



Stories that will unite us as a community - Washington Daily News (NC) - August 14, 2023 - page 1

August 14, 2023 | Washington Daily News (NC) | Leesa Jones

Stories that will unite us as a community

Published 4:39 pm Monday, August 14, 2023

By Leesa Jones

I have met so many wonderful people from writing this column who have asked me to help them find and tell their stories about their ancestry.

I am so pleased to help them find the stories of their ancestors who lived in the greater **Washington**/Beaufort County area and shared their lives and contributions that helped **Washington** to grow and prosper.

This is a wonderful request for me and an honor as I have been asked to serve as an historian for the Blue Cross Blue Shield **Building Integrated Communities** Initiative to help research the Latino ancestry as part of the **Washington** NC Latin American and Caribbean Public History Project. This part of the project is in conjunction with the Institute for the Study of the Americas at UNC-Chapel Hill funded by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation. The funding will support my part of the project which is **Building Integrated Communities**, a planning and leadership initiative of the Latino Migration Project, that partners with North Carolina local governments to create inclusive practices and policies for immigrant residents from Latin America and other underrepresented world regions.

Through the program, local governments and community stakeholders such as the **Washington** Harbor District Alliance, the **Washington** Waterfront Underground Railroad Museum and the City of **Washington** work together to improve communication, public safety, mobility, entrepreneurship and leadership of immigrant and refugee residents and to support resident **communities'** civic engagement and leadership. This initiative helps **Washington** reach its goal of being an inclusive, caring community for all of its residents.

My assistant and co-historian, Cristina Estrada-Underwood, a Spanish Teaching Instructor with the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at East Carolina University and I are working to collect oral histories of Latino families, to document and preserve these oral histories, so that

future generations can have access to these important pieces of history. The oral histories can chronicle how their ancestors came to **Washington**, and helped build the prosperity, cultural and economic growth of this part of eastern NC. This vital history may help us to design library/museum exhibits, help develop curriculum for K-12 teachers in NC public schools and help to plan community heritage events.

As part of National Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations here in **Washington** September 15th-October 15th, there will be many opportunities to learn, share and celebrate the Latino culture. The Latin American and Caribbean Public History Project will offer many events throughout the city for families of Latino descent to come and share their oral histories. I hope you will join us!

Leesa Jones is a **Washington** native and the co-curator of the **Washington** Waterfront Underground Railroad Museum.

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