

[Narrator] You've tuned in to another
edition of The Breakroom, a

weekly conversation about how
the City of St. Augustine works

from those who do the work
everyday. Hosted by the City of

Saint Augustine's
communications director,

Melissa Wissel. The Breakroom
offers a closer look at the

different city departments and
provides updates on current and

upcoming projects and events
and now your host Melissa

Wissel. [Melissa] Welcome to The
Breakroom and thanks for tuning

in. Over the years, the City
Commission has established

three Citizen Awards as a way
to recognize local individuals

for outstanding service and
contributions to the city and

our community. Each award
carries with it distinct

criteria which must be met by
its recipients and each award

is presented at a time of year
that coincides with a milestone

in the city's history. So with
September being the anniversary

of the founding of the nation's
oldest city, we awarded the

Order of La Florida to two
recipients this year. We

recently met miss Kay Burtin
earlier in September and this

week in studio, I have the
honor of the break room with

Dr. Susan Richbourg Parker.

Welcome and congratulations.

[Dr. Richbourg Parker] Thank you. I'm pleased to be here. [Melissa] Uh your first time in The

Break Room so welcome. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes. [Melissa] Um I we started doing this on The

Break Room inviting the recipients of the awards a

couple years back because I realized that we present these

awards to folks. We read off all of the great things that

you've done and then we don't always hear back from you. So,

I am thrilled to have you joining us. I want to talk

about your history because Margo Pope refers to you as the

people's historian. And I just

[Dr. Richbourg Parker] that's her that's the title she

made up. [Melissa] I hung on to that. I
know but we all love Margot.

Margot's been in here. Um she
received I think it was

Adelaide Sanchez maybe. Um love
Margot and I love that she had

so many great things to say
about you. So tell me about

being the people's historian.

[Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well you know I'm I also do

academic work. [Melissa] Right. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] But as a
people's historian or I'm

taking from Margo's cue anyway.

I've spent a lot of time I'm

trying to present history in a
serious manner but to the

general public. So to filter
out some of the you know

historians catch words and
things like that. So it's more

accessible to to other people,

to intelligent people and

thinking people. It's not

dumbing it down. [Melissa] Right. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] It's

just taking the specialization

out of it for the public.

[Melissa] Making it digestible and I'm

referring to the fact that you

wrote for the Saint Augustine

record for many years. I think

that's what was referring to.

Can you tell me about how that

came about in the article? The

the column. Uh I think you

still publish it. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No. No. No. I

ended about a year ago. [Melissa] Okay.

Okay. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] I now do a column every

two weeks for the Saint

Augustine Historical Society.

[Melissa] Okay. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] And members have access

to that. It is sent to them.

[Melissa] Okay. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Um I started in 1996

actually the editor of the
newspaper at that time. Uh Jim

Sutton asked if I would work
with the staff because he

wanted to add this column and I
told him said truthfully it'd

be easier for me to write it
than to work with the staff

because you know presenting the
information. So when I first

started out I only had 200
words. [Melissa] And that's not a lot. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No

that is not that is very hard
to get in, get out, and make

your point. [Melissa] If you're wondering
that go look at your word next

time you're writing a document.

Look down at the bottom at the

word count. It'll tell you. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes

that that is not even one page

double spaced. So but yeah so

that was that was a real a real

introduction but and it was a

real challenge. And to try to

say things that that people

would be interested in. So you

know I decided to start talking

about if the weather was bad

I'd talk about how the weather

had caused problems in the past

for people you know, 200 years

ago 400 years what how how the

weather was a factor because as

we know it always is and so I

tried to very often associate

it with something that was

happening locally or perhaps
even nationally or worldwide.

Just it just depended and
sometimes I just wrote what I

wanted to write about. [Melissa] Well and
I can't imagine trying to write

something about this city that
of of any significance in 200

words. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No finally I got a break
and I got enlarged. [Melissa] Okay. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] So

when I when I for a long time I
was able to do six and 700

words and that was that was
much better because you could

get into a little more depth
and explain things a little

better. [Melissa] And you've you were
from Saint Augustine or grew up

here have spent your life. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes.

[Melissa] That was another one that Margo

mentioned. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] I was born here. [Melissa] You
grew up in living in the

history. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yeah both my parents
came here as toddlers. [Melissa] Okay.

[Dr. Richbourg Parker] And yeah so I yeah I lived on
Davis Shores but I came over to

the the old part of town a lot
and as I said you know I I saw

all the old buildings and old
sites you know from the window

of my parents' car from the
school bus window or zooming by

it on my bicycle or I thought I
was zooming by. [Melissa] Right. Or so

you thought and and what's your
most favorite part about the

city historically? Do you have
something that you can I know I

just popped that question on
you. How [Dr. Richbourg Parker] My most favorite part

of the city is really down in
the oldest part down down

around the oldest house in
Aviles Street just because of

the size of the the size of the
the size of the streets. It's

very it's very people size and
also what I like to do is of

course there's no sidewalks in
that area but to walk against

traffic because you get an
entirely different view from

when you're driving in the in
the typical traffic direction.

