BEATRICE GATEBUKE
FASHA Garden and Nonprofit – Nashville, Tennessee
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Date: May 11, 2016
Location: Panera Bread – Nashville, Tennessee
Interviewer: Jennifer Justus
Transcription: Deborah Mitchum
Length: 30:20
Project: Nashville's Nolensville Road

Interviewee: Beatrice Gatebuke

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

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Location: Nashville, TN

Length: Two audio files; 00:30:20

START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: This is Jennifer Justus for the Southern Foodways Alliance and it is May 11, 2016, and I am at Panera Bread with Beatrice Gatebuke, and I will ask her to introduce herself now.

[00:00:17]

Beatrice Gatebuke: Hi. My name is Beatrice Gatebuke and I work with the nonprofit FASHA where we have a community garden in Nashville. This is a community garden where we bring people together from various parts of the world to grow food and grow community at the same time.

[00:00:36]

JJ: So how did you decide to start this garden? What caused you to want to do the garden?

[00:00:44]

BG: So, a few years back my sister and I were talking about food security and lack of access to healthy vegetables for certain communities within Nashville, food deserts and things of that nature, and we kept thinking of a way that we could help combat that, especially since the groups that do not have access to healthy vegetables are usually refugees and immigrants and

people who don't have land here in Nashville. Then one day we were visiting a family and there was this older lady. She had recently moved to Nashville, didn't speak the language, basically spent her days home acclimating to Nashville, and she had created a small, tiny plot of land and she was growing food on it. That, to us, was such an inspiration, like this is someone who just recently moved to Nashville, found a way to create a small space where she can use her skills, because she's been a farmer all her life. So, upon seeing that, my sister and I were inspired and we took it upon ourselves to figure out and launch a program that would create that space so that she doesn't have to use that really tiny small plot that she has at her house, that she can come and get bigger space and grow food.

[00:02:16]

JJ: The woman that you're speaking about, could you talk a little bit about her, and how did you meet her and find her space?

[00:02:25]

BG: So, this is a lady from Rwanda, and she's, I believe, in her seventies. She came over as a refugee, I believe, and of course I'm originally from Rwanda and so we all tend to know each other [*Laughs*] somehow. So I was visiting her and her son and noticed that she had been growing things and one of the things she kept saying that she missed from home was the ability to grow things because this is what she's done all her life. So we thought, ah! How great would it be if we could really—? Because all she did was spend all of her days at home. She can actually come out and go to the garden and start growing and have something to do instead of feeling like, you know, she was struggling with nostalgia and she's struggling with adjusting to the culture. She eventually came out to the garden and had a plot and she worked it for a while, but for us it was really something that we can relate to, something that we can connect to, because

it's really strange to be in a new land [*Laughs*] when everything is new and then you feel like what you already have isn't good enough to fit in with the new place, so.

[00:04:04]

JJ: Well, talking about that, can you go ahead and tell me your coming to America [story], what brought you here and how you ended up in Nashville specifically?

[00:04:16]

BG: Yeah. So, I came to the US as a refugee, right after the Rwandan genocide, so I'm actually a Rwandan genocide survivor and came to the US directly to Nashville. My father was actually already here so we came through the resettlement program where you are joining a family member. It was quite different. [*Laughs*] It was really hard to understand people. It was kind of–. You know, so we're talking about having been through a war recently and basically haven't had a break, really, so you're coming from living this refugee life where things are hard, where food is scarce, where basically most resources are scarce, and you've even totally forgotten about certain things that you used to do or have because now you're thinking about bare necessities, right? Then you come to the US and you get here and all of a sudden there's enough food, there's enough drinks, you can sleep inside a house and you're not sleeping in the grass outside, you have a roof over your head, and things are entirely different. But then in the midst of that you're kind of overjoyed, because now all of a sudden things that were scarce are available to you, but then you have a hard time adjusting because it almost feels like there is no break in between. You're going from nothing to stuff, [*Laughs*] and so that transition period was quite hard. Then also the sense of peace, you know, the sense of feeling like, "All right, now I can take a breather. Now I don't have to worry about anyone questioning why I'm here, anyone maybe looking to aggress me in any kind of way. So basically there's this sense of peace and

security and you're able to do whatever you need to do without having that worry on your mind that something could seriously go wrong.

[00:06:33]

So, adjusting to that is also—it takes a while. Then you've got culture, you've got language, you've got just basically getting your life together now that you can, [*Laughs*] which is a process. So, I mean, like I always say, Nashville's been my home for all these years and I absolutely love it. We were welcomed by Nashvillians who are just amazing and it's been a great story so far. [*Laughs*] Even though sometimes it feels like I might be dreaming.

