

Stories in Our Roots

Schuyler Carter | Community Building Through Generations

Episode 5 • 24:51
(edited for clarity)

SPEAKERS

Heather Murphy, Schuyler Carter

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Welcome to the Stories in Our Roots podcast. I'm your host Heather Murphy. In this podcast, we dive deep into how knowing the stories of our ancestors can make a difference in our lives today. Discovering our family history is more than a hobby. It is a way to connect deeply with ourselves, those we love and the world around us.

Heather Murphy 00:25

Welcome to Episode Five of Stories in Our Roots. I'm Heather Murphy. In this episode, I interview Schuyler Carter. I met Schuyler through Instagram, she posts frequently about her family and I got a feeling that she really knew these people, they weren't just names and dates to her. Another reason I'm excited to share Schuyler's experiences is because she is my first guest who is not a professional genealogist. Schuyler holds a master's degree in Urban Planning and is a PhD candidate in Urban and Regional Science. In this interview you will hear how her professional pursuits and coming to know her ancestors have become intertwined. Now here is the interview with Schuyler Carter.

Heather Murphy 01:11

I am excited to be here today with Schuyler. She is the first person that I'm interviewing that is not a professional genealogist and I am so excited to have her perspective on how she became involved with family history. Now to start, Schuyler, could you introduce yourself?

Schuyler Carter 01:29

Sure. I am Schuyler Carter. I am originally from the Muskogee, Summit, Oklahoma area. That is where I grew up for most of my childhood. I am currently a PhD student at Texas A&M University where I am getting a PhD in Urban and Regional Science. So I have a background in urban planning, historic preservation, agriculture business, a whole bunch of other stuff.

Heather Murphy 01:56

Great and can you tell me a little bit about your family?

Schuyler Carter 01:59

Sure. So I have two sisters. I'm the middle child. I think I'm the non-traditional middle child. But I yes, I have two sisters. Both my parents are still in Oklahoma, where my mother is from the Muskogee area. I'm really close with my grandmother, who is actually, you know, I'll talk about her a little bit later, but she's like one of my biggest inspirations. 92 years old. So she is a real pillar in our family and community. Yeah, it's just us.

Heather Murphy 02:31

Okay, that's great. So here's my dying... I've been dying to know since I asked you to be on, how did you start becoming interested in researching your family?

Schuyler Carter 02:43

I started my genealogy journey around 2009. So I was a senior, a senior in high school. And if you know anything, I guess, about African American families, there's this like folklore, I guess, you have Native American in your family. And being from Oklahoma there are resources and scholarships and grants and things to help you fund your education. So as I was in that senior year trying to find funding to go to college, I had heard this story my whole life about, you know, our grandmother, great-grandmother had Indian in her and we just got to find it so we can get a card and you know, do all this. So I'm like, "Mom, I'll do it. I'm gonna find the connection." I started looking, I found a connection, not necessarily to the Dawes Roll, which is what many of the Native tribes go by to acknowledge your citizenship with the tribe. I didn't find a relative there. But I just I got bit by the bug as I was looking and finding different information about my great-grandparents and you know, great-uncles and aunts and everything. Like, I just thought, wow, like I really started to feel a connection further back to ancestors and those that came before me and just finding similarities within their stories and my own and you know what I was interested in at the time. And yeah, so from there... I did not find the connection to give me any scholarships or anything, but I mean, so much more. I have been on the journey ever since. So it's, yeah, been over 10 years, and I'm only 28, just turned 28.

Heather Murphy 04:27

That is a great story. So do you remember, was there just a time that you're like, "I'm never going to stop doing this" or did it just happen gradually?

Schuyler Carter 04:39

Um, I will say it never really stopped. I didn't have as much time as I would have liked to work on it. As I was finishing my bachelor's degree, and even a little bit of my master's I was just really consumed with my research and everything like that, but I never let it go. Like I would try to, I would try to look up family members and just different things continuously. But yes, like I said, I got bit by the bug and I was just like, I really love doing this. Like I really enjoyed that, like thrill of finding another relative, finding siblings of my great-grandparents and things like that and being able to talk with my parents about it.

Schuyler Carter 05:17

Because even now my mom, she's just like, "You know more about the family that I do." But yeah, I think, I really think after maybe like two years after I really started researching, I just was like, I really enjoy this as a hobby. Like just being able to make that connection. And it just feels like... I felt like you

bring... I was bringing the family together, almost, you know, because I was sharing that information with my, with my parents and my grandmother and my aunts and stuff that they didn't know. So yeah, I think it was just some kind of like bonding moments that I was creating.

