

Jagged Path Interview: Faustine McDonald

Faustine McDonald is the daughter of Victoria Casey McDonald. In this interview she tells us about her mother's life and art practice.

BRAHM: So your mother Victoria, Casey McDonald, where was she from?

FM: She is from Callaway, North Carolina. She was actually born at home. And what's really interesting, you know, she was as she was a historian and a teacher is that if you actually pull up the records for birth, because in the 1940s, you actually went to report the births, you know, to the courthouse and to somebody. And because of my grandfather's complexion, and people not paying attention, you actually have her labeled as white because of my grandfather's complexion, your her and her twin brother, which is just interesting, because he went to go register them because of his complexion. It's just one of those cool little things factor, if you ever actually pulled up your records to see those back in the day, how they did things. But yeah.

BRAHM: Okay. And then, so she was, from what I've learned from reading about your mother in her books, and then also from Marie, so she was a historian, a teacher, or preacher and author...

FM: Coach.

BRAHM: Coach? What she coached?

FM: She coached everything, actually. But her specialty was basketball, she won the most champ women's championships for Smoky Mountain elementary for the middle school. So when she was a part of the community, she was truly just not, you know, there as a factor. She, she helped build the community around her. She helped when she was when she taught. She, like I said, she was a social studies teacher, she was very engaging and making the kids understand the history. And she always did it through her artwork and her books to understand black history. And her actual first, not the first book that was published, but her first historical novel, fictional novel, well, that was actually based off of my family. But what what's cool is it was written during her 30 year teaching career, she actually continued to add to it because the kids would ask for more. They wanted to hear more about Amanda and Bill, and wanted to know where their story went and how they do and that's how she got them to engage into history. So that was one of the really cool things that she did. If you ever went through her sixth through eighth grade history class, you would get to, in the certain months, get to read her book, get to hear her read about the book, and read it to you, and then she would apply it to the history.

BRAHM: Oh, that's wonderful. And so then Amanda, was that a family member? Amanda and Bill, were they...?

FM: Yes, that's my great-great-great-grandparents. They were actually, Amanda is was owned by William Holland Thomas, which was the biggest slave owner in western North Carolina, and one of the biggest slavers in western North Carolina, as well as he is listed as Amanda's father on her death certificate. Which is very, very interesting. And if you know anything about William Holland Thomas, he also was who helped they call him the white chief of the Cherokee, which was never the chief, but it was just a nickname. He helped the Cherokee Indians obtain the land they have now.

BRAHM: Wow.

FM: Yeah. And then also fought for the Confederacy. So he's a very interesting person, shall you say?

BRAHM: Yeah, definitely. And that's incredible that she not like that only you have that heritage but that she did so much research into it, and then was able to share that story with the children of your community from that region as well.

FM: Absolutely. And then you know, like I said, with the coaching, basketball was her specialty. She coached me even. That's, let's put it this way, maybe a mistake on the court, but it wasn't my fault. It's my fault. It was still my fault.

BRAHM: Definitely. Well, that's wonderful that she was such a pillar of the community and was so involved in mentoring youth and, so then we've got that's going to be included in the exhibition is a painting that she made. That's of her and her sisters. And so do you know when she started making art?

FM: She started to paint at a very young age, it was just always a part of the activities that my grandmother did at home and that picture that you have, and that you're going to be displaying in the exhibit. That's literally an example of how the household was on a day-to-day basis, then go growing up, was them doing artwork. My grandmother was a teacher as well. So doing artwork, those things, interest them hair, electronics, you know, drawings, buildings, so all of those things in that drawing. And in that painting, that's what they did every day as children. So it was just a part of everyday life. It was a thing for the black community comes to the KC household to come to that areas that you're seeing described in that picture. Because, my uncle would build certain things, build those towers in different of different towns, one playing music, you know, and they, so that it all started when she was very young, artwork did for her. And that painting was done in 1967. And what's interesting, because of where our house was located, it was where the old Western (Carolina University) dump was. So that painting that you have a copy of, it's actually done on sheetrock.

BRAHM: So the piece of artwork that we have is on a piece of concrete, is that right? You said...

FM: Yes.

