

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN MEREDITH BROWN

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FEBRUARY 21, 2018

REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

This is Claytee White. It is February 21st, 2018. We're here in the Oral History Research Center. Lauren, please give me your full nature and spell it for me.

My full name is Lauren Meredith Brown. It is spelled L-A-U-R-E-N; Meredith, M-E-R-E-D-I-T-H; Brown, like the color, B-R-O-W-N.

Thank you. How are you today?

I am good, thank you.

Lauren, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what the family was like.

I grew up in South Jersey, in (Delaware), New Jersey. I grew up on a street that saw all four seasons and had other kids my age. There was Nerf football in the streets in the evenings and snowball fights on the weekends and this beautiful fall foliage. I remember you could always rake the leaves and jump in the leaves. It was very charming.

Good. Why did you leave?

We left New Jersey in 1997 while I was between my sophomore and my junior year. My mother at that time was a widow and she wanted to be near family. There was a big snowstorm, an ice storm that had hit, and the basement flooded and the roof started having issues and she decided that Las Vegas was it. She had a sister here and she was done with that kind of weather, and so we moved.

How did you feel about that move?

I hated it. I hated it.

Because you were in the middle of high school.

Yes, yes. I hated it. I think a Realtor had said to her something like, "If you wait until she graduates, she'll never come back and visit you wherever you move." So it's funny. She lives here and I live here and I've left and come back to this city I think at least three times.

The real estate person was probably right.

Probably.

How long did it take you to fall in love with Las Vegas?

I've had that conversation with so many people. A good friend of mine within the last year decided to buy a house and he said, "I've proposed to Las Vegas, finally." I think a lot of people have a relationship with this city or have had this relationship with this city where it's like, *I'm not going to stay here; I can't stay here*. I've felt that myself at times, but...I don't know. This particular stint, I've been here almost twelve years this time.

What is making you come back? What about this city brings you back other than your mother?

She's a big piece here. It's easy and I know that sounds so strange to say, but I'm sure you've heard it before. It's easy and it's convenient. You go another place and you cross a few bridges and pay a few tolls to get to Target and you are wondering why you're scraping snow off your windshield in a pair of heels and you want to come back to the desert where the sun shines most of the time and you can go hiking in the backyard.

I agree. Why did you leave the first time? How old were you?

The first time I left for college, so I was eighteen.

You decided to go to college where?

I went to Wash U in St. Louis. I thought coming from the East Coast that I might go to an East Coast school. I applied to East Coast schools, West Coast schools, and that was the only one in the middle of the country, and somebody said to me, "If you visit on a nice day, you're probably going to end up there," and that's exactly what happened.

Wow. What was your major?

I majored in visual communications and marketing. It was good. It was a great environment for me. It was a work hard/play hard place.

That's amazing. Now how do you use that in the work that you are doing here?

I am so extremely fortunate that I really use everything I've learned throughout my college career and other aspects of my life in what I get to do every day. I work for Paul Steelman and he is a well-known and respected architect here in the city. We do some local work. We do a lot of overseas work. I get to help run our branding division. We write stories and experiences that sell the softer side of the architecture. We're primarily entertainment focused, so we do resort, casino, hotel, theme park, and a couple of other projects in between. In order to pitch those pieces and get people onboard, there's a storytelling aspect that has to happen and I get to be part of that.

I like that.

So do I.

Storytelling, good. Tell me what you were doing the weekend of October first.

That weekend was...I can't remember. I think it was that weekend. That weekend was Yom Kippur. I am Jewish. Saturday I broke the fast with a friend of mine who actually after breaking the fast was going to the Saturday night show. I had been with him actually in a previous year to that concert, but I had no plans to go this particular year. I knew that he was going. He's a diehard fan of that festival and has been going since day one. When I heard the news, he was my first thought.

Did you try to get in touch with him?

I did. I texted him and other people I knew. He called me surprisingly almost instantly and let me know he was okay. He's got a lot of stories to share of his own. But, yes, that was my first response.

If he decides to share, we would like to have his stories. The reason we're doing this is we want to help people with PTSD and we'd like to help the rest of the country, cities that might go through things like this. We have had one survivor who has gotten in touch with a survivor in another shooting and a survivor in an earlier shooting got in touch with him. We are finding connections across the country. If your friend really would like to talk, we'd love to have him share his story.

I have several friends who were there and I will certainly ask them.

Thank you so much. Tell me about your experience with country music.

Truthfully I never liked it. The majority of my younger years I could not get into it. I dated somebody who really loved it and somehow that made me love it, too, and appreciate it and I hear it differently now.