Heather Murphy 05:53

That's great. I listened to your trailer on your YouTube show and I loved at the end you refer to yourself as a millennial kin keeper. And I just thought that was, I don't know, that touched me, like, you're young, but you're gathering your kin.

Schuyler Carter 06:08

Oh, yeah, yeah. And we just had a birthday, you know, Zoom, of course, Zoom birthday celebration for my grandmother who just turned 92 when, you know, so many of my cousins have, you know, acknowledged like what I'm doing, which, which really makes me happy. Because I do this because I enjoy it. I find family, I love to like bring our family back together in certain moments and so forth. So when my cousins and aunts and everybody in their in their 60s, 40s, 50s, 60s, even 70s and they're just like, thank you, thank you, thank you and actually expressing their gratitude for the work that I'm doing it really, it really makes me feel good. And it feels like I'm really bringing something and doing something memorable, not only for our family, but you know, the communities in which our relatives were from and lived because they are a part of that story. They are part of that narrative in that particular geographical area. Yeah, I really do consider myself a kin keeper. I will have, like I said, I will have cousins, you know, messaging me on Facebook, like, "are we related to?" "how how are we related to?" or texting me asking me all kinds of questions and I love it. I really do.

Heather Murphy 07:20

That's great that your looking back at your family has also connected that family that's still around and going forward the other way.

Schuyler Carter 07:28

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And particularly for my mother's side of the family. Both of her parents had quite a few siblings and her grandparents, her grandparents had quite a few siblings as well. And so the aunts and uncles that they grew up with, my mother and her siblings that they grew up with, they kind of lost touch after a while, you know, generation, you know, you lose touch. And one of the greatest things for me, that I've done this far, was reconnecting to some of the lines. Expanding the lineage of my grandmother's family and being able to reconnect in the fact that it's kind of crazy. Because some of those cousins were actually living in areas like I mean miles apart in the same city as my older sister when she was going to college, close to me while I was away, when I was up in Iowa. Just finding out that we had family everywhere and just being able to reconnect to those lines within our family that had we thought were lost. And it's just, it's just a beautiful thing. And now we're, you know, trying to plan a family reunion and after, of course all this, you know, COVID we get this setup. We definitely want to reconnect in person and be able to celebrate family.

Heather Murphy 08:45

That is great. Could you share an ancestor or a story that you found in your searches that has just really connected with you?

Schuyler Carter 08:55

I would say it's probably my great-grandfather, my maternal great-grandfather. So this is my, my mother's father's father, for those for those who are not really clear on the genealogy terms, I guess you could say. But so Reverend L. W. Thomas, his name was Reverend L. W. Thomas. And he actually found... He's a pastor, of course, and he actually founded the community of Summit, Oklahoma, which is a historically Black town. Within Oklahoma, there are 13 left in existence. At one time there were over 50 all Black communities within the state of Oklahoma. And I would say yeah, I would say that I connect with him because he was a community builder. He was not only just a pastor...

Schuyler Carter 09:36

He was originally from Mexia, Texas, is a native of Mexia, Texas. And he was very involved within the church within the agricultural part of the economy. He presented at different like farmers conferences and things like that. So he was very, very well known in the community. And he struck oil in Mexia. And it was not welcomed for a man of color to have as much money as he was, you know, receiving for that. He became pretty wealthy from that. And so he was, I say was forcefully migrated to Muskogee County area and built this community so that the Texans that were escaping that situation could be self sufficient, could care for their own to feel safe and not, you know, live in fear. And so I consider him a planner before we really kind of knew what a planner was. Because this was 1921, 1922 when he did this.

Schuyler Carter 10:39

I really feel like I connect with him because of his community planning background. Because I am a planner, I'm urban planner. And so that's what I want to do. I love to bring community together. I love you know, hosting events and bringing situations and atmospheres to life so that connections can be made, that they can just continue. So I definitely feel like that I connect with him because he just has such a passion for people and seeing people, especially people of color, succeed and thrive in the midst of all this turmoil I said that was going on. Because if you if you're familiar with Oklahoma history, or just history in general, it was 1921 when the Tulsa Race Massacre occurred. And so this was right around the time... Him establishing this community was right around the time that they were dealing with the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre, which was 45 minutes up the road in Tulsa. So that's very close proximity to what was happening. So I think he's a trailblazer and I'm doing all that I can to further his legacy and to make sure that people know that there were and there still are people who care for their community so much that they would offer up their assets and do whatever they can to help people succeed.

