

In an effort to attract new visitors to Tybee, Stacye Jarrell solicited the assistance of PR guru, **Toren Anderson**. Their hard work has resulted in over 80 million impressions on TV, print, radio and web. Shortly thereafter, Tybee Island was named the **Healthiest Beach in the Country** and was featured in *Health* magazine and on CNN, *The Today Show*, *Boortz*, AOL, *Dave Ramsey* and more. It's no wonder, friends, family and the community have quietly dubbed her the...

QUEEN of tides

written by BLAKE WARREN | photography by ERIC PRINE

FOR THOSE LATTER-DAY EXPLORERS, EARTH CHILDREN, PADDLE JUNKIES, OLD HIPPIES, PARROT-HEADS, WOULD-BE PIRATES, WILD-EYED SHRIMPERS AND OTHER ASSORTED CHARACTERS WHO LIVE ON TYBEE, THE ISLAND IS THEIR LIVELIHOOD. **BUSINESS MOGUL STACYE JARRELL IS NO DIFFERENT** AND IS WORKING HARD TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS BUILDING A HOME ON SOLID GROUND.

The beach on Tybee Island, Georgia, is clean and beautiful, especially since the 2008 re-nourishment project, which wiped away decades of erosion with millions of tons of sugar-white sand from the nearby seafloor. The estuaries surrounding the island are part of a unique ecosystem. Here at the mouth of the Savannah River, hundreds of miles of water snake through dozens of barrier islands, most uninhabited (by people, anyway). Dolphins play in the wake of the occasional passing boat. Some species of migratory birds can be found, in certain seasons, no other place on earth, and rare saltwater evergreen forests host a delicate habitat that supports diverse life forms—including Stacye Jarrell, longtime resident and economic champion of the island and her island-hopping friends.

It's because a place like this exists that the few who have discovered it are willing to fight for it. Tybee Islanders have survived wars, the

near takeover of the town by gangsters and countless summers under the subtropical sun prior to the advent of air conditioning. They've managed, so far, to dodge threats from hurricanes, rapacious developers and a stray nuclear weapon. Now, after decades of building their little island into a year-round community of like souls and regular visitors, they face a new danger: this time an economic one. "If we can hang on just a little longer," Jarrell says, "we can make it through this storm."

The island, in all likelihood, will survive this storm, just as it has all others. Meet Jarrell and you'll begin to understand why.

Jarrell's workplace is the whole of the island. On business trips, she travels by boat, not by plane. When she and her husband, Lannie, go on vacation, it's often to destinations within just miles of their house, yet none of her neighbors know exactly where to find them. She is the essence of a Tybee person.

Jarrell is also a grandmother, but that's not the first thing that comes to mind when you

meet her. She most recalls, perhaps, a Southern, female incarnation of the ageless Sir Richard Branson. But rather than shamelessly promoting herself and her business, as the Virgin mogul might, Jarrell promotes the entire island.

She owns Oceanfront Cottage Rentals, a Tybee Island-based vacation rental property service that offers, give or take, 85 plum homes throughout the island, many of which are eponymously situated right on the Atlantic. They're WiFi-equipped, concierge-staffed gems that often serve as home-away-from-homes for A-list celebrities.

"They enjoy coming here because when they're going through a time of crisis or unwanted attention, we will lie like dogs to protect their privacy," Jarrell explains. "When they come here, they know they're not going to be bothered."

That egalitarian model of community—for beach house-owning celebrities and beach bar waitresses alike—is a holdover from a time when there probably wasn't one rental home



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A room with a view: Jarrell's waterfront home and headquarters for her ever-growing business.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS HORNADAY

on the island a celebrity would want to set foot in. Today Tybee Island is cool, but it wasn't always so. Homes in disrepair, a lack of a year-round business community and a dirty beach characterized the island when Jarrell first arrived in 1980.

"I don't know if you know this, but the island used to be kind of a dump," Jarrell recalls in her trademark blend of frank, dry and facetious. "If you wanted dinner on Tybee after August, you had to cook, or you went to Savannah."

Jarrell's longtime friend and Tybee Island native, Terry Jackson, remembers too.

"When we were kids, we had a boardwalk, with electric bingo and all that, and we didn't feel like we were missing anything," Jackson remembers. "After we started making friends in Savannah, we saw a little bit of the outside world and swore we would never live on Tybee."

Sure enough, though, Jackson and her husband bought their first home on Tybee, and they've never left. The Jarrells, the Jacksons and pretty much all the year-round island residents have worked, slowly but surely, to build Tybee Island into a destination, if only to preserve what they love about it for themselves and their children.

Jarrell has been instrumental in that building

at all steps, from the literal building and renovating of homes to helping with rebranding the island to bringing in the big personalities and media attention that draws tourism dollars even in rough times. Her current projects include the move and refitting of a movie-set chapel to serve as the centerpiece of Tybee Island as a wedding destination, and a mass fitness event featuring celebrity trainers to celebrate Tybee Island's reign as "America's Healthiest Beach" for 2009 and 2010. The Tybee Island Wedding Chapel and Tybee Throws a Fit, as these two projects are respectively known, represent significant personal investment on Jarrell's part, but they're expenses she says are necessary to keep the island's economy afloat.

Hosting lavish dinner parties—so far more than 60—for visiting journalists and notables is another major diplomatic effort Jarrell has undertaken. Like the duchess of a Mediterranean principality hosting vacationing nobles, she curries favor and wins custom for her tiny kingdom. And it's worked. Oceanfront Cottage Rentals, amazingly, has had a record year so far.

"We've extended our homes and boats and everything else to get people to come and see what we've done with the place," Jarrell says.

Stay like a Celebrity

Southern celebrities know how to vacation in style. Follow in the footsteps of Lisa Wu and Ed Hartwell and spend some quality time on Tybee. To book a rental through Oceanfront Cottage Rentals, visit OCEANFRONTCOTTAGE.COM OR CALL 800.786.5889.

"We've got more part-time residents that allow for full-time restaurants and clean, beautiful vacation homes."

The island as a whole is faring far better than most tourism and second-home destinations, with sales in high-end homes ticking back up, and not even because of foreclosure.

The herculean workload Jarrell has willingly taken on gives you some sense of her priorities and, really, her underlying reasons for going above and beyond. She could simply rent her homes, chalk up sagging numbers to a bad economy and wait it out for better times. But she knows that her owners can't afford to let their homes sit empty. A foreclosure is not just one step back to the bad old days; it's a lost friend, a vibrant tapestry with one fewer color.

Even the part-time residents are, almost all of them, island people. Without them, Jarrell's Lowcountry boils on the riverbank behind her house would be a little less lively, her camping trips out to Little Tybee just a little too quiet. The people that stay and discover the island discover each other. **S**

Behind Every Great Woman

Jarrell had a dream, and her husband, Lannie, is the man who literally laid the bricks to make it a reality. The three-story riverside home that serves as their escape (and frequently her office) was designed and built by builder Lannie and his team. He does all the general contracting work on the 85 vacation homes she represents through Oceanfront Cottage Rentals, and he's also refitting the Tybee Island Wedding Chapel for a fall opening after the building was moved earlier this year.

"If it wasn't for Lannie," Stacye explains, "none of this work with the chapel or even my regular business would even have happened. He's not just a great builder, he's my rock. He's supported everything I've tried to do here every step of the way. **"If you're not going to talk about Lannie here," Stacye says, "there's not really a reason to write an article about me. I wouldn't be much without him."**



Lannie Jarrell