Michael Carter Jr.

Carter Farm - Unionville, Virginia

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Accession Number: AGR-004

Date: October 30, 2024

Location: Unionville, Virginia

Interviewer: Sarah Rodriguez

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: One hour and nine minutes

Project: Restoring Soil, Reviving Humanity: Stories of Regenerative Agriculture and Community in Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here in Unionville, Virginia. It is October 30, 2024. Would you mind saying your name for the record?

Michael Carter Jr.: Michael Carter, Junior.

Sarah Rodriguez: Would you tell me when and where were you born?

Michael Carter Jr.: When and where? You need the exact year, or just...?

Sarah Rodriguez: Whatever you would like to share. [both laugh]

Michael Carter Jr.: "I was born by the river, down by the shore." I was born August 19, 1978 in Baltimore, Maryland.

Sarah Rodriguez: And where did you spend most of your time growing up? Was it in Baltimore, or here in Virginia?

Michael Carter Jr.: No, I only spent about 20 minutes in Baltimore. [laughs] No, only a few months probably in Baltimore. Mostly—all my time growing up was pretty much in Virginia. I grew up in a place called Caroline County, which is by Kings Dominion, across from an army base called Fort A.P. Hill which I believe is now called Fort Walker.

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A.P. Hill was a Confederate general. That's all of my memorable life growing up, my formative years from about 4 until 18. That's where I spent the majority of my life.

Sarah Rodriguez: And who did you grow up with in your household?

Michael Carter Jr.: My parents. And my little sister came about when I was eight years

old—seven years old, about to be eight. Nobody asked for that. [both laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: I imagine that was a big transition.

Michael Carter Jr.: Not really. At the time, the single-child syndrome already set in. I was cool with just being me, and because she was so much younger—seven to eight years—she didn't have an impact much on life or whatever. My parents were stable and everything else, so nothing really changed when she came about outside of she got a share of the spankings, or the food, or we got to argue over the TV now because there was a new body that was trying to impose upon my will, or have a will of her own. I was like, "You don't need that, I got it." [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. Could you tell me what food was like in your home growing up?

Michael Carter Jr.: Food was food. I don't know. There weren't a lot of memorable meals per se, growing up. I mean, a couple memorable dishes occasionally. I'm not a big foodie guy, so, you know. We were entering the processed age for latchkey kids, so lunch was some type of deli ham or turkey ham on Wonder Bread with Miracle Whip or Hellmann's depending on what was in the—a lot of Oatmeal Cream Pies, a lot of Little Debbie Swiss cakes. I was a big snacker.

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Yoplait Yogurt, the little shredded—or, the cheese sticks. I don't know why I even... And then probably when I got older, being able to make either pot pies I could heat up myself, or then, I went from pot pies and then graduated to Steak-umms. So, I could make my own Steak-umm, and then I start to make my own steak and salmon and all that kind of stuff. Probably the more

memorable foodways is probably here and in my other grandmother's house. It's unique. I got to introduced to poverty at my other grandmother's house in Cumberland. So, it would be all of my grandmother's grandchildren. There was about maybe eight of us probably, six to eight depending on... Yeah, six minimum before, and then other children came in, so eight maximum at any given point—eight to nine—in, for lack of a better term, a shotgun house: three bedroom, one bath, with a little kitchen, and a little living room.

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My cousin, Kevin, would introduce me to syrup sandwiches. So, the syrup sandwiches and sugar water, that was his thing. [laughs] Growing up in kind of middle America, middle-class America in my neighborhood, I just didn't like going there because of probably the lack of food and food availability. Going from a place where I could have what I wanted when I wanted, snacks whenever I desired it and I could eat two or three of them no issue, to being relegated to three meals [laughs] a day. There was very limited snacks to the point that you would just try to [laughs] eat the mints—what I thought were mints, but they ended up being ex-lax. [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh no!

Michael Carter Jr.: And I still ate them even when they told me what it was. I was like, I just need something. I don't care what it is, I don't care what the results are. [laughs] That doesn't matter to me. I'm used to snacking, you know. For 11 months, 10 months out of the year I'm snacking, and then all of a sudden I'm hungry. I mean, I used to use the term "snacky," because I wasn't hungry, I just wanted to snack. So, I was "snacky." So, that's what I told my mother. "You

hungry?" "No, I'm snacky." And then when I would come here to Orange to the gram's—this is my great grandmother's house behind me. She cooked a lot of chicken. I got introduced to what gizzards were, or what gizzards wasn't, or what gizzards could be in the mind of an eight or nine year old. We had some other community friends who'd come down, and they would say, "What gizzards is, is chicken balls." [laughs] "You don't want to eat the gizzards."

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And they're just cooking the gizzards right there. I'm like, "Aw gram, what you doin'?" And then my grandmother lived at the top of the hill. She's probably my most memorable food experiences because she did a lot of cooking and baking and canning. I can remember Sunday mornings when I was staying with her, she'd have WHUR, the gospel section on, and they played kind of the same songs that every Sunday morning. And then she'd be making eggs and bacon and sausage and toast. And she was an exceptional cook, so she would make the toast, and the toast and come out perfect because it would be that golden color. And then she would grab the butter, and you would [makes sizzling sounds]. There was a sound to it. There was a rhythm to putting the butter. I didn't have that rhythm, so I had to have her butter my toast because I would mess it up. I would probably put too much wrist into it, and I ended up putting a hole in the middle of the toast like [makes noise].

