

The Break Room, Charles Ellis, February 3, 2027

Narrator:

You've tuned in to another edition of *The Break Room*, a weekly conversation about how the City of Saint Augustine works, from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the City of Saint Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel, *The Break Room* 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 Wissel:

Welcome to *The Break Room*. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of Saint Augustine. I'm not sure where January went—we are already into February, and that means it's Black History Month. I can't think of a more appropriate place to be than Saint Augustine, which is home to Fort Mose, the first legally sanctioned free Black community in what is now the United States, as well as home to the Fort Mose Jazz and Blues Series music festival, which is coming up, honoring history and community through music.

I've invited Mr. Charles Ellis to join me in studio this week. He is President of the Fort Mose Historical Society. He has been named among "10 Who Make a Difference" by the *St. Augustine Record* and is one of the visionaries behind the Fort Mose Jazz Music Festival. Welcome, Charles.

Charles Ellis:

Thank you for having me. Thank you for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

This is your first appearance on *The Break Room*.

Charles Ellis:

It is. It is. It is.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we're among friends here, so we're just going to have a great conversation about your time here in Saint Augustine. You've been here now 44 years. We were talking about—you moved here from Miami. Tell us a little bit about you and your arrival here in Saint Augustine with JCPenney.

Charles Ellis:

Okay, well thank you so much for having me, Melissa. It's great to be here. It's great to be, like you said earlier, in Saint Augustine. I can't think of a better place to be.

About me coming to Saint Augustine—back in 1982 from Miami—I grew up in West Palm Beach. I went to school in West Palm Beach. I graduated from high school in West Palm Beach and went into the military for a couple of years. Out of the military, back in West Palm, I started to work for the JCPenney Company, working downtown on Clymatta Street, which was where most retail stores were back during that time, because malls were not invented yet. Later on, malls started popping up.

Then JCPenney decided to move into the mall, and I was asked if I wanted to come on board as a management trainee. That's where I got my real start with the JCPenney Company. I moved from West Palm Beach down to Miami, where I became Director of Personnel and also merchandise management. I got my first store in Miami, and after being there for two years, I moved here to Saint Augustine back in 1982, not knowing much about Saint Augustine other than what I had read—and I didn't read a whole lot about it, the history and all that.

I told my friends I was going to move to Saint Augustine. They said, "You're going to move where?" I said, "Saint Augustine." They said, "You sure?" I said, "Oh yes, I am." My job was taking me. I was married, I had three kids, and I needed to feed them, so yeah, I needed to fill them. I got the promotion, and I took a week off prior to coming here.

Melissa Wissel:

Need to pay the bills.

Charles Ellis:

And then I got on the road. Matter of fact, it was a Father's Day weekend. Got on the road and made that travel to Saint Augustine. Living in Miami, you're used to nothing but bright lights and big city. Daytime, nighttime—it's like daytime because the lights are everywhere. I got here, and it was dark, man. There were no lights along the highways other than the lights from your car. So I asked myself, "What did you do? Oh, wow."

But anyway, it's been a great experience being here in Saint Augustine. It's a really great place to raise my children. They all graduated from here, they all went to college, they are out of college, and they're all doing great. So we're just having a great time.

Melissa Wissel:

I think one of the things that's significant—and why I wanted to invite you to talk about Fort Mose and Black History Month—I had asked you what comes to mind when you hear that phrase, "Black History Month." Is it significant to you? What does it conjure?

It's important to note that while you very casually remarked that you got your first store in management, you showed me that you were the first Black store manager, which was big.

Charles Ellis:

Store manager—right. Yes. This was back in 1980 when I got my first store with the JCPenney Company, and I was the first Black store manager with the JCPenney Company—the whole company.

Melissa Wissel:

The whole company.

Charles Ellis:

Right. And when I think of Black History Month, I mean, to pronounce that saying “you are the first”—anytime you can be the first in anything, I think it’s great.

Growing up knowing that February was Black History Month, there’s a lot that’s pronounced and said about what happened during that month—the accomplishments of African Americans. That makes me feel proud, to know that my mother raised me at the right time and I came along at the right time.

Being the first Black store manager, and also coming here to Saint Augustine, was a great honor for me. Not prejudging anything, but accepting things as they were, and the acceptance I got when I arrived here—that was just fantastic.

I was able to join a lot of boards. Wayne Simmons—who was the video announcer here with WLC—was the first guy I met, and let me tell you, he put me on more boards than I wanted. I had to tell Wayne, “Hey, slow down. I’ve got a job.”

