

ALEX BROWN

BY KIM KACHMANN-GELTZ
PHOTO BY ROB KAUFMAN

ISLAND FAMILY ROOTS RUN DEEP

Alex Brown is a sixth-generation native islander, Camp Hilton Head business executive, mentor at Central Oak Grove Church and the chairman of the Town Planning Commission. If Brown wrote a book, he would call it "Sense of Place."

Brown said that native islanders had a strong sense of place before 1956, when only private boats and a state-operated ferry could access Hilton Head Island.

They were tied together and to Hilton Head Island by the pristine land, farming and fishing traditions, a shared Gullah and Geechee culture and language, and the historical legacy of freed slaves.

"We had to rely on each other. Not everyone fished, not everyone farmed. We had to come together. But after the bridge and island development began, our sense of place diminished," he said.

What's the story of Hilton Head today, Brown asks. Does it have any substance to it? Or is it

just a built-out resort for tourists and wealthy homeowners, like Myrtle Beach?

"We've got all walks of life here. And any healthy community will respect those (socio-economic) tiers. If that doesn't happen, our community is going to decline," Brown said.

"Look at some of the native islanders who've lived here for generations but can't find a job or affordable housing. They've inherited land that's worth a lot of money; it makes more sense to sell it and move on. That troubles me."

Brown thinks many young native islanders don't have a good understanding of why they belong here.

"That's why it's important that we support things like The Mitchelville Preservation Project. It gives kids something they can touch and feel and better understand," he said.

The legacy of native islanders is important on a local, regional and national level. Their history provides a cultural, linguistic, and historical perspective on freed slaves in the years after

the Civil War. The values of native islanders are deeply spiritual, communal and focused on family and work.

"Dad made me earn everything and taught me the importance of work ethics," Brown said. "I remember him waking me up to help him with paperwork before school. He drilled in me that there are only so many hours in the day, and you've got to get work done."

After school, Brown would have to help his grandfather in the field. His family planted peas, corn, watermelon and other staples on their land in what used to be called Chaplin Plantation. While his father and grandfather taught him how to work hard, his mother taught him how to love.

"She always found the brighter side to situations. And that stuck with me; I very seldom have a bad day," Brown said. "I believe that things happen for a reason, that God put something in front of me as a trial or tribulation, something to make me grow stronger." **M**



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