[00:07:07]

JJ: How long have you been in Nashville, and when you came, you said it was hard to understand people, so had you studied English before? Was it all new? Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:07:22]

BG: Yeah. So I've been in Nashville for about twenty-one years now. Very surprising: so I've lived in Nashville longer than I've lived in Rwanda. [*Laughs*] That always sounds really strange to me because I never thought that that would be the case. But, as far as English, it was very new to me. The only exposure that I had had to English was classes that we took, but most of the curriculum in school for us was in Kinyarwanda and French, and so you had one English class maybe once a week or something. [I] did not retain anything so it was very new. For like the first two weeks I walked around mute, didn't say much, because, one, I didn't understand what people said, and gesturing was sometimes really hard, so I just kind of, you know, stayed to myself and hoped that eventually I'd be able to understand everyone and definitely be able to get in with the language.

[00:08:27]

JJ: So, the gardening, do you feel like that activity can help assimilation for people who are coming here from different places?

[00:08:38]

BG: Absolutely, because currently we have people from various parts of the world, so we've got I think all—. Well, Africa's represented, Asia is represented, South America's represented, and North America, of course, and when we are out working we have to talk, and so as we talk, as we exchange tips and best practices and things like that, or share how we did it back home and how we're doing it here, there's growth that happens. Some people with a language barrier are sometimes encouraged to speak English, because you can hear all kinds of accents when you're at the garden so that creates a comfortable environment for anyone who was maybe hesitant to try the language to be encouraged to try the language. But we're also very welcoming. We've got people from the US gardening along with people from Burundi. I think that is a great story and a great way for people to pick up the language and get enriched in culture.

[00:09:56]

JJ: How many farmers do you have on the land now, and what is the approximate size of the land?

[00:10:05]

BG: So right now we have about twenty gardeners and it's on one acre of land. We're actually using the one acre right now and our plot sizes have increased. We initially started off with something small, four-by-eight, and those, you know, were small and people wanted to have

more space and so we expanded, and we're really excited. We love the growth and we want to see more people, we want to hear more stories, we want to travel the world through the garden. [00:10:42]

JJ: So, I wanted to ask another thing about the garden. Oh! Can you tell me how you started the garden, because there were some challenges, I'm sure, involved in finding the land and being able to do that. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:11:03]

BG: So, you know, we met this lady, we're inspired, my sister and I are on fire and we want to do something, we feel really connected to this, and we realize, wow: our biggest hurdle to get this started is finding land, and we have no idea if anybody—. We don't have any access to land and we don't know anyone who actually does. So, with that, we started going around the city looking for places that may be empty lots and enquiring about them and trying to figure out who was using them. Then my sister one day came across this flood plain property and inquired and found out that it was actually owned by Metro, and so we contacted them, and our program was the first of its kind, and so because of that there really wasn't any kind of structure as to how the land would be used for that purpose. So we started going back and forth with Metro, you know, asking them for the space, giving them a plan of what we had, and answering a whole bunch of questions and working with the mayor's office, because that's who we initially started with because we thought they owned the property. But eventually we were able to work through that process and got the land, but it wasn't as easy as we thought. [*Laughs*] We thought it was just going to be, all right, you find a piece of land, you talk to the person, they loan it to you or something, and you're done, but this was involved with a lot of restrictions, which we've worked through to make the program what it is, because there's still, like, the access to land.

[00:12:45]

JJ: So, from the idea for the garden and when you broke ground, when you started to plant, how far apart was that time period?

[00:13:00]

BG: So, it took a while. We first got the idea that we wanted to do this in 2011, so we started working on it and encountered a number of hurdles. The property didn't have any water on it, and you really can't have people gardening in the summer without water. We were having to work through the different restrictions that we had and at the same time getting the word out that a program like this was starting. So it wasn't until 2014 that we actually broke ground, and we were so excited the day that happened. It took many hours, a lot of sweat and a lot of thought that went into the whole thing, but we were glad to see it launch and two years later we're still here, so that's good. [*Laughs*]

[00:13:50]

JJ: Did you and your sister grow food before the idea for the garden, or was it a new thing for you?

[00:14:00]

BG: Well, our grandfather was a farmer, and so we had been around the process of growing food. We were kind of involved but on the lighter side because we were younger so we did like some weeding and we would go out to the fields with them when they were looking at the crops and that kind of thing, but not heavily, heavily involved. Then we also, at school, I do remember like each class had a garden of its own, and we had competitions on who either had the best garden, who was doing well, who tended to their garden better, and so that was

something that we did and everybody was involved in it. I feel like that and being out in the fields with my grandpa really set me up for what I'm doing today with the garden.

[00:14:54]

JJ: So you do have your own plot, you or your sister, or both of you, or just helping with other people's plots?