Melissa Wissel:

I think Wayne Simmons was Paul Williamson’s predecessor, who was my predecessor—so there’s Wayne again. And I think Wayne brought a significant historic plaque back from Spain in his suitcase, if we really want to go back to talking about Wayne—but we’ll save that for another day.

If you’re just now tuning in, you’re listening to *The Break Room*. I’m Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of Saint Augustine, and I have Charles Ellis in studio with me this week. He is the President of the Fort Mose Historical Society.

We’re talking about Black History Month, Charles’s arrival here in Saint Augustine, being the first Black store manager in the entire JCPenney Company, and your time here in Saint Augustine. You knew the history, but now you *know* the history and what a difference that has made. Being part of Fort Mose—let’s talk a little bit about your involvement.

Charles Ellis:

Fort Mose—back in 1996, several of us joined the Fort Mose Historical Society: Lorenzo

Laws, Thomas Jackson, Otis Mason, and several others who were the forefathers of Fort Mose.

Melissa Wissel:

Founding charter members there.

Charles Ellis:

Yes. Founding members of Fort Mose. Fort Mose kicked off in 1996. It was the first free Black settlement in North America. The fort was not built at that particular time. We held meetings in various locations and also over at the Anastasia State Park.

In 1994, Fort Mose was designated a National Historic Landmark. From 1996 up until 2005 is before we started to build the fort. We broke ground on the interpretive center in 2006, and the fort was built in 2008.

Right. During that time, we brought a lot of student tours out there. We had groups coming from churches all over South Florida, from Georgia to the Carolinas. That became one of the signature events—the Flight to Freedom.

By having the Flight to Freedom, it gave us an opportunity to share with the community and visitors the story of Fort Mose, which was the long journey that these freedom seekers took—leaving the Carolinas and traveling some 377 miles down to Fort Mose.

Today, we have the new fort, which we broke ground on in January 2023, and now we have the fort, which had its ribbon cutting in 2025.

Melissa Wissel:

The actual fort—because it used to be a museum. You’d drive in and say, “Oh, this is a great museum.” And then, “Would you like to go see the grounds?” “Sure.”

Where’s the fort?

Charles Ellis:

Exactly. That was part of the tours, particularly with children. During Black History Month, we have a lot of school tour groups coming out. When you tell children, “We’re going to the fort today,” the last thing they hear is “fort.” They don’t hear anything else you say.

They go through the museum, see the artifacts, and then they walk outside and say, “Where’s the fort?” But today, we have that fort, and it’s been a great asset in helping us tell the Fort Mose story.

The Jazz and Blues event has been a big proponent of that, and we have to give credit to many businesses and stakeholders around Saint Augustine that helped support that event.

Melissa Wissel:

That was really the inspiration behind it. Before, we're almost out of time, I want to talk about first and we're going to continue this conversation. The Blues Festival, in regards to Fort Mose and telling that story. Give a description, a plug for Fort Mose before we sign off. We'll come back and do another episode and talk about the music festival.

The fort is just north of town. There's an interpretive center, a movie, and the most satisfying thing you told me—what you really love to see most. Share that thought with our group before we sign off.

Charles Ellis:

The most gratifying thing is the Flight to Freedom, our signature event. It depicts the travel freedom seekers took from the Carolinas down to Fort Mose. When they reached Spanish Florida, they were granted freedom if they accepted Catholicism, and the men agreed to serve in the military while the women served in the community.

The reenactment is about 25 minutes long, with around 10 stations which you go through. You see a live reenactment of the runaway, the embassy, the boatman, the priest Francisco Menéndez, and the militia. So all of that is done within about 30 minutes. It's a live reenactment.

The satisfaction I get is when folks say, "I never knew this was here," and they've lived in Saint Augustine for 27 or 37 years. Others say I never heard of Fort Moe and those are folks that come off the trail in tears, saying, "I can't believe this." It brings out a lot of emotion, and it's a great education on African American history. Fort Mose is that bridge that helps tell that story.

Melissa Wissel:

Perfect ending to our discussion today. We didn't even get to talk about the concert series—we'll come back and pick up right where we left off. We'll probably do a little bit of a recap.

You've been listening to *The Break Room*. If you want to listen from the beginning, you can catch it on your favorite podcasting app or at citystaugradio.com we have a complete listing. Charles, thank you for coming on this week.

You can follow us on all our social platforms—Facebook, Instagram, and X. Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

Narrator:

You've been listening to *The Break Room*, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of Saint Augustine. Join us each week as the city's

Communications Director, Melissa Wissel, has in-depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you next week at this time for another edition of *The Break Room*.