



In collaboration with

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Interviewer: Ariel Chukwuma

00:00 Ariel Chukwuma **OK. So, I think that a good place to start would be with your background—with who you are, and then get more into your work and what you're doing with your farm nowadays. So, could you start off with your name, just introduce yourself and your occupation, and what you believe your connection to (the Environmental Justice Movement) to be?**

00:24 Ike Mills Well, my name is Igalious “Ike” Mills. I go by Ike. It's kind of an easy name, but Igalious Mills is my full name. And I'm a third-generation farmer. Born and raised on a small cotton farm in East Texas, called Nacogdoches, Texas, and basically lived there until I actually went to school—college, where I obtained my Associate Degree, my Bachelor (of) Fine Arts Degree from Lamar University. And from there, I've always been associated with farming and ranching `cause my siblings, some of them stay on the land itself. And so, I went back and forth doing part of the work and the upkeep required on a farm. So, yeah, it's been an ongoing process.

01:41 A.C. **Yeah, thank you so much for sharing. I do want to talk a bit about your parents and your relationship to the land. So... what important lessons did (your upbringing) teach you in order to have you keep your focus on your land—or your focus on preserving Black land ownership in the US?**

Well, like I said, I'm a third-generation farmer. And, my father, he basically took over the land when he was—basically had a fifth-grade education, and so, he and my mother got married, I think they may have been like 15 years old, or something like that. And so, we had, it was like 10 kids—5 boys and 5 girls. And I had been trying to figure out why we had such a large family. Well, for the most part, it was that we were taught to work. And so, I finally figured out that we were the workers, to keep the land going, and raise cattle and crops, and those types of things.

And I'm also writing a book about how I grew up, because, like I said, I was a former basketball player—that is how I went and got my education. And I was able to do that, and it was a great opportunity because, otherwise, I probably wouldn't have been able to go on a full scholarship, to get my education. So, because my parents were unable to send me to college, everything we had was in the land, and on the farm. And, there was a long time before I was ever really introduced to society, because we lived on the land, and we was taught, until I was able to go to elementary school. And so, it provided a kind of a blanket 'cause you weren't introduced to society early on because they just kept you on the land.

And so, I never forget, the first time I remember going to the doctor's office, as one of the first outing(s) that I had, where you had the real lighted area where White people were, but in the back where we Black people were, it was real dark and cold. And I remember those distinctions like it was yesterday. And that was, I guess, my introduction to what society has done. This was back in the 60s, 'cause on Monday I'll be—no, Sunday, I'll be 70 years old. And so, we integrated in about 1967, somewhat over there, '68, when it first was integrated into a White school, so this was eye-opening for me because I had never been put in a situation like that. So I was really saddened, because, compared to how we was brought up like a village with kids, everybody learning' and knowing' each other and the teachers. So, it was a shock for me, for the most part, integration. And I still feel like integration was one of the worst things that happened because for the most part, it divided you. Because I remember being in a now-Black school, we got secondhand everything. But we didn't realize that because we thought that was

just the way the system was until the integration took place. But, for the most part, we always concentrated on doing the things that we needed to do to protect the land.

And that was, I guess, one of my father's—his dying wish, that we didn't sell the land, we keep the land, we work the land. Because for the most part, we raise(d) everything on our land, except for maybe stuff like sugar, but the rest of it, we was able to raise cattle, and milk cows to make our butter. I remember churning to make butter, from an old churn. I tell people that now and they're like, “Man how old are you now? That's something my grandmother and granddaddy used to do.” So anyway, we were the last ones in that area to grow cotton. So, we have a documentary film out, I think I mentioned it to you, with my brother—it's called the Agricultural Allotment Act¹ of 1933 video, that really showed where the disparity and the discrimination in terms of how you was treated, with the things that was critical for our family, which was growing cotton. And they was telling you to plow up your cotton, so other White farmers could grow more cotton—they didn't go into details at that time, of why they was doing it, they just told you to do it; Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to sell the rest of your other remaining cotton. So, I mean, it was really not much of a choice, and they didn't bring a contract or any documents out for my father's signature, they (USDA Agriculture representatives) just told you what to do or, otherwise, you lose all of it.

So, anyway, that was one of the reasons why we wanted to document that. And we're circulating this video documentaty now, around the USDA and other places, as well, because it was an injustice that the Supreme Court went in and basically voted that it was “Unconstitutional”. But we just never heard anything else from it, for the most part. But for the most part, that was a devastating thing for us because that was our financial background; For us to be able to maintain a family, we depended on that (work). A lot of Black landowners, farmers and ranchers lost a lot of land because of that. And so, we wanted to document that while my brother was alive. And he remembered plowing the cotton crops up, and

¹ Agricultural Adjustment Act, passed in 1933 to curb a Depression-era issue of overproduction by providing government subsidies to farmers in exchange for them reducing their crop output.

consequently, one of the old plows that he used was even in the video. So, it's more of a historical legacy documentary, at this point.