Try to explain to me the difference, what you hear that's different now.

You hear the story, and maybe I wasn't interested in that at that point in time in my life, or maybe because some of the things that the singers sing about were experiences that I was too young to have had although I would say I love almost all music and really have an appreciation for it. I grew up playing the piano and the flute. But, yes, you hear things. Every singer has a story. Ever since I was little, country music or any other music, I'm always listening to the lyrics. I would sit by the tape deck with a recorder on one side and the player on the other side and tape from the radio and try to make sure I got the play button to hit at the right spot so that there were no commercials, putting my own mixed tapes together.

That's great. Tell me what that weekend has meant to you and the way you see this city.

I was at my mom's house when my stepfather came in the computer room. I was helping my mother on the computer. He said, "There has been a shooting." And he said, "And there are two

people who have been already identified dead." I instantly looked at the video online and I knew it was going to be a lot more than that, instantly.

I stayed up almost the whole night wondering what I was going to do. I was at her house. I drove home. I thought about driving by the blood bank, but I wasn't quite sure. I went home first and I started looking up information online and I tried to call. Of course, it was a recording at that hour. It was like two or three in the morning. I had never donated blood before, but knew that that was where I needed to be. There was a big G2E convention in town that week that my company and my office, everyone was preparing for that. I was reading what to do if you're going to donate blood because not having done it, I didn't know. It was saying, make sure you eat, make sure you get a good night's rest. I thought, *I don't know how I'm going to get a good night's rest*. But I tried for maybe an hour or two and got up.

I spoke to my brother first thing in the morning. My brother lives on the East Coast and after 9/11 he went to the blood bank and told me that there was no line at that time. He said to me, "I don't know, Lauren, if there will be a line, but good for you, go, go."

I got there near seven in the morning and the line was already wrapped around three sides of the building. I thought, number one, *times have changed*. Number two, I put a post, up on all of my social media immediately that said, "For everybody who says Vegas has no culture, bullshit." There was a big response to that and it was really interesting because now all of a sudden people were reaching out to me, like, "Can I join you down there? Where should I be? What can I do?" I emailed my office and I said, "I'm not in today. If you know me, you know I cannot be productive. I can't be anywhere but here."

I started to look at this city differently that morning. I don't know if I answered your question just now.

I think you did. Do you think other people began to see us differently?

For sure. R & R put out a great ad campaign; everybody knows it. The visual imagery to it was great and the two words of—"We've been there for you during the good times, thank you for being here for us now"—I think being that that's also my line of work, it was brilliant. It came across to me and everybody I know took that and changed their profile pictures to that and I think developed a really different kind of love. I had a lot of other people from outside of Las Vegas checking in. Yes, they were curious.

I think we all agree with that. Tell me more about the blood line. You were there at seven o'clock. Give me some details about what happened during the time you spent there.

Like I said, I was nervous because I had never donated blood and I wasn't sure what to expect. My brother on the phone call had said, "Take some bread or something; make sure you eat something." So I grabbed a little bit of food. I was on the third side of the building wraparound, and while I was there the line just grew and grew and grew.

There was a form to fill out and while I was filling out that form, people were coming over with water and then with doughnuts and then with coffee and then with muffins. By the time I had made my way up onto the second side of the building, I couldn't believe how much food had shown up. There was somebody who walked around with a "free hug" sign. I've seen those before. But every single person in the line took one that day. It was really like a weird special thing to watch, just so many people showing up. I knew that was the place for me to be and I knew others would go, but I didn't realize that would be the place where the city was and maybe the country was somehow pouring out. People showed up with cases and cases and cases of water. They tell you, you need to eat and you need to drink. I have never been so thoroughly hydrated and "carbed" as I was that morning and so ready to give.

I stayed in line until I think around eleven o'clock, is when I actually signed in, but I never got to donate that day because there were just so many people and I just didn't have the opportunity that day.

When you say you didn't give blood that day, did you go back later?

My company has now instituted four times a year that we're going to do blood drives as a result of what we saw and people's desire to give. We just did the first one. I unfortunately had the flu, so I wasn't able to, but I plan to.

Good. Are you still scared when you think about giving blood?

No, I'm not scared of it. I think it's really important. Somebody from the blood bank did come and speak with our company and really educated everybody and made sure everybody else knew that those people who donated that day, their blood wasn't necessarily going directly to the victims. I think a lot of people may or may not know that, but it was an interesting insight to learn, and then to have that blood be able to help others in other parts of the country is really a wonderful thing.

Yes, I like that aspect of it, too. What did you learn about yourself during that period, during those few days?

