



The Honorable Paula Stern, Ph.D.

Freedom Reigns: Lowcountry, South Carolina

**Conversation with The Honorable Paula Stern and South Carolina
State Senator Paul Campbell:**

What America Means to Me: Diversity, History, Competitive

Advantage and the Choices We Make Today

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America is a blending of everybody from somewhere else, not necessarily voluntarily. History and how we connect to history through our ancestors and research shapes what the meaning is for each of us. For us Southerners there is great pride in our history, but it is important we critically examine it.

I know diversity is key to America's competitive advantage as a great nation economically, geostrategically, and diplomatically because I have studied the roles of immigrants in shaping our foreign policy to one based on human and individual rights. My interest in diversity stems from my personal experience growing up in Memphis.

As a Jewish family, my parents, siblings, and I gained a perspective on the civil rights struggle that many did not share at the time. On a break from my graduate studies, I was home in Memphis when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was fatally shot and the rioting broke out. As I told the *Washington Post*, "... Our family was just devastated about Dr. King because he was a hero in our house."

Already academically interested in the effect immigrants have on America's competitive advantage, my work ever since has, in some way, focused on increasing and promoting diversity of every kind. Guided by my parents, my brother and sister were similarly moved. My brother, Gerald Stern, became a civil rights lawyer in the early 1960s. My sister, Margot Stern Strom, founded the nationally prominent non-profit Facing History and Ourselves, which engages students of diverse backgrounds in discussions on racism and prejudice.

In many ways we are incredibly proud of the history of this country. The choices that our founding fathers made formed a nation based on ideals. Our desire to ensure we are extending the unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" have allowed us to form an incredible legacy ideologically, academically, and economically. For instance, America has long dominated the Nobel Prizes, but did you know that 1 in 4 American Nobel laureates since 1901 are foreign-born immigrants? They have consistently taken their education with them on the boat and brought it to a place which would ensure they have the chance to actually make it.

When I look back, it seems we have come so far. The sun is setting on our first African-American President's time in office, and Women's suffrage seems like ancient history, now that we are looking at our first potential woman President.

So what do we do with this ideological legacy going forward? We focus on tolerance and understanding. This is especially important as we debate who will lead us going into a presidential election where the media has a stake in churning up controversy rather than understanding.

We must also reflect on and question our own personal histories in order to ensure we are truly offering those three unalienable rights to all Americans. This is often overlooked in this land of enterprise and new beginnings.



I came to this realization this past summer on a trip I took to Lithuania with my husband, Paul London. Our family has always been so interested in history generally, but I did not realize how deeply we buried our own personal family's history until this trip.

After the trip I re-read material about my family tree, I discovered material I had previously not focused on. My great grandparents were likely killed by the Nazis in 1941 in what is Belarus today. So many millions of Jews, political dissidents, and so-called social outliers were annihilated in gas chambers or marched into pits, and killing fields and executed. I don't know how my great grandparents perished, but it took my visit to see some of these pits and killing fields in Lithuania to realize just how much of my history was buried.

I questioned why our parents and grandparents never talked to us about the history that we dug up and only faced this summer abroad. I assume it was because they felt guilt for surviving. Their family members who did not immigrate were eliminated. It must have been too difficult to talk about the past to us youngsters. However, everybody benefits from asking about their parents and the choices they might have made or did make as a way of challenging the choices they make today. Asking these questions puts daily life into a broader, deeper context.

In America, everyone will have a story if they are willing to dig back into their history and into their hearts to help face the choices that they make every day.