



Not too long ago, a Newark TSA agent informed me that my driver's license was expired. My heart skipped a beat as I imagined his next sentence excusing me from the TSA Pre-Check line to the hell of airport bureaucracy, a lost soul trying to get home without valid identification. (Only now does it dawn on me that I have secondary identification – a military ID – as the spouse of a retired Marine!)

Instead, he told me I could use my elapsed license for air travel for another year and pointed me toward a line of plastic bins and x-ray machines. Once my heart returned to a steady state and I settled into my seat on a direct flight to Savannah, I realized I had lived in South Carolina for ten years, the life span of a twenty-five dollar South Carolina driver's license.

Where does time go? I know it settles in the deep creases between my eyebrows and I witness it in the white hairs multiplying around Toby's eyes and beagle snout. The 2014 expiration date on my license seemed so far away in April 2004, an eternity from my first days on Lady's Island, yet here it was. Here I am. Ten seasons of browned out cord grass turning green. Ten years of tidal currents lapping over my life in waves of work, writing, and age.

My body has changed since I moved to Beaufort County. I passed through menopause during this past decade and I struggle with the slow march of decay of my bones and tissue. I have made and lost friends over these years. I have watched my friend Dan persevere in his recovery from a car accident while other friends – Gay and Bart, Joe and Lou, Donna and Dot – have passed away. In a community where many of our residents are retired and have committed to living out their lives in the Carolina Lowcountry, funerals are frequent gatherings and I have developed the habit of reading obituaries dreading the appearance of the name of someone I know.

Ten years ago, before an appointment with Martin Goodman, then the head of USCB's entrepreneurship program, I sat in a pew inside the old church beside Martin's office wondering what I would do for work, dreaming of starting a business in Lobeco or downtown Beaufort. Today, my job takes me to states and countries foreign to Bay Street and the tiny plot of land I purchased on Paris Avenue to grow my dreams lies dormant inside Port Royal's longing to mature into the same beauty of her big sister Beaufort. Historic St. Peter's has a new makeover, and a pew donated by Mac and me wears an inscription on a small, yellow metal plate

confirming our love and commitment to the community we call home.

I am too acquainted with Beaufort's medical community, mostly due to caring for my mom, but also because my eyes, skin, and arteries need more attention. Our healthcare professionals and volunteers are constant in their care and commitment, and I am blessed by their support in Irene's care. My mother has lived here nine of my ten years in South Carolina and the changes she has endured, along with the impact of her presence on the strength of my marriage, is an epic tale waiting to be written.

Dogs happened to me over these ten years. When my mother relocated from Pittsburgh, she arrived with Cokie, her best friend and beloved Bichon Frisé. Cokie has passed and my mother's need for companionship translated into Cokie's antithesis – a silky terrier refugee from a commune of Georgia rescues named Trooper who took residence in our home just hours after my mother's lumpectomy. Of course there is Toby, my dog, and the only true South Carolinian residing in our Walling Grove home. Toby, an injured and malnourished beagle, hails from St. Helena Island and was miraculously mended by Dr. Mark Guilloud, wooed by the Animal Medical Center staff, and is financed by paychecks from private industry and the federal government. Toby keeps my heart beating.

Over my ten years in Beaufort, I ran a few Shrimp Festival races, taught a class at ArtWorks, volunteered at Habitat for Humanity and Bayview Manor, and stood at the foot of the McTeer Bridge waving campaign signs. I am a good and loyal customer to Waters Drycleaners, Publix (workplace of the infamous Valerie!), Walgreen's and Video Warehouse. I enjoy shopping at Lulu Burgess, Grace & Glory and Mango's and I have overspent my Weight Watchers points dining at Dockside, Plums and Upper Crust. I am honored to be a writer for the Lowcountry Weekly. It is a thrill to see my words and name in print and a gift to experience the support and encouragement of Margaret Evans.

Through each of my ten years, palmettos, azaleas and camellias, pluff mud, rivers, creeks, and marshes, dogwoods, redbuds, magnolias and live oaks, sunrises and sunsets, whelks, sand dollars and star fish, turtles, dolphin, shark, skate, flounder, alligators and every sort of crab, blue heron, wood stork and returning osprey have graced my life. And the ocean, always the ocean, calls me to float on top of her, meander beside her, or just gaze into the deep horizon of her watery eyes. Even as she ate the cabins on Hunting Island and robs one island to pay another in sandy currency, to live beside the Atlantic is one of my dreams realized.

After crossing the Broad River Bridge on Friday afternoon returning from the Savannah airport, I went directly to the DMV office to renew my license. So much had changed. I was assigned a number that flashed onto a digital screen instead of a pull-tab paper ticket, and I moved from a payment window to photo processing completing the entire process in about one-half of an hour. It was a sunny afternoon and for some odd reason, I decided to turn into the National Cemetery on my way home. A long line of cars was exiting with the hearse pulling up the rear. It dawned on me that over the course of this past decade, my husband and I decided to be buried here one day and our arrangements for cremation along with a few words for our headstone are documented and filed. God-willing, I am a long way from that day, that decade. I believe I still have a lot of living to do, and although no one can ever be certain of the path ahead, I look forward to another decade of change and adventure as a legal and licensed resident of South

A Beaufort Decade

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Carolina, my Lowcountry home.

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