I learned a lot. There are so many sad stories that have evolved in recent years of a similar type and sometimes when you watch those stories on television, they can be really mobilizing for some and some people stare and watch the TV and they watch it over and over and they don't know what to do and there is this feeling for so many people where they stay in this place of "I don't know what to do; I don't know what to do." For me, this was the first time where I was so in a place to give and so in a place to find people who needed whatever they needed. My friend who was there, for example, needed a buddy, a leader that week, and I was able to show up for

him. When I learned about the Healing Garden, as soon as I learned about it, I went down there and I shoveled and I planted and I laid tiles. There was nowhere else for me to be. It was a strange week trying to juggle a little bit of work—a lot of work, I should say—and knowing that no matter how tired I was, I had to show up in these other spots. Now when I get to drive by there, it's like, *I helped do that*. It's a little piece, but I have a lot of other plans of things I would like to do.

What are some of those plans?

I have always had an interest in memorial design and it stems to my father was killed by a terrorist attack when I was very young. I was almost five. It was at a time when *terrorism* wasn't a word in the mouths of America. He was overseas. The shock of it was strange. There was no Internet, so hearing that news was like, *what do you mean?* You can't just look it up, and who do you call? If there is someone to call, will they speak English? It was just a different time. So I grew up in a space and a place where there really wasn't anybody to talk to. Nobody in my circle, none of my friends had that situation, and trying to explain it was really foreign. I grew up this way. It's what I know.

Sometime right before I started working for Paul, I knew I needed to go in some kind of architectural path because I always had this interest. I remember growing up on the East Coast, I went to the Vietnam Vet Memorial and I was fascinated. My father had been in Vietnam, but that wasn't the thing that took his life. But I guess I related to loss and this seemed like a place that other people felt lost, and maybe when I was younger that was one of the places where I got that feeling. I had always been interested in that and it's ironic that I ended up in the hospitality side, but I have this passion for creating spaces that evoke a feeling and evoke an experience. I've always wanted to do monuments and memorial design.

As important as it is to me, one of the things I've learned about myself personally is just that it's a part of you, but it doesn't have to be all of you because it changes you so much and it's really important, but if you let it become you and you let it drive the way you live your everyday life so much so that you become heavy, then you're not really living your potential. I love what I get to do, but I get to also use those skills and I'm looking and searching in ways to use those skills for these ideas.

When I showed up at the Healing Garden that evening, I spoke to somebody who was in charge there. I said to him, "I have ideas. I want to help." And he said, "Give me a napkin sketch because this here started on a napkin sketch." And I said, "My ideas are a lot bigger than a napkin. I need a pizza box." I was joking with him. He said, "Oh, we have pizza." So he walked me over to the table where the pizza was and he gave me a pizza. Then I took home the pizza. He said, "Come back to me with ideas. Here is my card."

The next night we were dedicating the garden. I drew all over that box and I went to that ceremony and thought, *I'm never going to find this guy*. But they ended up calling him up on stage, so I was able to spot him and talk with him afterwards. I have been talking with a few people in the city here and there about ideas.

Tell me where, and how would your memorial space look? Where would you put it and how would it look?

I have so many ideas and they're all different. One of the first ideas I had was I looked at Jason Aldean's lyrics at that moment and his lyrics are something to the effect of "putting on those boots and making that climb." I thought, *in Las Vegas, a lot of people I know find peace in the mountains*. There's a lot of discussion and talk about whether a memorial should be on the actual site or in a different location. People have mixed feelings about both especially because that site

is, in the eyes of some, maybe not good for the city and the tourism aspect of Las Vegas or the fun side that people know Las Vegas for. I think the Healing Garden and its placement is interesting because I think people needed to get away from that site at the time, but there is some good part of that.

I find peace in the mountains and I think a lot of people that live in this city locally go to the mountains to just drop whatever is on their minds. One of the ideas was looking for a mountain that looked back at the city of Las Vegas and I thought about maybe a pair of cowboy boots and maybe something that engraves those lyrics that Jason Aldean says, "putting on them boots and making that climb," because it relates to country music, but it relates to anybody that's a hiker and it relates to just getting up every day no matter what, perseverance.

What it makes me think of, after doing some of these interviews, I've interviewed now maybe four or five people whose feet were hurting in their cowboy boots by that third day and how they had to run and how they forgot all about the pain coming from those boots. They just kept on running.

Interesting. That's good insight.

I love the idea for the memorial.

It's one of many. I actually now have several pizza boxes from Las Vegas, Chicago, a business trip to Italy. What I've realized is that pizza, of course, brings people together, so there is this idea thing happening and I have sketches on pizza boxes, which I hope evolves into something.

