

Her fingers twist and curve themselves deftly around her many blades of sweetgrass. Years of practice make her movements confident and quick, but it still takes hours for the spiral she's shaping to grow enough that it might resemble a basket. Grass slides and chafes against her fingers, and as her hands repeat the same steps over and over, they begin to cramp. She probably takes a break, or several, but she does not leave her basket unfinished.

And when she does finish? She starts another.

"Everyone in my family makes sweetgrass baskets," senior Yesmine Alston said, "even my 11 year old sister [Corinne]. In my immediate family... it's only four of us." But since sweetgrass basket-weaving skills are taught within families, many members of Yesmine's large extended family make baskets as well.

"I was a young age when I learned," Cory Alston, Yesmine's father, said. "It's something that's usually passed down from parent to child. The children usually learn at an early age of seven, eight years old. It's a big part of the Gullah culture to teach it while they're young; that's so the people who are learning it don't hate it. It's very time consuming, so for an adult to try to start doing it all the sudden, it would be frustrating."

"Time consuming" is a bit of an understatement.

"On the average, something the size of, let's use a gallon milk jug for instance... that takes about three and a half days," Cory said. "Something small as the palm of your hand, you can get that done in right about six to seven hours."

Practice can make the slow craft quicker over time: "A small one usually takes me a whole day to do," Yesmine said. "But I feel like the older I get, the faster I'm getting to do it." Still, the most important thing about weaving the baskets isn't how long they take.

"You want it to be made very well, nice and tight, and that also shows the quality of the artisan," Cory said.

Because it takes so long, it's difficult for Yesmine to find the time to work on baskets over the school year.

"Since I go to school and I have other things outside of school, I usually only weave during christmas or spring break," Yesmine said. "Or during the summer, I do it during the summer a lot with my grandma."

However, it's a full-time job for her parents. Her father weaves baskets every day and is at the Charleston City Market five to six days a week, where the family has a business.

As many long hours as it takes, the family also gets a lot from making the baskets. Money, for one.

"Right now, since Christmas just ended, no one's really buying anything, and also the market is closed sometimes in the winter from it being too cold," Yesmine said. "So during the winter time it's really slow for us, but it'll start picking back up around spring break. We get a lot of business during the summertime, when it's warmer and everyone is traveling to come to Charleston."

But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"It's not a stressful job, so I would say it is very therapeutic," Cory said. "With it being therapeutic you can have many thoughts of whatever comes to mind. A lot of times late at night, I will just weave and listen to music."

And since so much work goes into it, they take pride in each piece they make.

“Every piece is unique, there’s not one exactly that we do twice,” Cory said. “It’s satisfying, to have something that is completed when you know you started from scratch. We don’t use any molds, we don’t use any guidelines, we don’t go by anything, it’s all freehanded.”

“It’s really tedious, it makes your hand hurt after a while, but I like doing it because it’s not something everyone can say they can do,” Yesmine said.

But a lot of their love of the craft is not because of its impact on their own lives, but the long history behind it.

“I feel like me doing the sweetgrass baskets, when I do it, it makes me feel connected to my ancestors and people that I’ve never met before, but I know they brought it from the coast of Africa to here and now all my family does it,” Yesmine said. “So I think that’s really unique, to see even after 350 years, we are still doing it up to this day.”

The past is a big portion of what motivates the Alstons to weave sweetgrass baskets at all.

“It’s business, it’s the family business, but it’s a part of keeping the Gullah culture alive,” Cory said. “And so that would be the most important part... The culture’s what makes us push to do another style, to do another shape. If the culture dies, then the relevance, what was done and kept alive generationally, that dies as well. And we don’t want that to happen.”

This is all the more important because of how few basket weavers there are.

“Mount Pleasant is the only city, the only town that has kept the art school alive,” Cory said. “There are places: Edisto, Kiowa, Stevebrook Island, John’s Island, James Island. At one time, those places did have basket weaving. But Mount Pleasant is credited with keeping it alive the longest and teaching it generationally. So I hate for people to miss that part about it because with us living in Mount Pleasant, sometimes we take things for granted because we see it every day.”