[00:15:02]

BG: Right now we mostly help with other people's plots. We haven't gotten to the point where we can actually have our own plot, simply because we're still trying to set the process of how we grow things, and there's landscaping that has to happen in the garden so a lot of times we spend our time doing that whereas everyone else is actually working on the garden. So, you know, spreading mulch in between so we can have a walk path, and maybe even setting up an irrigation system, that kind of thing we're doing, sometimes watering [*Laughs*] the garden for everybody, but we don't have a plot for ourselves. We've thought about getting one. We don't we think we would have enough time to dedicate to it yet.

[00:15:47]

JJ: Okay. So the growing of food leads me to the cooking of food, so I wanted to hear a little bit, if I could, about do you cook, do you like to cook, and where does your inspiration in the kitchen come from?

[00:16:06]

BG: Well, I love to cook, and I've cooked many, many meals. [*Laughs*] I learned to cook from my mother and she's always been my inspiration. She's very particular in the kitchen and she wants things to taste a certain way. So when I was about eleven, I believe, I started getting more involved in helping her around in the kitchen and watching and picking up skills, and then I

started doing it myself. Of course I wouldn't cook the major things. [*Laughs*] I would cook maybe sides and things like that. She'd make sure that I'm paying attention to how much salt she's using, where she's using sugar. I know one of the things I really loved doing with her was we used to make homemade mayonnaise and I would watch her do it, but in me watching her do it because, you know, you're having to like slowly pour the oil over the egg as you whip the egg, and so I would watch her and I would imagine in my head that her arm must be really tired. So, to get myself involved in that process, I said, "I will relieve you in pouring the oil. Let me pour it and you just whip the egg." So things like that I started doing, and then eventually she let me start doing it myself. So she is my inspiration and most of the skills that I have I learned from her.

[00:17:45]

JJ: And that started in Rwanda, right? So, how old were you when you came to the United States?

[00:17:54]

BG: I was fifteen.

[00:17:55]

JJ: Can you talk a little bit about what food was like when you came here? What did you make of it when you came to the United States and how did it sort of—? How do you bridge the gap between the food of your home country and now, and how does all that feel, I guess?

[00:18:23]

BG: So, food here, my first impression was it was odd, [*Laughs*] a lot more than I was normally exposed to, and I thought it tasted really sweet, very, very sweet, and it almost felt like everything was flavored with sugar, but I wasn't sure about that. So that was one of the

differences that I noted, and then, having dessert at every meal, that wasn't something I was accustomed to. We had fruits and stuff but not cakes and cookies and that kind of thing, so I had to adjust to that and, sure enough, I grew a sweet tooth. [*Laughs*] I love my cookies and I love my cakes. So that was one of the first differences, and then I also—. In Rwanda, cooking there, they don't use a lot of spices and a lot of the food is like root vegetables and rice and beef and things like that, but here you have a variety of things. You can do fish, you can do pork, you can do chicken. I mean, chicken is a delicacy in Rwanda so it's hard to come by, but here it's the one thing you can get in bulk. So that was also—. It took some adjusting to. [*Laughs*] So, I think the main differences were in how much food was available and how easily you could access it, and also the sweetness of the food.

[00:20:09]

JJ: Can you talk a little bit about the chickens—that's something I'm just unfamiliar with—and it being more of a rarity in Rwanda. Do you know much about that?

[00:20:21]

BG: You know, I'm not sure why that is the case, but I do remember you could have access to beef, pork, fish some, but chicken tended to be expensive. So, I don't know if it's because–. Some people in Rwanda are cow herders and so you probably have a lot more beef around than you do chicken and maybe people didn't raise as many chickens back, or chicken. I'm not sure. [*Laughs*] So, I think that could be the reason why, but I'm not sure. I just remember chicken was really, really expensive and not often on the menu.

[00:21:10]

JJ: Okay. Let's see. So, let's take a quick break.

[00:21:20 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So, getting back to the garden, can you tell me some of the type things that are grown on that land?

[00:00:08]

BG: Yes. So, right now we have cabbage growing, we have onions, we have garlic, we have radishes, we have carrots. Hopefully they'll come up. We're waiting. They're slowly coming up. We have collard greens growing, and those were really popular last season so we did them again this year. We've grown tomatoes, bell peppers. We're going to try to grow this eggplant from Rwanda, so we are getting seeds. I believe they're coming this weekend actually. It's the green eggplant. It's smaller and it's really popular back home, so we're going to try to grow that here. We have grown regular bell peppers, squash. We did sweet potatoes last season and we also did regular potatoes, and one of the things that we did, last year we grew this corn from back home and did the America corn, so we kind of did them both at the same time to see which one would do better, and the American corn was done maybe in a month or two, or a month and a half, and the other one took about four months. So, [*Laughs*] learned a lot of lessons there. We harvested from both, which was really good. They both did really well so we were really happy about that.