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And she would have apple butter. She would fry apples, fried a lot of apples. I didn't like those as much because of the skin. I loved the sweetness of the apple, but then you had to eat around the skin, 'cause the skin nasty. And those things would come out even in the winter time when we didn't have apples, 'cause she had canned apples, canned peaches. And then she was a master

baker. She made apple pie, which was by far my favorite. Apple cobbler, sweet potato pie, which is by far my favorite again. [laughs] Peach cobbler, which is by far my second favorite. She kind of set the bar for desserts. Like, if it ain't grandma's, it ain't right. And she was kind of known for just having a standard to that. That was the one person I could see—my mother cooked with a lot of love as well, but my grandmother definitely. Because she would cook me things even—I became a vegan maybe in 2003.

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Even before I became vegan, my grandmother would cook me pies and set some pies in the freezer for me. And just, when I was going to college, I was going home, I was starting working, "Hey, Michael J.," my name here and most everywhere when I was younger, "there's a pie for you in there." And I don't know how—it made me feel uber-special. She made me a pie. She didn't make her children pies per se, but Michael J. got a pie, you know, sweet potato. And then it was so unique when I came back from living in Ghana in 2017, 2018, she said, "I want to bake a pie for you." "Grandma, you know I'm vegan." "Just bring the stuff. Bring the ingredients." So, she made apple cobbler for us, and sweet potato pie for me and my sons, utilizing the vegan ingredients we provided. It tasted the same as that goodness. My sons got a chance to experience their grandmother's love.

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My sons and I were just talking about it probably last week, "That pie!" I'm like, "Yeah, I know! Y'all kept eating it! I wanted to enjoy—that was my pie! And now I'm having to share it with you guys. Yeah, that was Michael J's pie. That wasn't for you. I gave you a slice to give you a taste, but I didn't mean for you to crush it." Yeah, that was a lot of love in those experiences of

the canning, the shelling peas, and stringing string beans, and snapping peas, string beans, shucking corn. She had a little garden in the back, having a slop bucket that went into her garden, and I was like, "Why do we have a slop bucket?" [laughs] But the nuance of even the smells of both this house and that house was always noticeable. As I got older and stopped eating meat, that smell became a little more not-as-appealing. But when I was younger, you know, there was a distinct smell.

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It wasn't necessarily not appealing, I just knew I was at grandma's house when I got here. Yeah, the foodways was cool. I was definitely an "eatitarian." I ate everything that you put in front of me. So, we had deer, a lot of venison with Grey Poupon, which to me seemed like a delicacy. "We'll use the good stuff, the good mustard. Put it on the venison. Bambi." I'm not sure if we ate as much squirrel and that kind of stuff. My father would joke about that type of stuff. They killed hogs here quite a bit. There are still probably hogs in that barn over there. Every Memorial Day weekend we would have a cookout, and they would kill a hog, roast it. And you know, I would hear [mimics gunshot noise] in the morning, 'cause I'd be here in the morning with my father. They would shoot it, let it bleed out, and take it up to my uncle's house where I'd be more at mostly. Slit its throat, let it drain out, and then they'd put an apple in his mouth as it was roasting, and I thought that was the coolest thing.

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Poor pig. [laughs] So, there was a lot of family gatherings, and everybody had their little dishes. My aunt Anna would be known for her pound cake. My aunt Gloria was known for like a mac and cheese which had six or seven different cheeses in it. So, that was kind of the food traditions

that we kind of grew up around, and I'm sure most families had something related to that where you had a few family members who cook well. My uncle Herb on my mother's side, he was a big baker. He loved to cook lemon meringue pies, chocolate cakes, and that kind of stuff. I attribute my sweet tooth to all those people—[laughs] my grandmother, uncle Herb, and then Little Debbie. Little Debbie is really a culprit in that, Honey Buns as well. There was a lot of junk coming out at that time, processed-wise.

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I remember a lot of the junk processed foods, a whole lot of the Now and Laters, the Moon Pies, the Huggies that you would drink, the Pixy Stix, Big League Chew chewing gum, the Nerds, goodness! I was a candy peddler, candy hustler, probably from like second grade till easily eighth, ninth grade, and then I elevated up to some videotapes and stuff like that, and tapes and T-shirts. But since kindergarten, maybe first grade, I was selling Now and Laters. I had a great supply. My mother would go to a place called Price Club which I think became either Costco or Sam's Club. She would buy the big thing of Now and Laters or something, and I'm like, "Okay, I'm not gonna eat all these. I can move some of these, move some of this weight." [laughs] "I got a really big clientele at school." Used to sell Cry Babies which were little sour gummy things or sour chewing gum. Yeah, I did a lot of entrepreneurial activities—legal! [laughs]

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But I'm not sure how dental-ethical they were, but I was definitely engaged in trying to figure out how to make something out of nothing or find a market to sell stuff. I enjoyed the art or the act of commerce.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you remind me when you came from Baltimore to down here?

Michael Carter Jr.: My mother was going to school at Towson State University or Morgan State, I can't remember which one. I think Towson. So, I think after her semester was over, because I was born in August, I think I was probably back here. They moved to Stafford, Virginia, I think, when they first got together and decided to stay together. Stafford initially, or somewhere in that area. We were there probably two or three years till we moved.

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So within six months, I would say, if I was born in '78, by '79 I was back in Virginia, and then they moved into the house that they still live in, in I want to say '82 or '83. I want to say '82. I've been there ever since—maybe in '81—and that's the home that I grew up in, and it shaped a lot of my memories and experiences—the bed I slept in most nights of my life in that time period.

Sarah Rodriguez: Your family is from Virginia, right?

Michael Carter Jr.: Yeah, my father's from here, Orange, and my mother's from Cumberland, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: And their families have been in these areas for a long time?

Michael Carter Jr.: Yeah, both sides of the family have been in their relative places for a long time. It's harder to tell from my mother's side that she's not... I can only go back maybe to 1860s, 1880s about her family lineage in terms of where they came from, usually in that Cumberland area. The white side of the family I can go back to freaking England in the 1600s. I can track their migration, but the Black side is tough.