BRAHM: She got from the dump?

FM: Yeah, so they, you know, they use the materials at hand. So, mom, that was instead of, you know, having a normal canvas, Mom, used sheetrock, because that was what was available to her. And so we have several paintings that are done originals that are done on sheetrock, and that's one of them.

BRAHM: Wow. And that's amazing that you know, their home was just kind of this hub for the community as well. And then just all that creativity going on, among all the siblings, I guess, got to be a nurturing place to grow up in and to be able to express yourself and everyone, you know, that is a very lively image where people are playing music or building things and everyone gathered together. That's really nice. So were paintings her favorite thing to make or favorite type of artwork to make?

FM: Yes. So mother was very much she loved to sketch as well as but painting was her. I can never remember a time that she wasn't working on a piece of artwork. It was just such a joy of hers was to paint with old pastels, and watercolor. You know, she did very different mediums. And she had her box. I remember trying to teach them how to work with our pastels because it's not the easiest thing to do. Some work with a little pastel and how the textures move and stuff. Those are my fond memories of her actually drawing she used when I was growing up, was her doing old pastel.

BRAHM: So in addition to her artwork, one thing Marie told me is that she kind of that your mother kind of put her artwork on the backburner to focus more on the history and on her writing. And is that true?

FM: Yeah, she did. I mean, she did it as a hobby. You know, and that was just something that she enjoyed. I think it was a stress release. She was a single mom, you know, but she focused on when she went and got her degree. Most people don't even know what Teacher Corps is. But when she did that, and she got her master's in that process. She also went when she was going to Western she got she was the first person to actually do any research on African American history in western North Carolina with a grant that she got through Western through one of our teachers that told us she apply, and it started with a slideshow. I think it was \$1,000 that was granted to her. And she did a slideshow, you know, the old school slideshow. As you know, the rotator, and everything and to get pictorial of what people did, and that was how it all started was with that actual grant surely I think encompassing who she was meant to be. And to continue her journey was what started with that grant and her doing that starting a history and she ran with it, she absolutely loved it and always was writing.

BRAHM: That's, yeah, that's wonderful to be able to, I mean, have the opportunity. So she was part of the first group of African American students to graduate from Western, right?

FM: Yes.

BRAHM: And then, for her to do it. I mean, later in life to is a non-traditional student, I mean, I'm seeing it was at she was in her 30s, right when she went through college. So that's wonderful to be able to have the opportunity to follow through with it. And then for something like that, to be able to, like a passion that carried through her life. Now, the, it's, that's interesting that she was the first one to really start doing the research about the African American community in western North Carolina, through Western because one scholar and book that I've read recently, as from Ann Miller Woodford, who's from the Matthews area, and has also done more recently done research about the black community in that area as well. And she's done work through Western Carolina too. So it's really nice that, you know, Western has become a place that type of research can happen.

FM: Yeah. Ann Woodford actually used all of my mother's research in her books. So that's where she got most of her research from the Jackson County, and the surrounding county area was my mother's research. She kind of --. Yeah, So that's where she got all that research. And my mother helped her along the way as well, when she was alive.

BRAHM: Yeah, that's great. And that makes sense. Because, gosh, that is a big book that's there. And I'm, it's kind of crazy and hard to think that one person could do all that. So it's understandable that she's used your mother's research as well. And it was a group effort there. So she wrote, your mom wrote a lot of different books. And do you know, when she first began writing was this part of like, when she was in college?

FM: It was partly in college in, like I said, it really started with that grant, then she really, you know, when I, as far as I can remember. And recall, it really started, you know, as when I saw it all together, it was through my, I can't remember a time I wasn't at the library watching her do genealogy pulling people's history, pulling, you know, the death certificate, the birth certificate, to see how far back she could go, tracing people's roots, if anybody needed anything, you know, that was they call my mother. She was the unofficial historian for you know, all of African Americans that knew in western North Carolina. And I always remember on Saturdays, it's, it's indefinitely ingrained in my brain, is that we would go, we'd go to the library. And then when it opens, well, I help her do research, I can tell you exactly how to find your birth death certificate and how they're filed. And help her do that research for all of that. And then once we got done, probably, you know, depending on if the library was open on that Saturday or Friday, and then after that, we go, I'd go play basketball. But there was never a time where I wasn't helping her on the weekends research and do. That's what she took her downtime when she wasn't coaching and teaching. She was looking up genealogy and doing the history. And I mean, I'm talking for me, I'm 30 going to be 35 in August and 34 at the moment, and I can say at least from 10 years old, like my youngest memories are always of going up to the courthouse, and looking up

records and doing that and her teaching me how everything worked in the books and the history of how things move with genealogy. So, that's, I'm -- so 10 -- so early 90s?