Heather Murphy 11:59

That is a great story. Did you already know that you were going to go into urban planning before you started researching, or do you think maybe researching your family had an influence on that?

Schuyler Carter 12:11

I did not know that I was going to do urban planning. Actually, I didn't even, I didn't even really know the term urban planning when I applied for my master's degree. But I started, you know, as I was looking at the programs, I was like, "Oh my gosh, like this sounds exactly like what I want to do." So I was like, "Urban planning, this is it." And I started one semester and loved it, fell in love with being able to be that resource for people within a community. But I had no idea I was going to do urban planning. I think definitely my family research helped me to understand how important it is to take advantage of an opportunity and the resources that you have. We weren't the wealthiest. I mean I just told you that my grandfather struck oil but it wasn't like that for everybody. And so when I think about other relatives that I have researched and the, you know, tenacity and the strength that it took for them to step out on their own or to leave a place that was not a good atmosphere for them I think it definitely helped me to understand that every opportunity that I have now, in every part of my life, that I have to take advantage of it. I will be doing a disgrace to my ancestors if I didn't. And that's just how I think about it these days.

Heather Murphy 13:33

Many people begin researching their family history eager to discover their ancestors and explore their heritage. Oftentimes, they don't realize the mistakes that end up tangling their family tree until much later in their genealogy journey. That is why I put together a free guide "7 Ways You (Unintentionally) Sabotage Your Family Tree." The link to download this guide is in the show notes. Are you letting what you don't know get in the way discovering your family's story.

Heather Murphy 14:03

Now, I hadn't heard the term urban planner before. Can you tell me like what would that actually look like in the job field? What would you be doing?

Schuyler Carter 14:12

So many things. There's so many opportunities for in urban planning. There's all types of different planning, I mean, transportation planning, environmental planning. I am a, historic preservation is, I do more that preserving culture, heritage legacy, and incorporating that into economic development and all types of things like that. So you could be I mean, a city manager, there are actual planners are called planners. And so they do a lot of the I would say a lot of the regulations and things that a city has to go by, whether it be the size of signage.

Heather Murphy 14:50

But you'd go more the history route and preserving culture?

Schuyler Carter 14:54

Oh yeah, yeah, and there's a thing called heritage tourism now that's really gaining some traction because there are areas that people don't, you know, know that certain events happened in that area or that it was the place of a battle or something like that. So a lot of, you know, museums and parks and things like that can be actually corporated into the urban planning field as well. So, I mean, there's so many things private and public sector, so many jobs.

Heather Murphy 15:22

Okay, well, that gives me a little better idea, and that you're focusing on that history preservation and helping people remember the past.

Schuyler Carter 15:29

Remembering the past and seeing how it affects us now. I just think it tells a story. A lot of historic preservationists or people who are working within a historic preservation division within a city have a lot to do with like historic homes and historic neighborhoods and things like that, and trying to preserve those structures. And I think those are really, really important in telling the narrative or sharing the narrative of a particular community. They definitely play a big role in preserving a community.

Heather Murphy 16:05

And you've already kind of melded the two because didn't I see that you have one of your ancestors, you did all the paperwork to get it on the National Historic Register.

Schuyler Carter 16:14

I did. I did. Two years ago, or three years ago now, it's 2020. Three years ago now. I just wanted some grant funding... It all starts with grant funding. Why aren't there more grants? But we, yeah, so it started with grant funding. And I knew that, I knew that the family would have a better chance of gaining funding to restore my great-grandfather's home that he built when he came to Summit. I knew they would have a greater opportunity to get funding for that if they were on their National Register. And so I started the paperwork and thankfully, with the help of the State Historic Preservation Office, I was able to get it officially on the register as of 2018. So it is a national landmark. You know, it is in the history books, you know.

Schuyler Carter 17:02

And it's just bringing me one step closer to further advancing the legacy of my great-grandfather, because he had so many plans. I feel he had so many plans for the community and didn't get to see, you know, all of that come to fruition. So, for me to continue the legacy is really special to me, and I do not take it lightly. And my grandmother that I mentioned, that's the 92 years old, she actually was the first mayor of the community. She actually did all the groundwork for getting the town incorporated in 1980. So even though the community was established in 1922, it didn't get organized by the state or anything until 1980. She did all that work as the mayor and served for many decades. But so yeah, I'm continuing the work of two amazing people that I do not take lightly.

