

Finding Hope in America

In a time when America and its history are under assault, I recently found hope and inspiration in a visit to Virginia's Historic Triangle: Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown.

At all three of these historical places I found much-needed relief from months of rioting and our poisonous political atmosphere. Everywhere I went – the Jamestown Settlement Museum, the Historic Jamestowne Archaearium, the Governor's Palace, the state house, and the other historical sites in Williamsburg – I found docents, black and white, male and female, who clearly love our country. I encountered Americans from all walks of life, waitresses, hotel clerks, and tourists, who were affable and kind.

Which brings me to Yorktown, the historic Cole Digges house, and Celeste Gucanac.

As arranged by Jill Pongonis of Visit Williamsburg, my friend John and I met Celeste at the [Mobjack Bay Coffee Roasters and Petite Café](#). Celeste works the business side of the café, while her husband Josip (Jo) is the master roaster and also operates Taproot Recruiting, a staffing firm for IT businesses. In addition, Mobjack Bay Coffee provides guided tours of Yorktown, which is why John and I were there that morning. Within minutes of meeting Celeste, however, a woman with dancing eyes and a ready smile, I realized she might have a story I could share with my readers.

I was right.

After a lovely walking tour of Yorktown with humorous and insightful guides, I spent half an hour with Celeste at a table on the second floor of the café, typing out notes on my computer while she answered my questions. It was the first day of school, and her three children, Gabriel 13, Julian 11, and Sofia 8, were nearby, busy with their distance learning

schoolwork.

At an early age, Celeste became intrigued by ballet. She trained with the New York City Ballet, and then danced with the Richmond Ballet and the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. She left the stage at age 30 and eventually went into business when Jo, who has a passion for roasting coffee, suggested they open their own company.

When Celeste and Jo returned to the Yorktown area, Celeste became acquainted with the Cole Digges house, a “most darling building” that a woman in the 1800s had once operated as a coffee and teahouse. Celeste announced to her husband, “I’ve found our new home.”

But then came the difficulties. The National Park Service owned the building and didn’t offer any leasing services in Yorktown, as it does in some other places. “I called them every week for almost two years to ask about the building,” Celeste said.

By such perseverance, Celeste won the lease and has now operated her coffee shop in the Cole Digges house for two years. She and the family recently purchased a nearby home for their living quarters.

Then came COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns.

At this point in the conversation about the pandemic and social unrest, I mentioned that some people, not just rioters but also our politicians, forget about the importance of small businesses and property.

“It’s not just about property,” Celeste said. “We have twelve employees, so there are family lives involved as well. We haven’t let anyone go. When COVID changed the world, we were not about to shut down or take a handout.”

Though Jo and Celeste briefly thought their business might go

bad, “we evolved fast and furiously.” They offered online ordering, restructured their website, and spent much more time advertising on social media. Celeste even devised a “Ye Olde Plexiglas Shop Window,” through which customers could order and receive their coffees and treats.

When asked for her values of entrepreneurship, Celeste said, “We have to be self-motivated and self-disciplined. We do what we do, we do it very well, and we do it every day.” At one point after the lockdown, Celeste realized her employees were dispirited because customers couldn’t come inside the shop and some of the normal routines had been disrupted. Boxes, for example, now littered what had been the display case for muffins. She turned that discouragement around by telling her staff “It doesn’t matter if people come in or not. Life is going on, and the muffins are going back in the case.”

For husband-and-wife business teams, Celeste offered this piece of advice about taking work home: “We use a code for when it’s time to quit talking business. One of us just says ‘We need to get a life,’ and the discussion ends.”

Finally, I asked her what inspired her to add the history tours to Mobjack Bay.

One reason I loved the ballet was the tradition and history. Here in Yorktown I get that historical fix every day. Living in this town reminds me that people died right here for our independence. The history tours remind people of that.

Lessons learned or reviewed during this interview?

For Celeste, the discipline she practiced as a ballerina carried over into the discipline necessary for running a business.

A crisis can either knock us off our feet or force us to adapt and become stronger. Celeste and Jo faced the battle line instead of running away.

Determination and persistence pay off.

Meeting Celeste Gucanac topped off my three days of listening to people who can laugh in a crisis, who can light a candle in the darkness, and who are proud of their country.

Time to strike a match and join our light to theirs.

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