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Here, some of the Black side is easy 'cause we have some mulatto mixes and that's easier to track. But our family history here goes back to at least 1745 of being Orange, if not longer, and then in Virginia you can go back from roughly 1745 to about 1622 to the first plantation in America, Shirley plantation which is where some of my family was enslaved down on and upon as well as something perceived to be Montpelier or Monticello as well. So, my history on my father's side, I could trace it back a lot. We've been in Virginia for a long time, even the ones that weren't in Virginia that I recently found out about that weren't in Orange was definitely still in Virginia, so we didn't have a lot of migration back and forth. We kind of stayed put in this area, and we've been in this area, and I've kind of made a living of telling that story.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. Could you tell me about—so, you went to college. Where did you end up going to school?

Michael Carter Jr.: North Carolina A&T State University, which is in Greensboro, North Carolina. Historically Black college and university, 1890 land grant, and I majored in agricultural economics with a minor fashion design. The fashion came because I was working with my cousins who had a clothing company, and I was intrigued by the business and had felt I had a sense of fashion at the time. And, "Okay, we gonna do this." If worse comes to worst, just helping in the business aspect of it, and then I realized that I know way more than the professors as it related to this because I was actually working in it. My professors were teaching certain things, and I was like, [makes noise].

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I wanted to drop out of school after that. Like, I'm learning way more and actually getting paid for it, than paying for you to teach me something and I got to learn it at a job when I get there. I ended up graduating in 2000 and working in Washington, DC, buying a home in Washington, DC the next year in 2001. And yeah, that's a whole 'nother... [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: What were you doing in DC?

Michael Carter Jr.: Working with my cousins' clothing company called Indefinite Designs. It was an urban clothing company. It was relatively profitable, employed about 15 or so African Americans at every important position. It was one of the few Black-owned businesses that actually was national. Most of the other businesses that sold to Black people or marketed themselves to Black folks were usually owned by others.

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So, we took pride in that: not selling out even though we should have sold out. [laughs] And it was definitely family. My cousin Lidell was the owner as well as my cousin Kenyatta who was the designer/poet. And there definitely was a sense of pride, especially early on, and learning, and them taking me under their wing to teach me and show me certain things, or just explain it and give me the opportunities to be a part. So, when I graduated, my cousins, they would call me and say, "We'll offer you this, and this is cool. You can be our national sales manager." Like, cool. I traveled around the country selling T-shirts, going to trade shows, doing marketing events, and things like that, and they kept me in the loop. It was good time. [laughs] I bought a house in South East DC and kind of was like–

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I was enjoying life. Yeah, so that's what I was doing there: being a bachelor and doing what 20-somethings in that time period does: go to the clubs, go to the go-gos.

Sarah Rodriguez: Fun.

Michael Carter Jr.: Yeah, it was cool. Good times.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what was your next step after that? What made you decide to move on to something else?

Michael Carter Jr.: I'd say I had a spiritual experience. I got introduced to a group of African Hebrew Israelites probably in about 2001. They had a restaurant not too far from my office—restaurant and grocery store. I was a very strong proponent of supporting Black businesses back then and even now. And I ate there quite a bit.

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I wasn't vegan at that moment, but there was vegan food there. That's all they served was vegan food, and I ate there quite a bit, two or three times a week. There were—I think 2003 I heard their spiritual leader speak, and it resonated with me what he was saying, and I just jumped in and said, "I'm going to be part of this community," so that changed or shifted my directory much more from a personal directive about what I planned for my life in terms of business, class, home ownership, buying houses, et cetera, to now having this more service-oriented nature in my life. Now I'm working in a restaurant, or I'm picking up people to take them to work and that kind of stuff, as a form of what we call service or worship—is how they would define it—to the creator. And that took me to Israel where I worked in Israel with the community on various agriculture

projects.

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And it probably reignited or actually probably even watered the agricultural seeds that were in me and just gave them more sustenance and meaning because they related to using spirituality, which I never related agriculture to before. So, gave it a different meaning and purpose and engagement in a different way, and probably made me more intellectual related to agriculture. So, I ended up selling my house in DC, moving into their community housing, which is a whole another therapy session. [both laugh] So, from 2003, 2004, and I think I sold my house in 2005, and then by then in 2008 I got married in the community and had our first child in 2009 and then another child in 2011, and then 2012 we moved to Ghana to kind of escape America.

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I didn't like the trajectory that the country was going in under the Obama administration, kind of the social factors related to that as well as I had a 15- or 16-year-old stepson who was—we were living in Washington, DC, and that environment wasn't conducive to his growth or his health or his life. So, we got out of there for his sake as well as the sake of my then-wife at the time dealing with some seasonal depression issues and some other things, and wanted to be in a different space where you could see a different future for yourself. And I had to carry the burdens of what this environment provides. And part of the Hebrew culture talked about getting out of her my people, "Come out of her, my people," so that was a passage of scripture that resonated with me, so I said I'm leaving. Initially I was planning to go to Israel. Israel is totally complicated to try to live in.

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And, you know, I wasn't a fluent speaker of Hebrew at all. I wouldn't be around Black people. I'd be around Black people in the community, but that would be it. Once you get outside of Dimona, all the community is like, "Whoa, yikes." [laughs] And I'd been probably around Black people all my life, going to an HBCU, lots of Black folk live in PG County and DC. At the time I was living in PG County and DC, it was nothing but Black folks, still chocolate city. Working in the urban clothing environment was a whole lot—I mean, it was a mixture, but it was still a lot of Black folks that I, at the end of the day, my road dogs, my folks that I would go to different trade shows with were all Black. We had some white folks working with us, and there was a lot of white folks and Koreans and Asians in the industry, but there was still a majority, 60/40 or so.