But we wanted to make sure that we'd done everything that we could, and we're translating that into our heirs, that you always keep your property, and pay your taxes, do what you need to do to maintain it because it's a legacy, and it has to be passed down through generations, and that's what our generational wealth consists of. So that was important for us, Black farmers and ranchers.

09:50 **A.C.** **OK, I'm gonna pause really quickly because— [TECHNICAL BREAK]**

09:57 **A.C.** **OK, so I appreciate you telling me about all of that. And I think that you really emphasized the... difference between your experience at home and then at school. And I'd like to talk a little bit more about what you look like today. So, what is your day-to-day routine like today?**

10:24 **I.M.** Well, our day-to-day, basically, well, we have cattle, and we have forestry, trees and pasture land. So, that just consists of, for the most part, taking care of the animals, feeding them, and also buying and selling cattle. I think that's the most important thing, right now is that we are looking at some, innovative projects, such as in renewable energy-type projects. We also have went in and created what we call a limited liability partnership, because we think that's important because, for the most part, that allows you to be as one unit. Especially when oil and gas companies come into your area, they like to deal with one entity, `cause if you're scattered out, it makes it very difficult in terms of heirs' property, `cause they have to have all titles clear before the oil or gas company will lease to drill for oil and gas. So that was another mechanism for us to be looked at as a company, and also to help keep us together, in terms of day-to-day activities, and everything is still the same, we also want to look at how can we diversify what we have? In other words, make it better, or be in a situation where you can make more money on your land. `Cause that's one of the big issues right now in Black farms and ranches, (for) landowners is really trying to keep their land, and how do we make it productive? Because nobody is

growing a lot of cotton or soybean and stuff like that in the eastern part of Texas. Now out in the western part of Texas, it's a little bit different, because you have a lot more land, and it's flatter—the terrain is conducive for that. East Texas is a little hilly, and then you have a lotta trees—forestry is a big, big industry there. So, we're trying to take advantage of some of the things that we have. And when we look at trying to create different scenarios—projects, that's one of them, is to look at renewable energy-type projects that... can be conducive for where we live.

13:24 **A.C.** **Is that work something that was inspired by your connection with your community, or something that just came about in your own day-to-day—as an extension of the development of what landownership means today, for you? Or is it something that was really community-based?**

13:48 **I.M.** Well, it was more of our, something we felt that was something that we could utilize, because, former President Barack Obama, when he initiated his renewable energy process, we began to look at that, because every family has to decide on what they want to do with their land. And so, this was a perfect opportunity for us to begin to look at different avenues and different projects and approaches that we could do with our land. Being formerly associated with this Texas AgriForestry Small Farmers and Ranchers, that's the organization—a nonprofit that... we were previously working with, and previously served as the Former Executive Director. So that gave us a lot more insight in terms of programs and things that the USDA agencies have available. And part of what we do with that organization also is to let others know some of the programs that's available.

And that's been one of the big issues that Black landowners in Texas has faced, going back to the time of slavery. Because, if you remember, in slavery, (when) the slaves were free, they weren't told that they were free. And it was about two years, they allowed—I say, they, the slave masters—allowed ²them to continue to work, for that free labor, and didn't tell them that they were free...they was

² Allowed, as in let them go on thinking they were still slaves.

still taking advantage of that situation. So that information never got to them 'til like two years later, but look at the amount of capital and assets that was obtained as a result of that.