BRAHM: Wow, yeah, that's incredible. I mean, in that time, you had to do it all by hand. I mean, now a lot of this stuff is you can use websites like ancestry.com or something, or some of these files are digitized, but that's exhaustive research to spend time going through all those files. Now, like, yeah, what was that? Like? What type of? Would that mean to you? You know, growing up and seeing your mom do that, like, how did that make you feel and kind of like reflecting on that now?

FM: It was a joy, it was just a part of our routine, I loved it. You know, some people revere their parents, or, you know, or aggravated halfway with their parents half the time because mom, I don't want to do that I want to go this, you know, she was, I mean, now, that woman, I would never cross in my life. And if she was still alive, she looked at me twisted, I'll go the other way. I'll do whatever needs to be done. But I enjoyed it. I loved it. I loved spending time with her, she was a single mom. And so she was my best friend. Because of my sickle cell. She was always working being there. And you know, and she always told me, I could overcome and telling showing me throughout how to use my brain, as well as my athleticism. And so it was, it was a joy to do those things. Because like I said, she was my coach as well. And I never thought of it as a task. You know, honestly, it was fun. She made it fun. It was a fun time. Well, hey, let's go. See if we can find who, whose mom and dad are this. And let's see if we can find those pages of this. It was always an activity, it was something joyful. So I don't-- It made me feel wonderful to help her to this day. Yeah, when I got older, and she was still doing the research, and she was holding me up with the internet and things like that, of course, those teenage years, you're a teenager, it is what it is, you would get frustrated *just click this button*. You know, but I enjoyed every moment of it truly.

BRAHM: Oh, that's wonderful. And that's great to have. I mean, to have such a role model like that as well. And just to, like, instill that sense of confidence in you and to show you that, you know, this type of work is important. And you know, somebody's got to do it, might as well be you right?

FM: Absolutely.

BRAHM: And, yeah, I just kind of chuckle with your story about the computer stuff, because I'm 33. And my mother had me when she was 38. So when computers came around, she was not used to them. And I've had that similar frustration of like, just just click, just move the mouse and click there. Like why What don't you get, you know, in these things that are kind of come natural to you. But for them, it's different. But then at the same time, they can run circles around you when it comes like using the card catalog and pulling down the files --

FM: For typewriter, typing. Because you mean they had typing back in the day versus you know, that

typing class, it wasn't computer class, but it was still the same brain ethics and motor function. So it was just nice to see it in evolution. It's fun. That's for sure.

BRAHM: So did she ever tell you what her like what the books meant to her? Like what doing that research meant to her?

FM: Oh, absolutely. We had a lot of conversations about that. Like I said, she was my one of my-- she was my best friend and my hero, you know, but we would talk and it meant so much to her that she was able to publish them and not, it wasn't about recognition, it was about people's stories being told, because people don't realize the history that they stand in. And that not she was being seen, but that the work and the people in the community that was being built, that how much African Americans built was seen and it meant so much to her to be able to do so. I remember her excitement for when the pictorial history of African Americans was able to be published, you know, and she got not sponsorship, as well as then when she was able to do just over the hill, which we just were able to republish, which is the small, the short stories African Americans in western North Carolina, that though those were pivotal points for her that knowing her research was able to reach an audience and that it was needed, she knew it was needed. But to be able to get that reciprocation it meant a lot to her, from the community to know that their, you know, the history is not lost.

BRAHM: Yeah, that's wonderful. I mean, just to be able to share those stories, because, I mean, it means so much to y'all. But I mean, there's so many other people who's, who don't have their family history. And then, because of the work that your mother did, now, they know some of it. Right?