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And then our market base was a lot of Black folks. You know, it was comfort, so I still wanted that comfort, probably, psychologically or subconsciously. So, I moved to Ghana May 12, 2012, and we lived there for five years while working. While there I started working as an agriculture consultant, then an organic agriculture consultant where I was advising farms on how to go from conventional to organic. And working with this company called African Boreholes Initiative in creating organic farming kits, little market kits that we'd buy from a certain agriculture distributor, Desert Gulf or Army Run. And they would buy these kits. They would buy a greenhouse, and then it would come with these inputs to try to make them as a successful as possible, the drip irrigation, the seeds, and I would be consulting on those projects for those activities.

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So, I trained in Kenya for a little while and then I went back to Ghana and started working with a company in place called Wenchi, which is like northern—well, the bread basket of Ghana. Had a tomato factory, or a former tomato factory, but tomato farm, and they had tomatoes. They grew a corn called Obatanpa which is a cross between two different maizes, corns. They had cashews, and then they did sorghum, and then we did also some cowpeas as well. That was a really eye-opening experience of working in agriculture much more on a larger scale than this, the community thing, or urban agriculture like I did in DC. And then working with the mechanization of it where we only had four or five employees on a thousand-acre farm. And then most employees were actually settling around just the greenhouses.

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At that point I was seeing the benefits of my American privilege, that I was making way more than everybody else [laughs] by far. And I could see then and now why giving up privilege is tough, because Lord knows [laughs] you've got to have either a huge heart or have a different type of vision because like I wasn't going to give that up for nothing. You ain't going to give me—get paid 200 cedis a month when I'm getting 4,000 or 6,000 cedis a month. Like, yeah [laughs] not doing it. Even if you double it, even 2,000 cedis, if they were getting 2,000 cedis, they would be happy. I couldn't see—after 6,000 cedis, I'm like, "This ain't enough." And some of that is psychological, or some of that is just lifestyle, being American and what is and isn't acceptable, how you live and what was suitable for you, what you wanted for your children versus what other people would allow.

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They had water in bags, or what they called satches, so we would go straight to be the distributor

who made it and made it fresh, so it would be fresh, or we would just get bottled water and drink that versus getting whatever, "pure water" is what they call it, in the sacks. We ate a healthy, diverse vegan diet. We had chefs—house helps, cooks—that would work with us to do that. It was like, you know, certain things we did was very much necessary but not necessary. Necessary for the lifestyle that I wanted with my family. So, we worked at about three or four different farms in West Africa. Ended up working with Rita Marley Foundation, which is Bob Marley's wife, and got a chance to talk to her a couple times. That was a good experience in networking of sorts.

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They reached out to me after I got back and wanted to come back. I was like, "Oh, I feel flattered." But yeah, those were good experiences of probably re-getting-my-feet-back in the agricultural world. So, we came back here to visit, and then we had a going-away cookout for myself and the family in July of 2017. We returned back for the first time after five years in May of 2017. In July 2017 we had a cookout right here. My cousins took us around, down to the field and then it was just a... I say the land talked to me, and there was a message being conveyed. I didn't probably have my antennas fully in tune to what was being conveyed, because I found myself on the tarmac getting ready to go back to Ghana, like, "I shouldn't be leaving. I should be staying here telling our story." Thinking I needed to be telling the story of my experiences in West Africa and all that kind of stuff, and not realizing that I'd be telling the story of my people here.

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So, I think we left in July of 2017 and returned back September 2017. And it was just this, "We

gotta come back here and do this." My father was in my ear, "Your uncle's getting older. We need to hand it off to somebody. Nobody else is interested. You're doing this stuff in Africa. You can do it here." And he was right. Africa made me aware that I don't own nothing there. I was leasing land. I bought a lease, three acres or something for fifty years. And as we were building a home, there was this guy that was pretty much saying, "Okay, another 42 years, 40 years, it'll be yours." And that didn't feel right. [laughs] You plotting—so whatever I build, if you decide to change your mind, I'm just S.O.L., so I'm like, "Okay."

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And I could relate back to here, like this particular place. This particular property's been in our family since 1910. I didn't realize that till I got back here and started doing research, because that was one thing that wasn't shared a lot was the history of the land. A little bit of the history of the family; I had a couple of family reunions that kind of said we were of Scottish ancestry and things like that, and I was interested, but I didn't get the proper advice. I didn't make it to the family reunion for some odd reason. I'm sure I had some event, and I ended up skipping that to... But the history was here, I just didn't cultivate it well enough, and it wasn't pitched to me or shared with me a lot. But as I started doing more research, the history started to unfold quite a bit. And I started to share it more, and I guess people took an interest to it, hence you're here. [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Good point. Absolutely. So, you decided to come back to Virginia. What did you start doing when you were there?

Michael Carter Jr.: In Virginia, or...?

Sarah Rodriguez: Once you came back here.

Michael Carter Jr.: My father was working with the Virginia State University Small Farm Outreach Program, which is their version of extension—a whole 'nother history behind that—and he got me an interview for a position in the Small Farm Outreach Program, so I started working with them in September, as soon as I got back in—or October first. And then by November first I approached my uncle who was/is sort of the caretaker and kind of the farmer, and explained to him I wanted to come back, and not necessarily take over right now, but just establish some things and start the process.

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So, I started planting some African plants right behind the garden, right here behind the house, with the idea of I'm going to do things small and then kind of build up. I really think I will keep my coverage. I wanted my coverage because I'm still small in terms of my production, but my media and the attention that we get is way bigger than what we actually do or produce. So, I'm very conscious of that. There's 99.8 percent of the farmers doing way better than I am, but I got a heck of a way to tell a story. [laughs] I tell my story better than the 99.8 percent of other farmers. So yeah, I started there. We started doing some African crops that's behind the house here. Nothing major, just something small and it's kind of just ballooned from there.