So, that same philosophy is still there today. Because people are not gonna—when I say people, the agencies—are not gonna go into those backwoods, to find people that look like me, and give them the information pertaining to their agencies. I mean, it's just not gonna happen. So, what we've done is, we've noticed that, and we've developed an organization that goes out and provide(s) that information for them. And in fact, we do a summit every year, inviting Black landowners to come in, and we have the agencies to talk about their programs and stuff. So that way, we—we're basically doing their job, for the most part. But it's what we call an outreach campaign. And, in some kind of way, the landowners have got to get this information. So, it's been, real receptive, but the issue has always been and continues to be an issue of trust. See there's a lack of trust that the Black landowners have towards your agency. And, I've said this on a number of occasions, in different settings and state meetings, things like that, I don't care what kind of program you have, if you don't have a level of trust, then it's just like you don't have access to the programs. And so, the people that's goin' out there, even if some of them go out there—when I say they, the agencies—the Caucasians or Whites go out to provide this information, to share, try to share this information, it'd still be difficult, because, number one, they don't trust you. And this is based on, again, back in the time of slavery—and a prime example is what happened a couple of years ago when there was supposed to have X amount of billions of dollars for debt relief for Black farmers and ranchers, and then, the State Commissioner of Agriculture of Texas³ goes in, him and some others, and blocked that from happening. And so, there again, it's like, same thing happened when we were slaves, they promised you 40 acres and a mule. Well, you never got that, and then they went and took that back. So, this was the same scenario. So, it really put us even in a deeper hole, in terms of credibility, and the credibility of the USDA agency, which we were trying to promote and trying to get them to participate. So, it's

³ Sid Miller; blocked an initiative introduced by the Biden administration as part of the 2021 COVID relief package

something that's always there, we just have to make sure we continue in that effort.

19:03 A.C. Yeah, thank you for that. Some major points that you brought up is the lack of trust between agencies and Black landowners, for sure, and also generational—history repeating itself, but then also the importance of passing things down through the generations, with community ties, as well. So, my question is, in terms of government support, which government agencies are you in contact with most frequently, or have you had the best experience with?

19:38 I.M. Yeah, for the most part, we've had a good relationship with a number of them—specifically NRCS,⁴ and the Forest Service. These are two we probably work with the most and get a lot of good feedback in terms of programs. So, FSA,⁵ they've had some issues, continue to have some issues, and, we don't know, I just don't know about them. Rural Development is another one that we have a pretty good relationship with and we're going to be doing a lot more work, in conjunction with the USDA.

I mean, what can I say? And we do have some grants that we're working on, from NRCS, and looking to get some more and doing some other things with, in the NRCS conservation grants. So, we have a good relationship working with other agencies, with them in partnerships, like with the 1890 land-grant colleges,⁶ in conjunction with the grants and stuff. So, that's a partnership effort that has to take place `cause no one entity can do all of it. So, understanding that, I think it's important for Black landowners to really kinda focus on trying to get together, as well, because that's a whole another topic. But, for the most part, (there are) times you don't have trust among yourselves, and that goes back to the days of Willie Lynch.⁷ If you don't know what that is, look it up. But that's something that's there, we don't talk about it, but that leads you to a lot of internal

⁴ Natural Resources Conservation Service

⁵ Farm Service Agency

⁶ Historically black universities that were established under the Second Morrill Act of 1890; A USDA program intended to strengthen research, extension and teaching in the food and agricultural sciences

⁷ A British slave owner in the West Indies who allegedly taught his slave-owning methods to the Virginia colony.

trust (issues) among yourselves. And that's been one of the things that has always been known throughout the Black community, for sure.

22:22 **A.C.** **Internal trust being so important, and thinking about what you've mentioned about practicing sustainable agriculture or animal husbandry, how do you think that internal trust has played a role in sustainable agriculture or animal husbandry, historically, compared to now?**

22:46 **I.M.** It's gotten better. And because of information technology, that's been one of the bridges that we are working towards, getting the information to people that wouldn't otherwise be able to do it. And case in point is, when we went through the COVID process, where everything came to a halt, we were still doing things, in terms of getting information out, because we set up what we call a... information data center, IDC. So, where we've basically compiled a lot of information, because one thing we found—and my background, also, is in economic development. So, one of the things that I found is that you got to be able to network and partner with other agencies, people, other entities, to make projects work. And so, we was able to establish this kind of data information center, where we're compiling data to help landowners, because one thing we wanted to do is, when we get information that comes in—and typically it comes in from the agency, from federal level, to the state level—once it gets to the state level, then it goes to your regional, and then to your district areas. Well, what we found was, that we wanted to cut through the chase of all that because it was too much red tape.

So, what we established was a direct link to Washington, D.C. So, when it comes off the press, in Washington, D.C., it comes directly to us, and we get that information distributed out to the landowners and other agencies—other community-based organizations. Simply because, number one, when it comes from the federal level, when that program is talked about or is introduced or is announced, then that information takes time to get to the state level. Once it gets to the state level, it sits on people's desks and stuff there for X amount of days or whatever. And then from that point, it goes to your

regional level. So, it sits on somebody else's desk there for a long period of time, OK, before it goes out into your local district area, sits on somebody's desk there. And if you don't have anybody that's taking the ball and running with it, by the time you get it—and we've had this to happen—by the time they get the information to take advantage of the program and develop a proposal, it's too late because for the most part, the deadline's passed. You follow me?