So, I like to walk against
traffic and you see different

things because you're turned
around 180 degrees. [Melissa] Right and

you're not looking through your
rear-view mirror. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] That's true

too. [Melissa] Looking forward. Uh one of
the things that you were

involved with that was very
significant was the Secrets of

Spanish La Florida, the PBS
special. Could you share that

with our audience? I don't know
if a lot of people are familiar

with the program or the fact
that you were heavily involved

with that. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes, it was it was
quite a it's quite a

challenging program. I worked
with the wonderful producer

Robbie Gordon and and we were
fortunate through her

connections to be able to work

with WNONYT in New York which

is a major PBS station so

therefore we could have

national distributions and our

idea was that you know like I

said it wasn't just the secrets

of La Florida sometimes it's La

Florida is a secret [Melissa] yes [Dr. Richbourg Parker] and

so we got on on Secrets of the

Dead which of course you know

lured people in. [Melissa] Yes [Dr. Richbourg Parker] and it was

very because we had a lot of

lot of scenes, a lot of

speakers but the television

station also wanted everything

that everything that was said,

not by the speakers but by the

narrator. Everything had to be

footnoted. In order to so

that they could say this is
credible reviews and I had to

have two sources. So, my job
was not just to help with the

writing but to provide all the
sources that made it that made

it legitimate and to their
standards. [Melissa] And there's a short

version and a long version [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes,
we did. We did a four-hour

version but in the end, it got
cut down for national

distribution to two hours but
you can purchase the four-hour

version. I can't remember which
catalog it is at the moment.

Signals maybe? [Melissa] We might, I'm
going to go out on a limb. We
might have it at the visitor
information center. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] There are some for

sale in Saint Augustine. [Melissa] In
Saint Augustine, so if you've

never seen the history of our
history of the nation's oldest

city, I would I would recommend
that and you know now that

you've heard it here that we
have a very esteemed historian

in our midst that was very
critical to to the accuracy of

that which is also very
important. Um if you are just

now tuning in, you're listening
to the break room. I'm Melissa

Wissel, communications
director for the city and I

have the pleasure of speaking
with Doctor Susan Richbourg

Parker in studio, the 2023

Order of La Florida Award

recipient. I want to go back to
something that you mentioned in

your remarks at the award about
History Versus Heritage. I

found that really fascinating
and I don't know that everybody

tuned in to the live stream
when we presented that but

would you share that
perspective with us? [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well, and

it's my perspective. Someone
else might have might have a

different one but since the
award specifically mentions

contributing to and preserving
the heritage of the city, I

thought it was important to
because for me, heritage is a

sentiment and a feeling as more
of a gut-level thing than an

intellectual part. That doesn't
mean it's unfactual or

anything such as that and I
personally felt as if a lot of

that, you know, was bread in me
because I literally absorbed

the history of the city as a
child through my pores just

like I got a sun tan. [Melissa] Yeah. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] I
think and then later on of

course got to the actually got
to read the documents and and

the things that were written
here and as I moved on, I

realized sometimes history and
heritage are not quite the same

thing but heritage is what
keeps people interested in it

and as I mentioned at the at
the award acceptance, I think

history is the heat, excuse me,
I think heritage is the heat

that drives the interest in
history, right? [Melissa] And you

continue your your interest.

You are you still you're still

teaching. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Actually that's not
true. I I did a a guest

appearance for a UF class two
weeks ago. [Melissa] And and the academic

as you mentioned when we first
started speaking today. Your

your background is also in
academia. What are what you're

where what are you doing now or
how are you staying involved?

Cuz I know you've you've not

stopped. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No I'm not I'm not

stopped. [Melissa] You're not sitting at
home at the beach with the

dogs. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No and and you know this
is a this is a profession or a calling

whatever you think that really
you can do until you're

incapable and incompetent to do
anything. There's really no age

limit to it. Or really almost
physical limit to it. So at the

moment I have because of COVID
I became very interested in

epidemics in Colonial Florida
and especially Saint Augustine

and gave a talk on that about
two two years ago. But I'm

continuing to to follow that
relying heavily on the records

from the local Catholic parish

from the 1700s to try to track

what through the burials to try

to track how strong the how

strong the the epidemics were

and they are stunning. It is

absolutely stunning. [Melissa] So COVID

wasn't the first. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] No. Let me

kind of give you a quick

example. [Melissa] Absolutely please. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Um

it was probably smallpox or

small this is before Smallpox

vaccination 17 twenties. So I

looked at the burials for the

first three months of the year

that I looked at. There were

only six Saint Augustine was a small

community. In April after

smallpox hit, there were

ninety-two. [Melissa] Oh my gosh. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] I mean,

that is a and then the next
month, there were like 50 some

as it starts to taper off but
it doesn't go back down to the

pre epidemic levels for for
several months and so it's it

was just I I I counted several
times because I thought I was

wrong. [Melissa] So, so in turning that
around. So, what do you as

somewhat of a novice? What do
you do with that information?