Heather Murphy 17:54

Thank you. Another thing I noticed in your posts is you have this heritage of sororities and fraternities. And I'm completely ignorant of that world. How does that connect you back to generations? There's obviously a very strong association with that.

Schuyler Carter 18:13

Yes, it is definitely a big thing. In my family particular, African American sororities and fraternities have a legacy of community building and fighting for justice, fighting racial injustice in our country, dating back to the first fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated was established in 1906. And my

sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, was established in 1908. One of the reasons why I have such a passion for it is because I mean, I grew up around it. I am a legacy, my mother, my grandmother, aunts, cousins are all part of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated. And so it really means a lot to understand the impact that these groups had on building up a community or supporting aspects of the community that were not fully supported by the city, or some other resources that were supposed to be in place for the residents, but somehow, I will say, somehow, people of color, residents of color were left out. I would encourage everyone to to definitely look into called the Divine Nine organizations. If you just type, you know, Google Divine Nine organizations, African American sororities and fraternities, you'll find a lot of different instances of community service, community impact that they have had all over the country, all over the world. They are international organizations.

Heather Murphy 19:49

And I looked into it a little bit and I could just see how your family, like you talk about your great-grandfather and everybody is so community minded, of helping each other and not just blood line, but those that you live around as well.

Schuyler Carter 20:05

Yes, I'm so thankful that... And I do feel like it's, you know, in my blood. I feel like serving the communities in my blood. I'll say it again, like, we were not the richest family on the block but there was always a passion for seeing everybody succeed, not just being selfish and our family's got to get it, you know, our family's, the one that's gonna, you know, get rich off of something. Just knowing that passion has been passed down to me, like I said, I don't take it lightly. I am honored to continue this work, and to help who need it.

Heather Murphy 20:43

Are there any other ancestors that you want to tell us about?

Schuyler Carter 20:47

Ohh, I could really get into it. I can really get into, you know, talking about my family. I've done a lot of research on my mother's side of the family and I'm just now getting into my paternal side, my father's side of the family as well. His grandfather was very, I would say tenacious as well, just very hard working. I mean he was purchasing land in Butler County, Alabama, early 1870s and 80s. And so you know, if you understand any kind of anything about the dynamics in the South, in Alabama, this is southern Alabama down there in Butler County, that was a feat in and of itself to be able to purchase land down there. And Richard Clinton Carter Jr. was his name and I feel like I've gotten a little bit of his you know, you know, gotten a little bit of that from him.

Schuyler Carter 21:43

I feel like my ancestors fuel me. A lot of people ask me, like, "How are you doing all this?" Like, I mean, I do have a lot of stuff going on, but I really do feel like they fuel me and they want to take care of me by whatever means necessary and that's the only explanation. When I think about all the stuff, all the stuff that's going on, and I'm not saying I'm, you know, any busier than anybody else, but when you think

about, you know, all the stuff that is, I just, you know, you trying to balance the plates. There's a lot, there's a lot but they keep me grounded and they fuel me to do more, more for my community.

Heather Murphy 22:23

Thank you. Now, my last question for you is what advice do you have for someone who is just thinking about starting to find out who their ancestors are?

Schuyler Carter 22:34

Definitely take advantage of the free resources out there. In my beginning stages of my research I used FamilySearch.com. And that is a great, great resource. It's an amazing resource and it's free. I would say create your account on there, just kind of start browsing. And if you have just your grandfather's name or your grandmother's name start there just see what you can find.

Schuyler Carter 23:02

I guess also more, more importantly, I would say, if you have elders that you can talk to, I will sit down with them and talk with them and, you know, record them, just record yourself asking them questions about their parents and different things that they experienced growing up where they grew up and different questions like that, because you can go back and listen to that and research that. But that would be the main thing I would say is to record yourself, just talk to them. Have a conversation. It doesn't have to be like, "Okay, so what is your name?" You know, it doesn't, it doesn't have to be, you know, a list of questions necessarily like that, but just talk to them. And you, they, when they, and then, "I don't know anything, I don't know anything." And then they start talking. It's just like a plethora of information that you can glean little bits and pieces from which is awesome. So yeah, that would be the thing, record, record yourself talking and then you can go back and research on FamilySearch and different, some other free resources, GenWeb. And, yeah.

Heather Murphy 24:05

Well thank you so much for sharing your story. I'm sure everyone will love to hear it. Good luck on continuing your education and following in your great-grandfather's footsteps.

Schuyler Carter 24:17

Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity. It was wonderful talking with you.

Heather Murphy 24:21

Thank you.

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