

Transcript Episode 4 My South Side

Calvin Corriders: So Spades is kind of a game that has legacies within Black families.

Intro music starts to fade in slowly, a soft instrumental tone that goes louder through the next two speakers

Abby Fritz: Calvin Corriders has lived in Syracuse his whole life and is a board member of The Stand South Side News. He remembers the card game Spades as central to family holidays and gatherings. But also as a space for community and family to celebrate each other through laughing, yelling, and smiling by the end of the night.

Corriders: So I remember, kind of was like that coming of age moment where my sister and I were still pretty young and my dad finally thought it was time to teach us so that we can hold our own at those family events.

Music continues

Fritz: I'm Abby Fritz of The Stand's podcast "My South Side" on this episode we talk with Syracuse's South Side community about the card game Spades and what it means to them. Then a researcher and cultural worker takes us back to the game's origins in Southern African-American history.

Music fades out

Corriders: I think the basics of Spades are pretty easy to grasp. But then there's so many nuances to it and strategies, which takes a little bit more time to learn. And that's what makes it fun and challenging.

Fritz: It is a four-player game, with two sets of partners where the Spades card trumps all. The goal of the game is to get more books than the other team. While there are variations in house rules and strategies, everyone I spoke to talked more about the culture of the game rather than the rules.

Corriders: I love it just for that, the community and family aspect. It's something where you may not know someone very well, but as soon as you guys start playing and start trash-talking a little bit, you know, you just kind of grow closer to people. So I love it for that community aspect."

Fritz: Gabrielle Hickmon described the magnetism Spades holds. Her parents taught her how to play 10 years ago and has since brought it with her to college, Ibiza, and more recently her professional life, where she became interested in investigating the history of the game.

Gabrielle Hickmon: And it just got me thinking about how central cards are to the way that Black folks gathered together and I was like "Hmm, how did this come to be, you know, such a

phenomenon in the Black community, right?" Like that researcher's mind. And I couldn't find an answer, you know, anywhere online or in any just research that in any books, any research that I was doing that satisfied the question that I had, you know. I was like, why hasn't there been something written about this already? This is so big to Black culture, how is it that there's no rigorous attending to this game?"

Short Pause

Hickmon: And so research is a really big part of my writing practice. And the problem or the challenge with this piece was that because there wasn't a ton of stuff out there about it, I had to create my own data.

Fritz: Hickmon is a writer, researcher, and cultural worker. She got her undergraduate degree at Cornell University, then attended the University of Pennsylvania for a Masters of Science in Education. She says the work she did, doing qualitative research in her studies, helped her formulate an accurate representation of how Black people interact with Spades today through surveys, polls, and interviews. For her historical research on the origins of the game, she did a deep dive into archives, researched migration, and read the few books that are out there on Spades.

Hickmon: Spades is actually a descendant of Bridge and Bid Whist. And both of those started in England and then as people travel, right - so there's Whist in England in the 1700s and then when those folks come to America, you have American Whist in the early 1800s. And then in the South in the late 1800s, you have Bid Whist. And that was created by Southern African Americans. Often, we're not sure if it was enslaved African Americans or free, we just know that, you know, African Americans in the South created Bid Whist which is a combination of Whist and Bridge. Both of which were played by, you know, slave masters, and white folks of the day. And so they kind of combined these two games to make their own game. Which is just like Black folks, right? Like we're the most creative people in the world.

Fritz: To determine when the Spades we know today was formally recognized by name, Hickmon relied on the ethnographic research and oral histories she gathered for the project, since there is a lack of research on its modern origins.

Hickmon: The Legend has it that sometime in like, the early 1900s so somewhere between, you know, 1900 to 1930, 1940 is kind of when, from the evidence that we have, Spades began. The game was initially played in the South. And then from there, legend has it kind of that like with the Pullman Porters and the Great Migration, spread from the South throughout the rest of the country. And then that's, you know, how you find it in New York from that you find it in Chicago and California. There's also some evidence of Black folks and just people in Germany playing Spades because there were so many Black G.I.'s stationed in Germany during World War II.

Fritz: A more intensive explanation of Hickmon's research can be found in her piece for The Pudding titled "How You Play Spades is How You Play Life: Spades in the African-American Community.

Hickmon: I think what was really interesting in, in the research is how Spades has transcended Black ethnicities. Because obviously, you know, it, it started and has its roots in the African American community, right, and in the history of folks whose ancestors were enslaved in this country. But it has crossed over to, you know, I have West Indian friends who play Spades. Um, you know, friends from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, like whatever other kind of Black diasporic place like it has, it has crossed all of those lines and kind of, like, yes, it's rooted in African American experience, but it's expanded to all Black folks. And I just think that that's really, really beautiful.

Cards shuffling and the sounds of people walking around a mall fade in slowly.

Shelly Burke: I've been playing Spades since I was probably 12 or 13 years old. So it's been a long time."

Card shuffling fades out

Fritz: Shelly Burke lives in Syracuse's South Side and owns Chi'Soul a restaurant serving soul food. Burke is also a Spades expert.