So I'm not sure if that's intentional, or that's just the way it break(s) down, because, remember, I was telling you, one of the key issues is that lack of information. So, if you don't have the information, no way you can participate in the program. And the USDA is trying to figure out, when you look at the map of Texas, on the eastern side, that's closer to Louisiana, they have a lot of trees in the East Texas part. Well, they're trying to figure out how is it that Blacks own so much of that land, but they're not participating in the program? It's quite simple: You don't have the information to participate, so, therefore, you're not going to be able to participate.

And then, that's not even counting for the fact that you have lack of trust. Because what happened was the—and the reason why you have so many Blacks that own land in that part of East Texas is when slaves ran away from slave owners, they hid in the wooded, forestry area. There was the Indians. So, the Indians basically took them in, and you see it's a lot of Blacks that's, part of their heritage is... Native American. So, there was this connection with the Indians—in fact, Nacogdoches is the oldest town in Texas. That's where our home base is. The Caddo Indians was a huge population there. And, in fact, we had a descendant that was from the Caddo Indian on our Board and I think we'll be getting his son, who's a descendant of the Caddo Indians, to participate on the board, as well. So, we wanted to bring those two things together, and let people understand their history of where we are, and why we are where we are. That make sense? Yeah, I know that was a long answer to your question.

28:25 A.C.

No, I appreciate it. And I think that all of this really comes back to trust-building today when thinking about the relationship that landowners have to—or farmers of color—have to the FSA

and the USDA. And I guess a question that I have is, how would you describe an ideal relationship with the FSA? Or how would you recommend going about building trust with landowners, as you've attempted to do so in your own work?

29:08 I.M.

Well, transparency is always helpful. I just think that there has to be a better process to engage all landowners—Black, White, Yellow, Brown, BIPOC—to make sure that they're involved in this process. And so, the only way you're going to do that, first of all, you got to be thinking outside the box, number one. And number two, because what you found is a lot of them (are) still trying to operate in the way they used to operate years and years and years ago. So, they're going to have to do some different. And COVID showed us that. You going to have to look at a different strategic way of doing what you do. So that forced us—from the standpoint of outreach effort, how do we continue doing what we doing, getting this information out with people based upon the COVID situation, and the limited face-to-face exposure that we had to have?

So, communication was critical. So, we really kinda looked at different types of communication, and the ways of getting it done, without putting people at health risk, in that process. So, and all your companies throughout America—and the world, for that matter—they're having to relook at the way that they're delivering services. So, the agencies has to do the same thing. Because, see, a lot of them are not back to work, yet. And so, they really gotta depend on organizations like ours to be able to contract them out, to go in and carry out the goals and objectives that they have. If they're not willing to do that, then I'll say nothing's going to get done. So that came out in some of the discussions early on.

I used to also be a former member of the USDA Minority Farmers Advisory Committee, out of D.C. And that was some of the things that we talked about, in terms of engaging the agencies. Because of sequestration, a lot of agencies cut back on the staffing and the whole nine yards, so that even made it worse, in terms of trying to get that information out, and trying to meet face-to-face, and just trying to put people... at ease, in terms of then providing the information. And if they're not willing to do that, and not willing to

take a second look, then I'll say, you won't get the same results. And so, I would hope that, first of all, we've got to be honest with ourselves, in terms of what we've done. And so, that's why I think, until we come to grips about the impact that slavery... had on America, the quicker we understand that and begin to look at that. But (there's) just some people who are not willing to—like sticking your head in the sand. It's not going to go away because that's something that's actually happened, it's part of our history. And you see a lotta that right now, where you got a lotta your elected officials who want to do away with Critical Race Theory, and books and the whole nine yards about your history. There's no way that's gonna happen. And the younger generations—Generation Z, Generation X, they're not going to let that happen. And, rightfully so, because for the most part, that's what America is, like it or not.

I know I'm on my soapbox here, but these are some things that we hear all the time, and we experience what people are saying, and they're telling us the same thing. It's like, "why should I do this?" Because it's a level of distrust out there. "Why should I be exposed to more of that, when I can just go ahead and just try to do my own thing and still try to survive?" Well, it's bigger than that. Because everybody plays a role in it. And it's gonna take everybody moving together to come to some type of adequate solution. Because we got the next generation, that's looking at us, too. So, it matters as to what we're doing.