Are you writing a book about
it? Like you find that [Dr. Richbourg Parker] it may

not be long enough for a book.
It might it might go in an

article and I think it's one of
those it's one of those topics

that you could probably publish

in an academic journal but also

find some other sort of
scientifically oriented more

popular. [Melissa] And that's probably
one of those things where

Margot would come in and say
see that's you're you're

putting something historic in a
perspective and telling it in a

way where we can relate now a
little bit more in you know

modern times to first there was
then there was 95 or you said

six but you know just like when
COVID started it was just this

trickling in and then boom it
was a huge epidemic. Um any

other projects or anything. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] It's funny because my children

used to say yeah mom we know

this happened before. [Melissa] Well

that's how we that's how we
learn as we look at history

right? [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well to me it's sort of
it gives us the somewhat of a

sense of security. It's like
yes we made it through this

before. Right we we yes we've
been here before and we'll get

through it again. [Melissa] Yeah I'm also I am writing a book on the

governor's house. Uh for the of
Florida. And the governor's

house is the one right down
there downtown. Right, right

where it's been for 400 plus
years? [Melissa] And the seat of

government, we had our, we had
our reenactment of the

establishment. Five years ago.

Any interesting tales to tell

that you've uncovered there yet

or no? [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well, what I'm really

focusing on is not just the

building because there's been a

lot of focus on the building

over centuries but I'm also

focusing on what happened

within the walls as much as we

can tell and sometimes you have

good information on the

building but also what this

decisions that the governors

may, you know, we we that there

were some of the governors were

young. There were young

children born there because of

course children were born at

home at that time. There were

probably a few affairs that
went on. Um you know there's

just it's it's it's truthfully
it's it's the typical human

drama. [Melissa] Yeah. Um doesn't change.

[Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well humans don't change much.

[Melissa] Right. You like to think that
we've evolved and maybe we

really have. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] We have a little
but. Yeah. Not as much as we

like to flatter ourselves that
we have. [Melissa] Well one last thing I

would I would love for you to
share with our audience. Um the

other thing that was intriguing
to me was the invitation to

speech with the queen or
address the queen. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] The queen

mother. [Melissa] The queen mother. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Yes.
Um yes I was part of a program

in Miami last year sponsored by
the Queen Sophia Spanish

Institute. Queen Sophia of
course is the Queen Mother of

Spain. She's very very popular.
And and of and has been the

Saint Augustine at least once
maybe more than once. I'd have

to check back on that. But the
Spanish they were releasing a

huge digital biographical
dictionary. And as part of The

announcement and celebration.
They had myself and several

other people as speakers on
board the Spanish sailing

vessel, training sailing
vessel, Juan Spastian Delcano

that was in Miami at that time

and so the the Queen Sophia was

there and we were all

introduced to her and we

actually gave a talk on the on

the on the deck of the ship.

So, it was this, you know,

sailing ship that's not quite

100 years old but of course,

kept in beautiful shape but

with all the with all the With

all the navy personnel. Um Juan

Carlos excuse me Carlos Siltoro

who is the current US Secretary

of the Navy was also there for

the. [Melissa] Wonderful. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] For the talk.

So I I talked about important

Floridians. [Melissa] Well you represent

us well. You are a wealth of

knowledge. We're fortunate to

have you in the community and
we look forward to whatever

else you can uncover and share
with us. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Well I don't plan on

going anywhere for very long.

So thank you very much. [Melissa] Well

thank you so much for coming.

It's been a pleasure talking

with you. [Dr. Richbourg Parker] Thanks Melissa. [Melissa] If
you missed part of this

broadcast and want to go back
and listen from the beginning

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Until next time, thanks for
tuning in. [Narrator] You've been

listening to The Breakroom, a
weekly program addressing

projects and programs offered
by City of Saint Augustine.

Join us each week as the city's
communications director,

Melissa Whistle, has in-depth
conversations with the people

who make our town work to meet
the needs of our community. The

break room is produced by
communication specialist for

the City of St. Augustine Cindy

Walker. See you at this time

next week for another edition

of The Break Room.