

300 Stories Across America

Michelle Fishburne traveled coast to coast connecting with Americans and found we have more in common than we think



MICHELLE FISHBURNE AND BUDDY IN FRONT OF THEIR RV. (CREDIT: MICHELLE FISHBURNE)

At the start of the pandemic, Michelle Fishburne, 58, lost her public relations job. The company she worked for downsized due to COVID-19. She sent out 86 customized cover letters to no avail. Work was hard to find.

Her lease on her house was about to expire and her two children would both be in college that August. As an empty nester with no job in sight, she decided to leave Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and hit the road with her shih tzu, Buddy.

Life on the road was familiar. When her kids were younger, she took them on a 10-month road trip in her 29-foot Jamboree motor home. "I'm a third-generation RVer," she says. "My parents and grandparents spent a lot of time in their RVs and shared numerous fond memories of the people they met and the discoveries they made."

Last year, Michelle put her belongings in storage and decided to make memories of her own. "It was a practical decision," she says. "With no job, it didn't make sense to rent or buy a house. I had the motor home."

From fall 2020 through March 2021, she traveled 12,000 miles touring the country, meeting and interviewing people for her website Who We Are Now. She wondered if the media reports saying the country was so divided were true.

She decided to see for herself. “The pandemic shined a new light on us,” she says. “It made us talk about what matters in life, and that focus is on family, friends and jobs. I’m sure many of the people I interviewed voted differently from me. It didn’t matter.”

From strangers to friends

Michelle interviewed 300 people — from cattle ranchers in Alpine, Texas, to a monologue writer working for Jimmy Fallon in Los Angeles, to restaurant owners in New York City and health care workers in the heartlands. In Arkansas, she met a veteran who ran throughout the state carrying the American flag. “He wanted to lift people’s spirits,” she says.

“What the pandemic taught us was to slow down, **to think about others**, even others who we see as different from us. We all experienced the lockdown, the fear and the hope. Somehow, we lifted our chins and we’re able to connect to one another because we have a lot in common.”

Her day started at 7 a.m. and some days went to midnight. “All I needed was an RV, a camera, my computer and curiosity,” Michelle says. “Experiencing job loss allowed me to relate to people who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. People opened up to me and shared their stories. I’m fortunate I was able to meet so many wonderful people.”

She’s back in Chapel Hill living in her motor home and finalizing the manuscript for her book, based on her *Who We Are Now* project, which UNC Press and the Duke Center for Documentary Studies will publish in fall 2022. In August 2021, she’ll start a new position as a strategist for a public relations firm.

She compares her book to *Working*, by Studs Terkel, and *Travels With Charley in Search of America*, by John Steinbeck. “These are life stories from all over the country,” she says. “It helps us understand who we are.”

Just as Michelle travels with Buddy, “Steinbeck traveled 10,000 miles with his dog, Charley,” she says. “Buddy and I traveled a total of 12,000 miles. Buddy’s a **good companion** and a small dog who likes a lot of space. Visiting family and friends, he prefers stretching out in spacious homes compared to the small interior of a motor home. Still, he kept me company.”

On publication, she plans to wrap her RV with images of her new book and tour the country promoting the book and collecting more stories. “I have five or six books in me,” she says. “I like sharing other people’s stories.”

Following the six pillars of brain health:

A healthy lifestyle protects the brain. That can include being social, eating right, managing stress, getting ongoing exercise and restorative sleep, plus engaging your brain. Here’s what Michelle is doing.

Staying connected

Having grown up in a family that loves road trips, Michelle never got lonely on hers. “In 1936, my grandfather bought a camper that he and my grandmother lived in for three years,” she says. “And when my parents retired, they spent seven years traveling around the country in an RV. It’s much easier now **keeping in touch** with family and friends, thanks to my cellphone, computer and Facebook. Social media keeps us connected.”

Research shows that social technology use is associated with reduced loneliness among older adults. Fishburne used technology to help her connect with people to interview for her website and book and to stay in touch with her family.

Diet

Even with a stove, oven, microwave and refrigerator, eating well on the road is challenging. When her RV took her in and around urban areas, she ate her favorites: fresh fruits and vegetables, yogurt, pecans, granola and salmon. In rural areas, she made do with frozen foods. “I came across many food deserts,” she says. “It was even more difficult because of the pandemic, and food deliveries were disrupted in many areas of the country.”

Optimism

At 58, Michelle knows life is full of surprises. “Action is the antidote to fear,” she says. “I might not want to try something because I think it won’t work out; I do it anyway and find it worked out well. It’s about being open and accepting new ideas.”

Research from Yale University found being outside your comfort zone can increase your ability to learn.

Sleep tight

Not much comes between Fishburne and a good night’s sleep. Even when her life is full of uncertainty, she sleeps well. It also helps that her camper has a comfortable queen-size bed.

Stimulation

Constantly exploring parts of the country, meeting new people and asking many questions keeps Fishburne engaged. In his book *Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity Can Change Your Life*, neuroscientist Michael Merzenich explains how people who travel to new places as they age are less likely to develop cognitive decay.

Michelle says it works for her. “It’s the best anti-aging approach,” she says. “My mind is more open to everything now than when I was right out of law school. Interviewing people and writing their stories keeps me engaged.” —Michele C. Hollow