That's why I came up with this—I don't know if I told you this—this design; I'm an artist, so I came up with a design on a T-shirt called 'Black Farmers Matter.' Did I share that with you? I don't know if I did or not, but anyway... yeah, that was one of the things that came out of this, and those are relevant things that we cannot ignore. We can go around and do everything we need to. But until we look at some of those issues—same way with environmental justice, that's another component that we are faced with. I'm on the NAACP Environmental Justice State Committee and the National Committee. And so those are some issues that's there, that we really have to look at because it's affecting generations.

35:34 A.C. Yeah, thank you so much. I think you spoke to a lot of the different ways that you are using your identity to support your community, which I find super admirable. You spoke to your advisory role on the committee, and then also using your art, in order to promote environmental justice, which is amazing. Could you speak to the advisory committee a bit more—what your experience was like with that?

36:07 I.M. Well, the advisory committee, it really opened my eyes because then you're looking at issues around the country, and... in other territories, as well—Puerto Rico and so on. So, it is a much broader process that we looked at, and a lot of these things are prevalent throughout each one, especially when you talk about trust and you talk about the access to capital, some of the very basic things you find across the board in all southern states, and other states, as well. Whether it's through Black, Indigenous, Native American, all of them, Hispanic, all of them—they've had some of these issues and continue to have these issues. And, from a national perspective, I had to look at it as, this is something that's on a national scale, versus a local. And so, we really had to kinda look at, 'how do we really engage into that process?' And so, we find out there was a lotta issues—because, in that process, we always had the agency to come before us and tell us what it is that they do and how do they do it, stuff like that. And, those were some of the things we found out earlier on, and we also had to go back and make recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture. And, in fact, that committee met last week in Tucson, Arizona, and I'm hoping to get back on the committee, because they've opened it up again, so I'm gonna try to submit my information to be considered again because, you really have to try to come in with some solutions.

And that's what that committee is set up to do, is to look at how you're operating, and then begin to analyze that, and then based on that, make a recommendation. And then it's up to the Secretary and his office to make recommendations to Congress, in terms of how to make it better. This next Farm Bill is coming up. I'm also on the Advisory Board of the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy (Research) Center out of Alcorn State

University⁸—it's on the campus of Alcorn. But it's a part of the Farm Bill that established this policy center, and this policy center is to make, also, recommendations that they get from landowners, farmers, and ranchers, so they can formulate this and have it be a part of recommendations going into the Farm Bill. So, the Policy Center, as well as the Minority Farmers Committee,⁹ they meet and, in fact, they make presentations, so, they was kind of on the same page with their information and recommendations. And so, whether or not they develop the recommendations—I made a comment in the comment section about the Jackson Lewis Report, where the USDA spent millions of dollars to get this report that talks about discrimination, the whole nine yards; The question is...it was millions of dollars they spent for this report—has any agency adopted those reports? Have they implemented those reports?

So otherwise, you will have the same song and dance, again. And somebody's got to hold somebody accountable, and from what I understand, that's what this Equity Commission—a new Executive committee that was established by President Biden to look at the equity. But, the same thing, are they going to actually make things happen, or... I just don't think they have authority to do that. They may make some recommendations, but that's the same thing the Minority Farmers Advisory Committee is doing. They've been making recommendations—somebody's just gotta implement the recommendations. So, this is a great opportunity, but somewhere down the road somebody has got to make those recommendations into action, make some legislative changes—it's the only way anything is gonna change.

41:14 A.C. Thank you. I think you spoke a lot to the importance of implementation and action. And I wanna ask if you find your art, or your role in an advisory capacity, more fulfilling or more impactful for those reasons? I guess, just which is more fulfilling in that way—in actually helping create action?

41:45 I.M. Yeah. I think I mentioned to you I played basketball, so, that's how I went through college. And, basketball was a way to do that. In route

⁸ A land-grant university in Mississippi

⁹ USDA Minority Farmers Advisory Committee

to doing that, art has always been my passion—basically, I was a self-taught artist, first, before I went to college. And I actually learned a lot of techniques when I was in college. In Lamar University, I was the first African American to receive a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Because, remember now, this was so close to integration. We still had some segregated ideologies that was in place in some of the university. So, you had to overcome some of those things.

And so, I had a chance to utilize my art—as an example—use my artwork and basketball to be able to get some things done, in terms of on a local scale, at the university, and then on the national scale, where I was able to... address some issues that the regular social media—and at that time, (it was) just your radio and TV, they didn't focus on (inaudible). Case in point, at the time I was doing work with Earl Campbell. He was the first person I started (with), because I wanted to show a different side of the athlete. Being an athlete [myself], I could relate to that. So, I was able to do a painting of the house that he grew up in, because he put emphasis on buying his mother a home after he made it in the pros. Well, he was actually—he grew up in Tyler, which is about 70-80 miles from Nacogdoches. So, there was this connection and bonding that we felt right off the bat, and that's how I initially started that process. And, I understand he still (has) that painting.