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The idea or thought process around ethnic crops or African crops has been a thing that's appealed to many different people for possibilities in terms of markets, health reasons, soil benefits,

cultural benefits, culture appropriate foods. So, I found a good niche that I could grow relatively easy but also could explain extremely well. And the history that I had with the African Hebrew Israelites as well as in Ghana and Israel, I can tie a lot of those experiences, that history, the spiritual significance of some of those practices into the work that we were doing. I worked with VSU from October 2017 to August of 2022.

Sarah Rodriguez: And then after that?

Michael Carter Jr.: I started Carter Farms in November of 2017, officially.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Before that it was just a family farm?

Michael Carter Jr.: [sends text message] November 2017 I started Carter Farms. And it was, like you said, family, just a sole proprietor. It wasn't anything incorporated, no LLC, nothing like that. And then I started a couple other businesses. I started my son's company, Carter Brothers, which ended up becoming a seed company in February 2019, as well as Hen Asem which is a cultural program.

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And then April of 2020 we got Africulture started, which is a nonprofit. So, that's what I did after I finished that, was I just went to do my own businesses. That started, we got a couple of grants prior to me leaving VSU, and I just rode off that for a little while, and then finally it became too much to try to straddle the two. They didn't say it would come a confident interest, but it could be seen in that way. And my time, I was being pulled in a lot of different places. And I had a bandwidth for VSU, and I also was just outgrowing certain things; it wasn't paying me

anymore—a whole ’nother... So yeah, started my own business, or was jumping into my own businesses after I left there.

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Once I jumped in those businesses, that’s what I’ve been doing ever since, just figuring out ways to diversify revenue and experiences for those businesses.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about the primary work that Africulture does?

Michael Carter Jr.: Nope. [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: Alright.

Michael Carter Jr.: Well, we share the, or expound upon, or teach about the principles, practices, plants, and people of African descent that has contributed to agriculture. We also provide technical assistance for farmers. We try to be a training program in what we term “racial literacy,” where a lot of folks are illiterate, and a lot of people are illiterate around racial and cultural realities. We try to engage conversations. Then there’s events and experiences that allow people to be a lot more racially literate, as well as working on curriculum development, teaching.

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We teach a course at University of Virginia called Africulture which we have been teaching for the last—this will be our third year this year, this coming spring semester. Those are some of the things. I call myself, and have been calling myself probably since 2018, a grant farmer. Farming and agriculture, it’s a lot of work for a little bit of pay. Not a fan of that at all, so I figured out ways to generate more income with, not less work, but work that I’m better at and I can do year round. I don’t like the cold, so I don’t like being, you know—you got me on a really good day.

[laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: It's very nice right now.

Michael Carter Jr.: And the amount of time and energy and effort that goes into the agricultural production of vegetables, produce, versus the input, the revenue you get, it doesn't add up, in my world.

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Where you're used to gettin' paid $25, $30, $40, $50, $100 an hour for different work, and then you get paid for, if you consider the amount of hours you worked and the income revenue that you got especially after petty, any expenses that you may have, it might be like $1.50. So, it's like, this is not... Unfortunately, this is why slavery was created and fought over was labor and cost of labor and efficiency of labor. And the colonizers were, like many Americans now, lazy. [laughs] they don't want to do certain types of work. And if they do it, they want it to be as mechanized as possible so it can be as efficient as possible. So, if you don't have the tractors with air conditioners, with heaters, it's like, Okay, it's a tractor. It's hot in the tractor. I mean, add air conditioning to it. Oh, okay, all right. [laughs]

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So, figuring out ways, and Africulture is we do a lot in terms of consulting. We also do sister city program between Fredericksburg, Virginia, and Princess Town, Ghana. So, we try to do as much as possible as often as possible just to generate income in different ways. There's few things that we say no to. We do a lot of things in climate smart and conservation practices. We have various agreements with FSA which is USDA Farm Service Agency, with USDA and RCS which is

National Resource Conservation Services, that allow us to provide technical assistance outreach toward all the farmers in the area with the emphasis on teaching about some of their programs, as well as some of the cultural practices we do with Africulture, as well as just encouraging good agriculture practices and conservation practices in general.

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So, Africulture is an arm of our grant farming operation, as well as Carter Farms. This is part of my book, [flips through notes] chapter two, chapter one or something, so we're writing a book and we're looking to kind of expound on a lot more of what we do and how we do it as well as tying in a lot of our history. The way my mind works is all over the place, so the book is gonna be all over the place. [laughs] How does that link up? Bear with me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Trust the process.

Michael Carter Jr.: Yeah. Even if it don't link up, you just needed to hear that. So, Africulture has afforded me to do exactly what I wanted to do how I wanted to do it. It's a nonprofit that allows me to do that, where I can tie in my love for history, my love for Africa, my love for agriculture, my love for psychology, my love for the interconnected play of all of that, and make it into one.

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So, I'm teaching at UVA. I'm just talking about my grandmother and the chicken, or Nana. Nana was another person that was a great influence on me foodways-wise. But talking about the pies and the gizzards and all that kind of stuff is part of my classroom experience. I can give a test question around that if I wanted to. And that's fulfilling to know that I can venerate my ancestors

and my experiences and honor them because what we've been able to create and how we've been able to craft narratives and stories around our history. Africulture also tries to really help individuals understand the power of their story. Their story and history—or "herstory," or "ourstory," or however you want to describe it—is significant.

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And all stories are significant, not just one section of one group of folks whose stories, but your story is significant, and it can have an impact upon others, and it should have an impact upon others. And if anything, it should have an impact upon yourself and your immediate family. So, we try to implore upon individuals that importance of story, of crafting narratives, of passing that on to your own family. Helping families keep land and their family's land is a great storyteller itself where you can tell the story of ownership, of pride, of goals, of goal setting, of goal achievement, of loss, of pain, of joy, of happiness, and everything in between. So, in a nutshell, that's what Africulture does.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Thank you. Could you tell me about when you've come across the term regenerative agriculture, if you have any connection to that term, how that impacts your work, some thoughts on that?