FM: Exactly.

BRAHM: So that that's really wonderful. I mean, there's such a service to be doing for the community. And it really sounds like she was just, you know, a community servant. And she gave her all to, to the people of her community. And that's really special. So your mother was a preacher. Now, was this type of work like was her art and her research? Would you say that it was kind of part of her spiritual practice or not?

FM: Um, she always, she has different paintings and stuff that are very religious and spiritual, and they're beautiful. I have one, you know, going to the church and getting baptized in the water in the river. And seeing the crowds of people, that's how they did it back in the day was in the river, being baptized. And that painting is just, it's a glorious, glorious painting because it shows how the communities truly it was done from a picture truly gathered. You know, and appreciate it was, you know, that came late in life for her. She was always a God-fearing woman. But that calling came late for her. And it was a beautiful thing to watch her up in the pulpit. Watching her preach, it was just immaculate. Because it is one of those things if you're actually, you know, if you go to church, I always

tell people don't go to church to just to say I go to church, I go to get my toes stepped on. And if you don't know what that means, then you ain't been to church, right? If you don't leave the church, and you ain't had your toes stepped on by God, something's wrong. If you don't feel like it was pointing at you, something's wrong. And she always, you know, was that when she was preaching, God definitely filtered through her. And, or, yeah, her art definitely, like depicted, you know, the African American community and church.

BRAHM: Oh, yeah, that's powerful. Yeah, if you don't go to church to make appearances, you gotta get your toes stepped on. Because yeah, you need to feel the message and, and have, it means something to you. And too often it's not there. And that's, I think that's really cool that she, uh, it's something that came to her later in life and, and it's like a calling for her. So, and you told me earlier that your mother would kind of shoot, like trying to get you to do the oil pastels and teach you how to do some of the art with her. And then that's really great that she also kind of brought you along with her to do her research. So that kind of, you know, you learned how to do that in the process. Now, do you have any siblings?

FM: I have one brother and he is passed away, he passed away in 2004 of complications of sickle cell. And he was an amazing person, he was the smartest person you will ever know. And he was the most irritating, we were about 14 years older than each other. And he would always be so because of the difference, you know, I would always be running around and wanting to follow him. But I always like, you know, when he would wanted to help me with my homework. It was a such irritation. Because I would say I think the answer is and he would tell me no, don't think, no. And but his name was Creighton Casey. And he loved that man to death. But Lord have mercy. He worked my nerves because he would just say things just like mom that would make you just think and you would have no response. But to say okay.

BRAHM: Yeah, family can do that they know how to push those buttons. And so would he come along? Was he also like, be part of the research?

FM: So he was a lot older than me, we're talking 14 years different, so when I'm four he's 18. When I'm 10, he's 28. So, you know, he, he was more of finding himself as a man and you know, growing up and doing different things and college and that sort of thing. So that was where he was at with all of in this process, he would always come home to read mom, you know, show mom a couple books or that sort of thing. But he was like I said he was kind of, my perspective was that, you know, like I said, he was already out of the house doing college. It was more of mom mentoring him and being a parent to him as, you know, letting him see the world.

BRAHM: Great. And well, that's wonderful. You have such cherished memories with him. And then yeah, definitely the different experience with the different ages. I can similarly relate to that. Well, yeah,

so then thank you for sharing so much. And then I just have a couple more questions. How did you meet Marie? Marie Cochran?

FM: I met Marie Cochran, through my mother, my mother helped mentor her they were I guess, when Marie worked at Western she just happened to always see mom at every community of event and is that in the third and they connected and mom was always, you know, Marie, always on the weekends, when she came in, or whatever, coming back from Georgia, she would always stay with my mom. So that's kind of how that worked. And that's how I met her. It was through my mother. And you know.

BRAHM: Yeah, because I know, Murray worked at Western in the art department for a while, so it makes sense that they got to know each other there during that time. Now, you're an entrepreneur, and you have your company Survivors Journey. So, you know, how did that come about? And do you do the designs for the clothing? Or do you work with outside artists?