And then I started doing it for other athletes, and then started doing it for other world leaders, like the former British Prime Minister (Margaret) Thatcher, `cause of the way she handled the Falkland Islands, former President Jimmy Carter, and former Vice President (Walter) Mondale, and some others, because then, at that point, others had kinda recognized what I was doing and (I had) been recommended to receive the Presidential Freedom Award, in regards to that, so by the Bush and the Clinton administration. And certainly, we have to do things ourselves to participate in the process to make things happen, `cause otherwise, you sit on the sidelines, you can complain, “everybody doing that”—do something to help in the cause. And everybody has something that they can do and can contribute—big or small—to the overall well-being of the human race. And that's we're confronted with. You see that, today, `cause I

was doing this in the '70s, and so, even today, in 2023, that's an issue—how people feel about their country, how people feel about, just simple things. So, everybody has got to recognize that they play a major part in the survival of the human race. And we're confronted with that because you never know with all the things that's happening, (like) with global warming, and you see how out of the ordinary things are happening; That's a sign.

Now, one of the signs was COVID, where it just shut down the whole world. You follow me? And so, people have got to recognize that that's not an accident. So, there is things that we got to take into consideration, that sometimes we're moving so fast, we don't take time to really recognize what's important. A lot of my artwork also deals with abstract expressions, which is more from a spiritual standpoint, because of how I came up. I talk about that in my, purposed artwork, I was surrounded by nature. Nature is a blanket, and every artist—Michelangelo, everybody all the way down—they always talk about how nature plays a role with the artist. So, it's connected. So, in some situations, it's kind of like a view into the future. So, we have to, again, understand our roles and try to do things to make things better for the next generation of the human race... I know that's kind of way out there...

47:49 A.C.

No... I was just gonna say that I really appreciate your emphasis on the connectedness of people and its importance in trying to protect land, but also protect ourselves. Yeah, I think that's really beautiful.

And another question I had, I think you mentioned a few times already so far... you mentioned debt relief at one point, and I was just hoping that you could speak to your experience with the American Rescue Plan and the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act, and where that stands today. When thinking about how you mentioned how COVID was a reset for everyone, how was your experience with that [the American Rescue Plan and the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act] being the approach that the government took to address that reset?

48:55 I.M.

Well, that was obviously something that wasn't anticipated. So, you're already behind the eight ball—and when I say you, you being the Black farmers and ranchers—they're already behind the eight ball. So there had to be some type of method that had to be identified to help in that regard because there's so many Black landowners (that) have lost land over the years—millions of acres—because of the 'good ol' boy' network, and the whole nine yards because, first of all, what you have to understand is (there's) a certain part of society who don't wanna see you get anything, period. So, that's not being naive, that's the reality of... America. And, it's not something that just came yesterday, this is over generations.

But, I think the U.S. government really looked at it and (was) like “We gotta try to do something because we're looking at a population of people that, for the most part, have been brutally messed over, and (that) has been causing them a lot of issues throughout their culture, for years, even back during the time of slavery.” So, and reparations was always something that has kinda been out there, but it never got out of the committee. And now, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, she's kind of taken up that mantle, and trying to move forward with that torch, to look at that. Because, if you look at it, every ethnic group has got some type of reparation except the African American—Black—citizens, for the most part. But yet, they've built America, to be one of the superpowers, financially, on the planet. And if you look at the history, a lot of these large companies, they benefited from slavery, so, I think the issue right now is, knowing all this, are you still going to not try to do some things to assist in this process? And of 'course, I think the American Rescue Plan was part of that process for them to look at, “How can we begin to do things?” Because they were losing land, and banks weren't giving any loans, and they were discriminatory even at that. So, you had that against you, as well. So, it made it even more difficult to try to get things done.

And, I think the whole idea behind the American Rescue Plan was to try to come in and help alleviate some of that. It's just, you got some people in positions—elected officials—that don't want to see that happen, 'cause they feel like it's discrimination in itself. Well, at some point, you gonna have to look at some things that you hadn't

done before because you going to find that a lotta things haven't been done, it's not going to be a pretty picture. Because, when you get down to it, people who have suffered over the years and decades, and have done these things—you setting yourself up, for the most part. And in the political climate today, you can see how things are slowly going south. So, it's going to really take probably a lot more than just saying that you want to do this and you're trying to do this. But, something has to be done. I think I mentioned that on some platform... people are just tired of you saying you're going to do this, and then they never see it. And the case in point... is this debt relief process. Somewhere, somebody's going to have to bite the bullet, because people are just not going to stand for you still continuing doing what you've been doing, which hurts the survival of a race—those are God's people.