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Michael Carter Jr.: Hmm... I'm trying to think about when I came across it. I'm trying to remember my Hebrew experiences when we said "divine agriculture" which was agriculture that was pleasing unto the creator. It would have had reparative aspects in it, which was probably when I would have first heard it. Maybe I would have heard it before then. Because I'm still

studying agriculture and still much into the sometimes the pseudoscience of it and some of the niches, but I would say probably in that community is maybe when I first heard of reparative agriculture. And it was idea that we need to repair our relationship to creator, and the best way to do that is repairing it through our mother which is the soil, the earth. And it was very specific practices. There's a lot of practices—or a lot of agricultural laws—in the Bible.

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There's roughly about 613 laws in the Bible, and I would say about a third of those are probably agriculture related in some way, shape, or form. And as I explored that, you could see aspects, and you were taught aspects of how this would be reparative to not just earth, but also to your earth, your body. That as you start to get much more into microorganisms and stuff doing their things in the soil, that it's going to transfer into higher nutrient concentration availability in those plants, so when you eat those things it's going to make you Superman—stronger, healthier, longer living. So, that's probably when I first heard it. I used to study or read *Acres* magazines in probably 2006, 2007, or 2008. So, 2006 is probably when I was doing *Acres* magazines hard, reading 'em on a regular basis, and they talked a lot about regenerative agriculture.

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And it was Dr. Charles Walters, Dr. Charles Henry maybe, Dr. Walters, Dr. Maynard Murray I believe was, who would talk about those things. And I have articles from the '80s and '90s that would be *The Secret Life of Plants*. There was Chris Thompson [sic] and, I can't remember, Peter somebody, maybe Peter Thompson. I can't remember. And they would share certain things. *The Secret Life of Plants* was a decent book, and then their second book, *The Secrets of the Soil* was really good, in which they did more biodynamic principles, but it was still engaging. It kept me

attentive ‘cause they talked about what some would call the “sonic bloom” of 4:00 in the morning or so, plants open up their stomata to receive the dew of the day, and also the sounds is what generally stimulates that.

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The sounds of certain birds open up the stomatas. And if you could put certain biological components, and then would have certain concoctions of manure-based teas and things like that to help the plants grow by feeding them at that particular time of the day where their stomatas were actually open and could receive it fully. The BD100, BD200 preparations in permaculture, which was takin’ cow horns and putting a certain compost in it and certain minerals in them, and burying them and all that kind of stuff, or making teas out of those, those are all regenerative aspects that kind of intrigue me. The idea of the Hunza people and their agriculture in the mountains of Afghanistan, and they had Hunza water which was like a milky-white water that led to their increased lifespan and vitality also intrigued me.

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I need to find some Hunza water, to be honest. [laughs] but yeah, that’s when regenerative agriculture started to really take hold. There was a brother Louisa, brother Zebo, Bernard Turner, Vanguard Ranch, he was one of the first organic regenerative-minded Black farmers I ran across. Uncle Cliff Slade was another one. I didn’t have a lot of contact with him at that time period. I know him because he went to school with my father, so I would see him all the time at the homecomin’, but homecomins ain’t time for ag talk. [laughs] But uncle Cliff, he did a lot of things in terms of organic, or he did a lot of things in terms of production ag that planted seeds in me about making money. He had his 44 or whatever size of acre it is—I think it was 44 or 550 or

something to that effect—he wanted to make a dollar for every square foot on his property, which would be like 44 or something or another—44,000 or something or another, which made sense. He was constantly thinking about how to earn money on the farm.

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is your uncle who ran the farm before you?

Michael Carter Jr.: No. Uncle Cliff Slade is a veteran farmer in Surrey County, Virginia. I called him Uncle Cliff just because he's in the same age category as my father, so all those men in that general age are as uncles in my eyes. With the exception of the Zebo, because I met Zebo in a different time he was just brother Zebo. He's a little older than my father and my uncle Cliff. That's probably the only person I don't call uncle just 'cause I met him at a different stage in my life. But uncle Cliff, I've known probably since I was, you know. So, those were some of my interactions with regenerative.

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My spiritual father at the time, Minister Yadiel, Nasik or Prince Yadiel, he was the head of divine agriculture for the community, and he talked about regenerative agriculture all the time, and he talked about it from a different perspective. He had a farm accident. He was working on a citrus farm, or a citrus factory, and he lost his left arm in the factory, in the machine. And he wanted regenerative agriculture as a good thing for the earth, but also to help to regenerate his arm. He would constantly be doing, and still constantly does things to try to encourage any type of growth for that aspect of his arm. Can't remember if it was his right or his left arm. He would talk about regenerative agriculture quite a bit in different ways, and every time we talked it was

always usually about agriculture.

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We spent a lot of time. We spent time in Israel together, time in Kenya together, definitely time in Ghana together talking about agriculture and regenerative aspects of agriculture. And [laughs] there was started a nonprofit—I always forget about that—Edenic Agriculture Foundation in 2005 or 2006 that kind of focused on that as well. It never really got any traction, but it was there. Anyway, that's a long answer to a short question. [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: No, that's great. How do you implement regenerative ag practices in the work that you do now? Whether how much of that has to do with farming, or kind of like you talked about, the more holistic aspects of that type of practice?

