

Nikki Smith: From Political Campaigns to the American Dream, Florida

As told by Nikki Smith
Bartow, Florida

Introduction: In early 2020 (just weeks before the pandemic), Smithsonian staff and their storytelling partners at the Peale, Baltimore, traveled to multiple states in the U.S. to ask residents of those states about voting experiences, the current state of American democracy, what issues brought them to the polls, how they made a difference in their communities, and what Americans' civic responsibilities were, among other complex questions.

Story Narrative:

Nikki Smith: My name is Nikki Smith. I was originally born in Seoul, Korea. I was adopted here into America, lived in Michigan and then when I turned five, I made Winter Haven my home and have been here ever since.

(00:13) I've been an active participant in politics both personally and professionally. One of the memories that I have was on a personal note, I was part of a campaign kickoff team, and one of my responsibilities was to make sure that I had three 30-foot American flags hung as a backdrop for the candidate. So everything was great and all of a sudden, right before the candidate takes the stage, I had this panic moment, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I only see flags that are flying and actually waving. Rarely have I ever seen them turned 90 degrees." So in that moment, thankfully, I asked the Google and I had the flags in the appropriate direction. But what it did is it made me pause, because in that moment, I remembered how much respect I have for the American flag. Because it stands for freedom, it stands for all of the people who served before us, who gave up their lives so that we could vote and it stands as a symbol and a monument for all of those who still serve.

(01:12) So working with them, I realized that they're not the elite few. They're actually just everyday humans like us. They're just passionate about changing something for the community, and I've worked with politicians on both sides, Republican and Democrats, and their common denominator is they love America and they want to serve. And so from that, from working with them, I've gleaned that one person can make a change.

(01:35) I've seen in local primary elections and local state elections and even in the presidential what the difference one vote makes. From working with the different political candidates and things, it has opened my eyes to a non-biased opinion. I think so many times we hear rhetoric or narrative that people want us to hear, through working with them and through my husband being involved in politics, I've learned that I have to research truth

for myself. I have to make and form my own opinion. Not everything I hear and see or read is true. From that also, we've instilled that in our family, and a proven point for that our son, our oldest son graduated from Virginia Tech and upon graduation, he decided to serve in the Navy, right? He wanted to serve. That's huge.

(02:24) My husband teaches for Polk State College, political science and American government. He doesn't tell them what to think, he doesn't tell them to be a Democrat or Republican, he teaches them how to make a formed opinion. All of these candidates are strong and they're passionate, but what makes one successful over another is when they realize that one individual's freedoms does not trump another individual's freedoms, and when a spirit of collaboration comes together, that's when things really happen.

(02:52) From being an orphan and being born in another country to having the opportunity to live the American dream is amazing. I mean and I'm so thankful. So I set it as a goal, a personal goal, to be a good human being, even when no one's watching me. I don't call myself an Asian-American, I call myself an American. Because on the day that I get to vote, I'm voting as an American. When I celebrate national holidays, I'm celebrating as an American. I believe that we are so fortunate to live in a cultural pot of all sorts and all types and all nationalities, but our bottom line is we are American, and we share the same thing, freedom, and whether we're diverse, whether we celebrate differently, whether we practice our faith differently, it doesn't matter. We have to just become united on the fact that we're free and that we live in this great country.

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