FM: So Survivors Journey clothing, and actually came about -- 12 years ago now? So my brother passed away, as I said, in 2004, when he passed away, my outlet was to draw because like I said, I'm very much an artist. So our family's very artistic, and drawn and paint. So I had a notebook, and I drew it when I did a memorial design for him. And you know, it was just to get emotion out, it was nothing, nothing for it to be scenes. Well, if you ever been in an old school, or a black household, nothing in that house, yours, it's all to be seen, by whatever, by that parent and my mother in that house. And don't get me wrong. She gave me my privacy, but she found the notebook and she was just looking through and she's like, Tina, I love this. So I was by that time, I was 18. And she was like, I'm out. So I wanted to for my brother's anniversary. For my brother's birthday. I wanted to get her the memorial design on there, as well as I did a symbol on the back. Well, she loved the shirt. And so a place to be back in that day was the bowling alley. So we would use them as our bowling shirts. Because my mom loved me mom loved the boat. Well, after 1000s and 1000s of people asking me about the shirt and wanting and telling them no, they were like, well, we know that, you know, the more designs just for you and your mom, but we really just want the logo on the back. And my mom said, you know, you should think about this. You should think about starting on clothing. I said no, ma'am. And she's like, no, but I was like, no, she was like, no, but when my mama tells me to think about something, I think about it. So I say well, God, if I'm supposed to be doing this, give me a sign give me something. Well, you know, when your parents tell you to clean out that corner and cleaned out like 10 years or your old school stuff, or whatever it may be. Well, I was told to do that. What I did, but I was told so I cleaned up that corner and I cleaned up the corner. There was a little orange five star notebook and it said dreams every letter was a different color. Look like my 10 year old self, you know person's handwriting. And I was like what in the world is this? So I'll open it. While my 10 year old 10 year old 12 year old self did a business plan for a clothing brand. I don't remember doing it must have been done when a hospital you know, through my school,

my supersite you can't exactly play sports. So you know, you're right. I must have done it then. And, you know, 14 year old you're thinking maybe three names three logos, you know. So that's about it, you're 10, you know? Well, I had three names, three logos, who I was gonna sell the clothing to what type of clothing I was going to sale, and who was going to distribute my clothing and where I wanted it to be sold at, at 10. So I said, Alright, Lord, I closed it. And I began a true business plan. It started out at survivall pride that in the south just didn't mix after about six, seven years. It continued to push us into a corner, it was amazing. I had a store, I was the first African American to have a store downtown silver, I was the first clothing brand to come out of western North Carolina. And I was the first African American woman to have an African American and in woman to have a brand come out of western North Carolina. But that's how it came about was all from my brothers passing on always tell people that it's a tragedy to triumph story. The brand is amazing. And then I changed the brand about two years ago, I rebranded to Survivors Journey, it's smooth, it made more sense. And we added elaborated on updating the logo, and everything is survived by grace, living in the moment, that's the motto. And that everything has around that positive, uplifting message. And so that's what I do. And so my art background from mom continued into there, and she did help me. In the very beginning, she really helped me run the store, we had an art gallery inside the store as well. Store. So yeah, she definitely was a huge influence and help to do that.

BRAHM: That's wonderful. She helped, she encouraged you along there, and then, also that the community, you know, just a kind of, it was like men, I love that design you've got. I understand it that something personal, but we really want that logo. So is the logo kind of the bird on the clock?

FM: No, it is the stars, it's the turtle inside, not the bird. But stars inside in the middle. That is the original. It's called God's Compass, so it's pointing north, south, east, west. And, the ones pointed to God. And then one is the tears you cried, which is the line going down the middle of the star. And the other dots, the past and the other lines, the paths you take in life. And so, and the bird is representation of, it's flying, it's a journey as we fly through life. It is a part of Native American symbol as well, and then the clock is time. We never, get that time back. Time is of the essence. We need to live in that moment.

BRAHM: Oh, yeah, very powerful stuff. And just, yeah, beautiful, beautiful design. And so that's wonderful that you've been able to carry that forward, and that have your store, and then that your mom kind of helped you and helped encourage you along the way with that. Well, this has been great Faustine. I really appreciate your time and your openness, and sharing this morning.