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Michael Carter Jr.: There's different levels to it of holistic and regenerative that may not fall under the regenerative model or template per se, but just like listening to the sounds of these birds, to me, is regenerative. It's the soundtrack to the farm. There's an app here called Merlin Bird ID that we listen to. When I have large numbers of guests here, I have them pull that up to listen to the birds and kind of get familiar with listening to bird sounds again, as opposed to sirens and car horns and trucks going by. It's like, this is what life sounds like, [laughs] to be able to hear a woodpecker, a blue jay, any of the 15 to 20 birds that are around here. It's reviving, just to kind of recalibrate your senses a little bit. We're going barefoot in the fields. We're just sittin' here talking, just going barefoot to ground yourself.

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And then on the farm itself, in the fields itself, we're trying to do a limited amount of tillage. There's some tillage; like, we're just doing a project with the Rodel Institute at the top of the hill that we just tilled. The only reason we tillin' is because they required it. In the other areas I tried to do minimal till or no-till. I lay down silage tarps to kill the grass or any of the indigenous plants that are there, and then plant directly into it. From there, drip irrigation, cover crops, crop rotations. Try to limit a lot of implements or any inputs, and if we do use any inputs, it would definitely be organically based or organically compliant, but then also trying to do more companion planning.

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But even as I gotten older and as my crops fail, more research, [laughs] about what role do we play in the larger ecosystem that is what we termed as Carter Farms, but what the squirrel just knows as "this tree has my nuts in it." And not trying to be so much against nature as with nature, so don't get upset when the deer eat all your stuff or the rabbits eat all your stuff. It's like, well, they needed something to eat apparently, and they didn't eat your other stuff 'cause you sprayed it with stuff or something, so they ate your stuff 'cause it's healthier, and then let's verify that what you're doing is correct, because you can't get fruit for that, 'cause... [laughs] And some of the other regenerative practices: organic seeds, a lot of African seeds, a lot of seed diversity. I'm a strong believer in kind of the root exudates of plants being able to change the microbiota, or the microbiome of the soil to elicit certain things out of the plants.

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Like, we have this is clay soil here. Clay holds a lot of nutrients, but usually it's locked in because of the way the microorganisms move around and the water movement and everything

else moves in the soil. So, it's not—it's seen as bad soil because it doesn't unlock those nutrients to the plants and plant roots in most cases, so figuring out the plants and the microbiology that would actually loosen those or unlock those nutrients to give plants fuller expressions. I'm a big believer in plants need help. Like, we're all under attack. Like, we're a victim of a terraist, T-E-R-R-A-I-S-T. From the sky, from the rain, from the whatevers, when we see those airplanes flyin' by, they're seeding something, and they're doing some things that we can't unfortunately control, but we are impacted.

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And how do we control that impact or mitigate that impact so that boron, or selenium, or whatever else, or aluminum that's coming and you're seein' in the soil, how much can we mitigate that with a plant buffer or a plant that can absorb those things, like a hemp, or alfalfa, or Nigerian spinach, or amaranth that can absorb those things, turn it into something that we actually unlock and doesn't do harm to a plant, and then those plants help the other plants around it. So, there's a lot of thought and research, probably much more thought than actual practice that goes on here, [laughs] just because I be in my head all the time and not in the fields. Yeah, those are some of the regenerative practices that we try to utilize. You see solar panels up there. My own my cousin maintains a solar array.

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We try to be somewhat socially—I guess we are somewhat—we are socially conscious and aware. We're also dealing with the realities of different people have different practices on the farm. So, my uncle is very much conventional, and sometimes—

Sarah Rodriguez: Is he still working on the farm?

Michael Carter Jr.: He's supposed to be transitioning out, but he was supposed to be doing that five years ago, so I don't believe what he says. [Sarah laughs] Right now he's not as active as he used to be. This past season he was active like he was always, so a whole 'nother situation there which keeps—that's an aspect of regeneration as well, is being able to have a succession of growers on the family property so the farm can stay the farm and not become either houses or get sold off and become houses or Dollar Generals or subdivisions. So, that's a reality we face consistently.

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And to me, regeneration of the earth should be in line with the regeneration of the human spirit and human soul, and there's a lot of things that we have to regenerate as well: our compassion for nature, for ourselves, for plants, peoples, the flora and fauna, the insects. All those things have to be regenerated in ourselves, and I try to utilize this space to be a factor of that where my drive isn't necessary production but the regeneration of my soul.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. Focusing in on Africulture, are there any successes or challenges while doing that type of work that stand out to you in your mind?

Michael Carter Jr.: Successes or challenges in what regard?

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Sarah Rodriguez: In your efforts to, since we're talking about regenerative agriculture, in that respect in being regenerative.

Michael Carter Jr.: I think production definitely goes down quite a bit. I'm a strong believing

in lowering your expectations. [laughs] And I'm also a strong believer that not everything—because a lot of the crops that are commercially available or even available from a garden space has grown out of commercial production, where these things have been either hybridized or modified—not genetically modified—but just modified for better growth, for better size, for better storage ability, perishability. So, from a production standpoint, to me, we're nowhere near where I expected to be after four or five years.

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And it has challenges with labor, challenges with my own schedule, where I'm just not here as often. I thought I was going to have my sons out here. "Yeah, okay. You wasn't really thinkin' well" [laughs] in terms of the obligations and my availability to get them out here on regular basis. So, labor is definitely an issue; finding people, being able to communicate with people to make sure that they have interest in wanting to come and work, and then don't live so far that at that first or second visit, it's like, "It's not going to work." Which has happened numerous times where I get an intern, somebody will say, "I want to come and work with you." And I'm like, "Yeah, okay." "Yeah, I was just thinking—I didn't know it was going to be this far. And it's just like, "Thank you." [laughs] I think hedging expectations is always the key, and how you try to mitigate expectations in terms of what you see on the farm, in terms of what we're growing, in terms of how we're growing it.