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JJ: Are there things that you wish you could grow here that you grew in your native country that you've not been able to grow?

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BG: Yes. Yes, yes, and yes. [*Laughs*] One of the things that's really popular back home is igitoki, which is the green bananas, and those, I guess, are tropical plants, I think, and so they don't do well in non-tropical weather. So we wish we could grow that here because it's so

popular and the dishes just—. I mean it's quite frequent and we are not able to grow that. We haven't ventured into maybe trying to grow maybe cassava or something here, but it would be good if we could. I think some of the things that we would like to do are more like fruits, so guava is popular, but we found out that the climate is not conducive to us growing guava. So, yeah, just a few things that we miss.

[00:02:47]

JJ: And, along those lines, can you talk just a little bit about the differences in the climate and the soil in your native country and here?

[00:02:57]

BG: Absolutely. So, in Rwanda all year round basically the weather is around seventy-five degrees. We're below the equator and it's a land of a thousand hills so either you're in a valley or you're uphill. [*Laughs*] That makes the weather just, you know, it never really gets too hot, it never really gets too cold, so a lot of the crops that are grown there are crops that are really good for that type of temperature. I mean like in the northern part of the country they grow potatoes, which are usually for colder weather, and that's because we have the volcanoes up there, which around the volcanoes it tends to be a lot colder than it is in the rest of the country. So, that's shared here, right, because in Nashville you can grow potatoes. It just has to be after the winter. [*Laughs*] It can't be before and it can't be in the summer. So in that respect the climates can be similar for potatoes, I guess. But here it gets really, really hot in the summer, you can get to nineties, and so some of the things that would normally grow back home don't grow here, or you would just have to adjust the way you grow them. But climate wise I think they are two different worlds because here you tend to go through four seasons, you've got your winter,

you've got your spring, summer, and fall. In Rwanda it's fall all the time, I guess. [*Laughs*] Or at least it feels that way.

[00:04:36]

JJ: Do you ever see two farmers from two different places at the garden start to grow each other's crops that they didn't grow before? Has that happened yet? It might be too soon for that, but can you talk a little bit about that, and also a few of the countries represented, that you can recall.

[00:04:58]

BG: Yes. So last year we grew Zimbabwean kale and, boy, was it popular. It did well, loved the soil, so we harvested a lot of it and people loved it. Sure enough, when this year came around, everyone was saying, "Where is it? Where is it? We want to plant it again." So we planted a little bit of it again this year, but it was just one of the ones that was really popular. One of the things that I've seen is actually people are exchanging, so somebody who does well growing kale, and then somebody else does well growing something else, trade, you know, come together, "Well, my peppers did really well this summer. My tomatoes did really well this summer. Let's trade." So, you have that going on. As far as the different countries, we've got Zimbabwe represented, Tanzania, Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi, we have Ethiopia, and then we have Bhutan, and I think we have Somalia as well, and Sudan, and then we have Argentina, and we have the United States. So, we get to, you know, go around the world on a Saturday.

[*Laughs*]

[00:06:17]

JJ: So I know you need to—. Running out of time here, but I wanted to ask just maybe one more thing. Can you talk about the types of things that you like to cook, that you're cooking nowadays?

[00:06:32]

BG: So nowadays I'm really obsessed with lentil salads and so I'm doing—. [*Laughs*] My recipe's evolving and changing on a regular basis. I started off with just a basic lentil salad, vinegar and a little bit of lemon and pepper, but now I've evolved to where I add things like avocado and parsley and onions and things like that, so that's one of the things that I'm cooking. I'm also trying to refine my skills in making pilau, which is the flavored rice, right, and so it's eaten throughout East Africa, Northern Africa, and actually maybe the whole continent. I'm not sure, but I know East Africa for sure and you might find a version of it in West Africa. But it's flavored rice, so I'm working on getting the recipe right. Haven't made it yet. I'm hoping that I will, so, yeah.

[00:07:43]

JJ: And, last question, so what percentage of food that you cook today would be American and what percent is from your native area?

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BG: I would say sixty-forty. I mean, on a busy day I'll make myself a quick sandwich and I'll do a salad or something, but when I have the time, let's say a Saturday afternoon and I really want to cook and get in it and actually get—. I mean, I love cooking because I feel like when you're done and people are thoroughly enjoying it, that's like the beauty of cooking, right? So, I find myself, when I'm cooking big meals, I will go Rwandan, but then when it's quick and easy I'll go American. So I would say, yeah, sixty-forty.

[00:08:37]

JJ: Well, thank you so much for your time today. This has been very interesting.

[00:08:42]

BG: Thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and look forward to listening to it.

[00:09:00]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: June 12, 2016