Wow. I interviewed an artist, J.K. Russ, who has taken some of the cards that came from all over the world. The city somehow received these cards and she made an exhibit out of some of them. I love that artists are taking part in this. You are an artist and an architect and all of that. I just think this is amazing.

I think it's really important. I looked at the wall that's at the Healing Garden now and my first instinct was that that particular wall can't be a permanent fixture because of the way that it's made. That was immediately why I needed to talk to somebody and I said, "What are the plans?" Because immediately I went back to that childhood memory of the Vietnam Wall and that is one type of execution, but there's so many, especially now. It needs to be unique. I have a different idea if it were actually at the site and I have a different idea if it were...

I love that. Are you aware that the museums in the area have taken a lot of—I don't know about the Healing Garden—but the memorial sites that have been established, the museums have taken those items away to preserve?

Yes.

When you go to a place now where there is a crowd, do you pay more attention?

I always have. I have just because of the way I grew up and because my mother has said it to me my entire life. *Be careful. Call me on the way. Call me on the way home.* She is my check-in person to this day. If I go anywhere in the world, "Hey, Mom, I made it here; hey, Mom, I'm home." It's just how our family had to operate.

I am watching the news this week and what's happened in Parkland. Trump sat with a lot of people today who were speaking out from different walks of life, parents and other city officials voicing their opinions, and you can hear the emotion. It's heartbreaking. And, yet, I really do hope it drives change because those stories are also really strong and really so, so important. I'm watching people have the same reactions and the same emotions for the first time that I've had my entire life. I'm looking at, where is my role in that? How do I help them?

I think those students are so brave.

Yes.

Just so in the right place at the right time.

Yes. Their lives will be changed forever and it is so incredibly unfortunate, but they will do good things.

I think so, too. How did your feelings change about guns in this country before and after this event? Since that time we've had the church in Texas and now Parkland, so all of this.

My feelings are...It's so hard. I am not a gun owner. I know many people who are. I do believe, I think, like most people that anything that has the capability to kill in this way needs to be looked at and needs to be evaluated. There are parts about the gun, but there are so many more parts about the individual. I look at these individuals and I am constantly and consistently wondering, what drove them to that point? In any act of violence, it's the thing that I look for immediately because my father was taken by an act of terrorism and in order for any act of violence to be called out as terrorism, they have to know the motive. If the motive is one of political aim, then it is defined as terrorism. In a school shooting, they haven't identified that. In the shooting here, it's still not clear and it's still not identified, so they cannot call that an act of terrorism because they don't know the shooter's motive. I think that that motive and that catalyst, I am consistently wondering, how do people get to that point? There's a lot of issues that have to be spoken about. I feel so strongly—and this sounds so cheesy—that they must not be loved and they must feel like such an outsider to commit something of that magnitude, and so somewhere that conversation has to change.

I think you've probably touched on something when we look at that young man's life. Both parents, being adopted, then just being taken in by somebody.

There were so many flags. His vision came to fruition after both parents were gone. There's just something there. So now he sits, I think the news said, he sits on—what are they going to do?

Will they put him in jail or will they give him the death penalty? I am sure that the victims' families have lots of thoughts about that. You will have other people who might want to sit down with him and say, why did you do this? I think about that all the time personally. It's a complicated question.

How old are you?

Thirty-seven.

You're so wise.

No. I have a lot to learn.

I'm not saying that you don't, but right now I just think you're so wise.

Thank you.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything that you've thought about as we've gone through these? Anything that you've witnessed from your friend as he is healing? Anything about the blood line that you were in?

For anybody who lives here, the sense of community feels so much stronger. I have another girlfriend who was grazed by a bullet. They all have their stories, so I will try to get them in here so that they can share their stories. I could tell them to you, but they could do a much better job.

I loved seeing what the Golden Knights did that week or later that week and have done since and I love that that team is born here and I love that city pride and I think it is really cool. All of a sudden, if I'm wearing a Golden Knights hat and somebody in the middle of a desert on a bike path or in Marshall's will stop me and say, "Great hat." I loved what they did for the opening ceremonies. I love just that sense of city pride. I like seeing "Vegas Strong" hashtag things; I feel it. Having the experience that I've had and watching other cities go through terrible acts of violence in all kinds of capacities, to feel that here sucks and, at the same time, what has

grown out of it and is still growing out of it I find to be really fascinating and weirdly special, but I'm glad to be part of it.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

I really appreciate it.

[End of recorded interview]