Burke: I think we need to stimulate our minds on certain things, you know, and you had a rough day you get to come talk with your friends you play cards. You got to, sometimes you don't want to play sometimes I don't feel like thinking, I don't feel like paying attention to that. Or you can play with people that are amateurs and you don't have to think you're just playing for the moment.

Fritz: Burke is an encyclopedia of Spades facts, you can tell her knowledge of the game and strategy has been developed over years of passion for it. When we spoke, she made sure to tell me the bread and butter of playing Spades well.

Burke: I'm a very strong player so I don't care what my partner has but you definitely got to find a partner. The first thing is finding a partner. The second thing — to me — will be reading the cards. Now people always say, "That's not fair to copy a card," but it's mental.

Fritz: Burke says she first learned to play from her Uncle and Aunt at family gatherings.

Burke: Every time we have cookouts or barbecues or any holidays we would play Spades. And I will stand right beside him watching the game because he was so passionate about it. And he was like the best. And I'll always sit by him and he would teach me. So me and him became family partners, right? Any event it's always me and him and everybody wants to play us. The whole family's like "I want to play you and your uncle." No one can beat us. Like if I go to a

tournament, I'm definitely for sure going to bring my uncle and my aunt. We can play with our eyes closed. And we can play with the loudness of the cards. The way you slap the card down."

Fritz: Burke emphasized the importance of playful banter - or smack talk - to the game of Spades. Noting that it's a big part of her game and what makes the experience fun.

Burke: First of all, you just talk smack. You just talk. *soft giggle* It's loud it's aggressive, you try to show somebody what you got and what you can do. And then as soon as I come in the house they're like "Oh, there she go," and I'm like "Yeah, here I go, the champion is here. Yes I'm here." *Both laughing* Yeah, I said "You got your cards? Want me to use my cards? How do you want to get beat? With your cards, my cards? Where do you want me to sit?" I'm just full of energy when I come in. They're like, "Oh, you make me so mad. You talk too much junk." *starts to fade out* Ya you want me to put a blindfold on? Want me to put on glasses? How do you want to get beat?

Cards shuffling as the sound of people laughing fade out

Tyrone Dixon: It's very, it gets heated. For sure. I'll say that, it gets heated. Anytime you're talking Spades with a real Spades player, you're going to get passion. I just like to see people's reaction to mistakes that take it so seriously because it's just a game right? But, some people treat it like it's do or die, especially when you're, when you play with teams. So when it gets to that level of competition, people take it like really serious. So it's funny to me. Like if I'm playing Spades with family members and I mess up and cussing and all that good stuff. I'll laugh, but you can tell like, it means a lot to them. So it's funny to me. I enjoy it.

Fritz: Tyrone Dixon was born and raised in Syracuse and is a board member for The Stand. He says he was raised around Spades, but lost the game for a while. He credits his friend Keith for pushing him back to it.

Dixon: Keith was my number one go to guy for two reasons. Number one, he, he was pretty good at it, or still is pretty good at it. And number two, I love to see him get upset when I make mistakes. He's a good friend of mine, him and I have been friends since we were 10 or so. So we're talking about 20 years, 20 plus years of friendship. So anytime that I can tick him off a little bit, I get excitement out of that. *Laughs softly*

Fritz: Dixon says he wants to pass the game on to his daughters for a few reasons, but one of them being the community he has found within it.

Tyrone: I think that you realize what it does is it's a sense of belonging that, that comes to the table. And it's that sense of community, family, just being together. And although emotions do run high, it's fun. It is really fun. Because Spades games can go on for long periods of time. So you can end up spending hours, just conversating, uh, having fun, joking on each other and all

that good stuff. So after, after the end of the evening, usually see people leave happy and with smiles on their faces. So always love that."

Pause

Fritz: While the connection between Spades and the Black community is undeniable, the game's name is historically a slur against that same community it is bound to.

Hickmon: My mom, who is I won't reveal her age. But she, she's older. And she told me because I was asking her about this, right, because like I said, Black folks, elders, like going to the elders, oral histories. She has always told me that Spades the name is like a reclamation of the term because 'spade' was used in a derogatory manner toward Black folks. And so the name is kind of, like, you know, taking that and reclaiming it as this thing that we do together for fun, but that's my, you know, that's my mom's read on it from, from her years of playing spades."

Upbeat, inquisitive music begins to play, starting low and slowly getting louder

Hickmon: I think that like, Spades for me is just, and I wish I wrote about this in a piece, but it's such an example and a metaphor for what it is to be Black in America. You know, I just think you, you get dealt a card, you get dealt some cards, and you have to try your best to win with them. And there are all of these rules, and subtleties and nuances to it, and everyone has a different way of doing it and you can be, you know, so creative, and so strategic, and so intentional, and you need all of those same skills to survive and, you know, really thrive as a Black person in America."

Fritz: My name is Abby Fritz and you've been listening to The Stand's "My South Side." Tune in on Spotify and The Stand's website for upcoming episodes. A special thanks to Ashley Kang for editing and assisting with scripting. Thanks for listening.

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