So, it's a challenge. We know that. But, for America, it's going to have to change... Just like guns, you're going to have to do something about them, whether they like it or not, something has got to happen. Because when you got people who are shooting up little kids, come on, it don't take much to figure out that you got to do something about those weapons. And that's what's front and center, right now. Can you imagine little kids getting shot with bullets, probably as long as they are? But, you got some people who looks at money, it's valued more than life. It's unfortunate, but that's what we live in, that's what we're confronted with. And, a lotta those things is not going to be good.

55:37 A.C. And I think, at least for me, as someone who is, I guess, confronted with the world we have today, trying to take action in the environmental justice space can seem really overwhelming. So, my next question is, what would your advice be to any young person of color that's interested in pursuing farming, interested in preserving maybe their generational land, their ancestral land—and how they should continue to try and act, in the future?

56:19 I.M. Well, I think it's important, for first of all, to recognize that they're not making any more land. And, some people don't wanna see you with that, so it's important—and, we're finding that it's a lot of the

younger people now coming back into rural areas, because their mother or father or grandparents have passed away; So, they're now in a situation where, they're forced to come back and do something with the land, or something. But their whole thing has been, “what can we do to continue this legacy?” Because a lotta them don't want to give up their land that their parents worked for, and so that's a big thing that we're getting right now—is people from the cities, they are now coming, moving back. So, my deal to them is look at ways that you can utilize your land and make it better—i.e., sustainable programs, sustainable projects. And the USDA (has) a lotta those, it's just that you need to make sure you get digging to try to find that information, find out what you need. And we're showing a lotta them about the very basic thing that you need to get to be declared an agriculturally exempt place—form number, and some of the very basic things. And a lot of them are female, that's finding themselves owning 2 or 300 acres, and they're trying to figure out what to do because John Doe over there, they're trying to buy the land, or trying to run them off the land, so they can use the land, because it's waterfront property—and they see condos and all that (to be) built.

So, there's still an issue as it relates to the judicial system in those rural cities, rural towns, that John Doe knows Jane Doe, and Jane Doe knows the banker. So, they go out of their way to try to squeeze you out of the market, where you are forced to sell the land, or you let the land go for taxes, or whatever it might be. And so, my deal has been: “Find out about your land, know the history of it, and try to find out ways to connect with others, because you don't have to reinvent this wheel—there's others doing some of the things you need to do, (so) just finding and connecting with those people.” And that's kind of the issue we have, that we're trying to connect them with other people, as well as other agencies. And it's like night and day for them, because they don't know, and, now, they're put in a situation where they gotta try to find out, as soon as possible. And what are the remedies, that we have? Which is why really got to make sure that USDA Civil Rights Division is involved, which we had done last year, (with) Monica Rainge,¹⁰ to really have a presence in the rural areas, because those things are important; You're gonna need the aid to deal with a lotta the ‘good ol’ boy’ situations. But the

¹⁰ Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at USDA

main thing is, do the things that you know that you gonna have to do to maintain your land—pay your taxes, basic things. Then look at what it is that you want to do: raise cattle, and if you can't raise cows, if you have forestry, plant trees. If you got irrigation that you need, build a pond.

So, it's a lot of things that goes into it, it's a lotta work. So, we really have to get them acclimated to the point that they gonna have to pull up their bootstraps and get into the land. And, it'll make them feel better about it, simply because they see how they came up, their parents came up. See that's the driving force behind a lot of this, is they now realize how important the land is. Community gardens, for example, training kids to show them where a tomato grows, and how it grows, cucumbers—just basic things. So a lotta your—and that's one of the things that we're doing, is we're developing a lot more community gardens, for kids to be able to see this, because at some point, you're going to need to learn how to live off your land. That's what it's coming down to, `cause with the way the cost of everything is, number one, and then you have to look at the food security, in terms of safety because now they inject a lot of stuff into today's products, which could be causing cancer. I'm not saying that they do, but you have to consider, you ever see a strawberry as big as an apple? So, there had to be some ingredients pumped into that, to make that happen.