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We were talking about deer pressures. It's like, this is a reality. Like, I don't have deer fencing. Deer are in all these woods, and initially I was like, "Okay, let me fend them off or chase them off or get a dog or something." It's like, every time they build a new house, they lose more

property to live. It's like, I'm not going to—I'll be a friend to the deer, and to the foxes, and to the wild turkeys, and to the rabbits—Lord knows the rabbits—and live much more in harmony. That I don't necessarily need 60 plants of this to be okay; one plant would do. And then the deer are greedy 'cause they eat all 59 of those 60. It's like, "Oh good God, you've got to stop." [laughs]

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But it helps me to be a lot more patient, and it helps me to lower my expectations. So, as much as it's a hindrance or can be perceived as a weakness, I try to see most weaknesses at some level of strength or opportunity, and I think there's an opportunity to learn and grow from all those situations, and improve. And being in a rural location that's not close to any major city or suburb is challenging definitely for labor, but lifestyle-wise, I prefer this over any urban or suburban setting. It's like, I can't go some places and sit out here underneath my own trees. If you weren't here and I was just chillin' here, like, okay, this is a nice day. I would probably pay to experience this, and instead I can just come down here and park my car and not be bothered by nothing but some bugs occasionally.

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So, there's not a lot of challenges probably because of my perspective. I would love to have more staff to help me to do things, and to do things when I'm not here, and call to do a lot of other things, to help grow the farm; but until that happens I'll just do the things I need to grow the farm. And eventually I'll be able to say, "Okay, I can pay some $85,000 to work the farm." Like, make an offer they can't refuse.

Sarah Rodriguez: Any successes that stand out in your mind? You already kind of mentioned some.

Michael Carter Jr.: Yeah, I mean, I have plenty in terms of just inspiring other farmers to grow, and to start, and to keep land; really bringing more people back to some semblance of nature when we do our events and our workshops, and reminding people about some of the things that were done in the past as we were growing up, or as we were growing that made sense.

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Hugging trees, you know? Calling somebody a tree hugger now is an insult, but it's like, there's a lot of therapy in hugging a freaking tree, and being barefoot, and the grounding, and vitamin D. Like, you're getting sun and you're increasing your dopamine and lowering your cortisol and you're being able to be in a more stress-free environment, and some people struggle with that. But it's like, even if they struggle with it, the fact that they're here going through the process makes it easier the next time. They can go through it. So, there's been a lot of reconnection to nature. A lot of individuals who come from different countries, preferably in Africa, but also in Asia, Latin America, and various parts of the world come here, and there's a peace that comes here, and there's a commonality of sorts. We had a group come here from the Tibetan region—from Nepal, Tibet, and northern India—in June, and we had a great time. [laughs]

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The food was awesome in terms of I catered some food for them, but then they showed me—they put out a mortar and pestle that I have here that I was using to make fufu, and they talked about how they do a similar dish there, and it was this cultural exchange. They were

showing the dance they were doing, and the song they sing. It was like, there's a cultural connection that says, "Okay, we are very similar in a lot of ways. We've been made to think that were different, but culturally a lot of things stay the same." Wherever you indigenous are in the world, agriculture is always a key aspect of the nature of that indigenous grouping, no matter where they are, and we forget that. That was the commonality, 'cause we all had to eat. That was the commonality in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, South America, North America, there's indigenous folks that have some differences in doing other things, but eating was definitely almost always ceremonial.

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Everybody almost always had a ceremonial relationship with food at some point. So, being able to show connections, the strengths, the joys, the pains, it is a great success. Getting more young people out here to see—I've probably had maybe five or six student interns over the last four or five years that's been really good, some college-level, some high school. I've had several young people come out and it's been good to see them grow. Especially my college guys, they kind of stuck in the field which is always a good thing. I've planted some seeds. You saw some opportunities. You saw some things how you could fit in. One of the things that I call myself, or one of the things I say I grow, is I grow farmers.

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So, that's what I desire to do, and a lot of times I just need to plant the seed, and if I can get you here I can plant a seed. And sometimes you plant a seed that doesn't start to germinate until 10 or 20 years down the road, but the fact that the seed is there means I got a chance now for it to germinate. If the seed is never there, there's no chance for it to ever germinate. So yeah, being

able to plant those seeds, good, bad, or ugly. We've had various congressional members here. And granted, again, nothing about this place wows people, but I realized it just wasn't about that. It was about planting those seeds, having those voices heard that made sense to them, like, "Okay, I can see this. This makes sense." So, I think every day we've been here as a farm has been a success. We've had some great events honor Edna Lewis—Doctor and Chef Edna Lewis who was a cousin/neighbor of ours.

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She used to be a cousin/neighbor of ours, but also a trailblazing chef, African American female chef who's featured on stamps and books about her, and she's called Grande Dame of Southern Cooking. She grew up in the community my grandfather's and her grandfather's—my second great-grandfather and her great-grandfather started. But having those cultural connections, being able to honor those individuals in our communities who have made an impact and a difference even though they weren't usually honored in their lifetime, being able to set the stage and the mark to honor those individuals, being able to bring more attention to the role that African Americans have played in agriculture, and African crops have played in agriculture, and African principles and practices have played in agriculture, it is a success. So, every day that we've been here has been, to me, a success.

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Sarah Rodriguez: I want to be respectful of your time, but is there anything that I didn't ask about that you would like to mention? Any story or anything else?

Michael Carter Jr.: No, not off the top. I mean, it's your story or research or whatever you feel

like, I'll talk. And there's more, so much more, mainly to talk about that I don't want to over share or share too much of the wrong stuff. Like, I want you to stay on regenerative agriculture and that stuff, so any other questions you got for me is—I'm just answering the questions you give me.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure, for sure. Well, I think this is great, so thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Michael Carter Jr.: No problem.

[End]