talk a little trash, have a great slice of pizza, and more than that, Bryan has been such a huge help for me. Anything I've needed to grow Downtown Jubilee, he's been a community contributor. Just like a lot of people trying something new, I got a lot of nos, a lot of people not understanding what I was trying to do. But Bryan was an immediate yes, and not just one yes, but a lot of them. So this place has become very special to me.

Downtown is for everybody. You can find something you like in every single space. I even bought these earrings at Barringer General Store. You have to get out, walk around, pay attention, and get involved. Get tapped in. I do what I can, my husband and I decided we want to make sure the community we're taking from, we're also contributing to. We want to return what we've gotten back tenfold.

I'm thankful for the Main Street program for providing opportunities to get involved, get put into spaces to make a difference. It's just so easy to get plugged in, and I love helping others get that experience, too.

I'm ready to see what comes next.”