So, when we talk about food security—and another thing that is very rarely talked about in the environmental justice area is bioterrorism. That's an issue where we want to include into this next grant that we going after, where we gonna give workshops on bioterrorism. Because now people are going about and purposely doing things to kill your cattle and feeding stuff to where they gonna die; You think about this couple out in Colorado, with about 1000 acres, and they were really trying to do everything they can to run them off the property—(they're) Black landowners. Well, systemic racism is alive and well. And that's the other thing, that sometimes people from urban areas, they think that that's not there anymore, but when they come to the rural areas, and they get confronted directly, and I

tell you, it's eye opening. And, you don't know what to do. We've gotten a number of those callers.

So, we're trying to work through a lot of the people to make sure they just get information about who to call, pertaining to that. They just don't know what to do. So that's kind of a role that we play, as well, just trying to encourage them to continue, and it's a battle day-by-day. We've gotten a lotta good response and appreciation—they didn't know an organization like ours existed. Because everybody think they're out there on an island by themselves, because they got their own land, and nobody's ever told them about these other programs. So, we are getting inundated, with people all across the state, and other states as well, which is why we're doing things in other states—Oklahoma, Arkansas, so we've been moving around doing a lot of outreach stuff in a number of other states.

01:04:24 A.C.

Yeah, thank you so much. I think that's really amazing that you've been a source of support for a lot of people that are interested in continuing the legacy of their family. And as a final question—I don't want to take more time than you have offered, I really appreciate the time you've given already—is there anything else that you want to share?

01:04:50 I.M.

Well...I just wanted to let you know that one of the key things we're focusing on this year—because, last year, our summit was entitled, 'Women in Agriculture', because far too long, it's always been predicated on the fact that a lotta stuff was male-dominated. Well, what we're seeing is a lot of females is coming back into your rural areas, with land, and they're trying to work their way through it, to find out what they need to do. But another key component that we're going to be working on this year, and the summit is gonna be kinda focused on is 'youth in agriculture', because we feel that you really need to get the youth—the next generation—acclimated to the fact that, "it's going be up to you to carry on this torch, and, it's going to be up to you to try to do some things innovatively that the older generation wasn't able to do, because (of) lack of knowledge and lack of technology." So, we're trying to get them exposed now, to

begin to show them that you can do this. And they'll be able to think through that process and do it better.

Because you got so many people stating that statistics has already said that in the years ahead, America is gonna be a minority majority. Well, it's already people can see that now. And that's probably one of the reasons why you find so much of these laws being made, to try to protect a country that people think that's good for one race. I think you probably know what I'm talking about from that, but America is diversifying, and there is no such thing as one race. And so, you got a situation where, for the most part, we're all human beings and the quicker we understand that, I think the better off society will be. But, it's gonna take some other generations to come to that and realize that and begin to operate like that, where people don't see someone's color, as a point of survival. Because we're all one, everybody's blood is red, last time I checked.

So, it's a situation where we gotta understand and keep our eye on the prize. Because, like I said, COVID was just a wakeup call. You remember seeing a lot of stuff that happened where they were burying people—it was like a third world country! I couldn't believe that! It happened here on American soil, they was just taking bodies and putting them in mass graves—can you believe that? I mean, that's devastating. You get wake up calls, and there's a supreme being—whether you believe in God, or Allah, or whatever it is—there is a supreme being, and people must realize that you will pay the cost at some point, as a society. And it's up to us to try to rectify that and do what's better.

But I'll say this, lastly, is I use my artwork to give a different perspective towards goodwill and peace. And, that's kind of how I've operated, and people ask, "How'd you end up doing this?" ... I really wanted to do it the way I wanted to do it, and, of course, it was at my own expense—nobody paid me—but I felt it was important because everybody has to have a legacy; they have to, again, do their part. And so, it's important for us to realize that can't nobody do that, when you only have a short period of time in this physical world to do that. And from a spiritual standpoint, I guess that's the Native American in me—my mother is, her mother was a

Native American that lived in Oklahoma, on a reservation, so, we have a lot of Native American in our blood... (but) from a spiritual standpoint, the land is like a blanket. So, we have to treat it as such. Once we start mistreating it—i.e., with a lotta pollution, a lotta environmental issues that affect the land—you're destroying the blanket that's been woven for you to live, and to nourish, and to build a better life. That was given to you. And for you to go in and destroy it, well, what does that say?

So, we all have a part to play, and it's important for us to recognize that it's up to us to play that part. And it's not about greed, because you can take none of that with you when you pass on to the next world. So, I know I'm preaching to the choir, but from a spiritual standpoint, this is why I'm writing a book pertaining to my artwork and how it relates to nature itself.

01:11:14 A.C.

Yeah, thank you so much for speaking with me and sharing your experience. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your, I'm sure very busy day, to talk with me—
