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Mardi Gras Party Chez Ms. Dupre

The “voodoo priestess of comedy” speaks out about segregated Carnival traditions, how she will feed 2,500 guests today and moving into her dream house along the “white” side of the parade route.

By: Chandra R. Thomas | Posted: February 24, 2009 at 6:19 AM

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The racial divide had always been clear along the Mardi Gras parade route in *Ms. Dupre's* Uptown New Orleans neighborhood: White people stood on one side of Napoleon Avenue, and black people stood on the other.

These racial boundaries never kept the “Voodoo Priestess of Comedy” and feisty personality on *The Tom Joyner Morning*

Show, also known as Jemma Jones, from dreaming though. She was always fascinated by one house in particular on the “white side” of the street. She'd stare enviously at the family who lived there and vowed that one day she, too, would have a fabulous home along a parade route. Now she calls the pristine white house with baby-blue trim home.

It's also the site of her annual Fat Tuesday party. Before the festivities this year, over a lunch of shrimp and oyster po' boys and her famous homemade spiked punch, she shared her Mardi Gras memories with *The Root's* Chandra R. Thomas.

The Root: That's a great story. What's it like finally living in the house of your dreams?

Ms. Dupre: It's great. I spoke that into being as a little girl. Life on the parade route is different. You always have 'company' two weeks out of the year whether you like it or not. And of course, there's the mandatory Mardi Gras party to host. If you don't have the party, the party will come to you!

TR: I hear yours is a pretty big affair.

MD: Yeah it started off with about 200 family and friends, but since then it has grown to over 2,500 people. The whole house is locked up, and the party is outdoors. I have a big tented area, and I make all the traditional New Orleans food. People start showing up at 7 o'clock in the morning, and they stay all day.

TR: What's it like sharing your dream home with loved ones?

MD: When I was growing up, Hunter was [a] little boy who lived in the house that I live in now. I was so jealous of him because he got to live in this big pretty house on the parade route. Now my grandson is the new Hunter. He rubs it in, telling people 'this is my grandmama's house. We can watch the parade from the porch. We don't even have to leave the house if we don't want to. I can watch the parades from the window if I want to.' He doesn't hold anything back!



Photo courtesy of Zave Smith Photography

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TR: What do you want people outside of New Orleans to know about Mardi Gras?

MD: I'd like people to know where the tradition started and that's it's not just about drunk people in the streets. To a large extent, that's the truth, too, but it's a kid holiday as well. It's great to see the kids all dressed up in their costumes. It's also about spending time with family members having a good time. The concept of Mardi Gras originated in France, when the rich and wealthy would ride through the streets throwing fine food, pastries and coins to the peasants. They'd give them things that more than likely they would have never had. That then translated into the throwing of beads and doubloons [fake coins] at our parades.

TR: What role do you feel race has played in the observance of Mardi Gras?

MD: For years, there was a very distinct white Mardi Gras and black Mardi Gras. The Zulu organization was so important because they started the first black parade. Then in the '80s a bill was passed to integrate Mardi Gras. When that bill passed, one Krewe [Mardi Gras club] named Comus refused to have black people on their floats. They said we won't roll at all if we have to include blacks, and they never did. A lot of people can't believe something like that happened as late as in the 1980s.

TR: Back to Zulu, this year marks its 100th anniversary of its parade rolling through the streets of New Orleans. What did it mean to you as a little black girl watching the only African-American parade?

MD: They always had a different route than the other parades; they went through the [housing] projects. They wanted black people to see it. We always loved Zulu because we knew we would see somebody we knew in the parade, and if all of the Gods were shining on us, we'd get a [souvenir decorated] coconut.

TR: Were you ever in a parade?

MD: Yes. I went to Xavier Prep High School, and we used to march in the parades. One time we had to march in (predominantly white) Chalmette, and let's just say they did not care for us very much. They called us every name in the book along that route, but we just kept on marching and doing our thing. Other than that we used to have a lot of fun marching. We never got tired because it was so much fun. We had good dance routines, too. And when we got in front of the reviewing stand, we would act up. We always saved our good stuff for that part.

Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning Atlanta-based journalist. She is the co-founder of an African-American discussion group, TalkBLACK.

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