

Jeanette Bell

Fleur d'Eden / Garden on Mars — New Orleans, LA

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Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel, the Southern Foodways Alliance. The date is May 23rd, 2025, and I'm in New Orleans with Jeanette Bell. Ms. Bell can you please introduce yourself, give me your name, please.

Jeanette Bell: Yeah, I'm Jeanette Bell and I am the owner and operator, so to speak, of Fleur d'Eden, which is a garden here in New Orleans that was started two years before Katrina.

Rien Fertel: Would you mind just giving your birth date for the record please?

Jeanette Bell: My birthdate is March 24, 1944.

Rien Fertel: Thank you. So tell me about this site, let's start with the location, maybe the address and the neighborhood that we're in today. And then we'll get to how you came to this location.

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Jeanette Bell: This location is 2111 Baronne and my address is 2219 Baronne so we are exactly a block apart. And when I purchased this property in 2003 it was an overgrown lot that had been overgrown for many years. And as an activist in the neighborhood trying to make my neighborhood better, I felt that the thing to do was to acquire this lot and turn it into a garden, because at the time the city was having a problem with vacant property. There were 37,000

vacant properties in New Orleans and many of those were overgrown lots. And I thought that if I took this lot and turned it into a garden that it would be an example that other people would want to follow.

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Rien Fertel: It's a rather large lot for New Orleans, and this block of Baronne does have large lots. Do you know what was here before? Was it a house that was torn down or that was lost?

Jeanette Bell: There was a house here, a very large house that, when the neighborhood started to deteriorate, these properties were turned into various types of facilities. This was a care facility that was not cared for. It was a fire, it burned down, and after that, what was left of the building had to be torn down, and it stayed vacant for many years after that. And because I lived in the next block, it was important to try to do something with this lot.

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Jeanette Bell: But at the time all of the properties on this side of the street were vacant and what I was doing at that time was going to various meetings and trying to interest people into coming and living in this part of the city and restoring these historic houses.

Rien Fertel: And how difficult was it to obtain the lot? Was it a city-run program? Were they selling the lots? How did that work?

Jeanette Bell: It was a rather difficult process because the city had what they called a blighted property program, where they had thousands of properties on a list. And you could sign up for these properties and if you signed up for these properties you were able to purchase them at half the market value.

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Jeanette Bell: You had to pay for all of the fees associated with the purchase. And so I signed up to purchase this lot. It was very difficult because I had pictures of what I wanted to do with it and no one was interested in the lot until I started circulating pictures of what I wanted to do with it. And people came out of the woodwork to purchase it. I ended up having to file a lawsuit against the city of New Orleans to acquire this property at \$6,500 dollars for the property and a \$10,000 legal bill.

Rien Fertel: And did the city promise it to you and then were trying to sell it for a higher price, I'm guessing?

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Jeanette Bell: Well, I had filled out all of the paperwork but other people were going to the members of the group that was in charge of this and saying, we'd like to buy that property. So in order for them to sell it to the other people, they had to derail my application. And that was the process.

Rien Fertel: Was the lawsuit that you filed against the city successful?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, it was. It took us a while to get to court. I incurred a lot of expenses because every time we filed a document was \$300 and that's how I ended up with a \$10,000 legal bill. We only appeared in court once at the time that we appeared in court finally, the other department did not show for the hearing.

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Jeanette Bell: And when the judge asked why they didn't show, his clerk went and checked and was told that the wrong department was served and that was why they didn't show. But we had paid to have them served and the judge said at that time to the city attorney, "If Ms. Bell loses because you have given her bad information, the city would pay." And the city attorney said, "But judge we're not at that point." The judge said, "I know we're not at that point, I'm telling you what is going to happen if we get to that point." And my attorney and I went to lunch and two hours later we got a call from the city attorney saying that they wanted to settle.

Rien Fertel: Wonderful. And so you obtained the property in 2003, this ended?

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Jeanette Bell: We acquired it in 2003.

Rien Fertel: And what did you need to do once you had the keys, so to speak, to this property?

What did you need to do to remediate it and put your plans in place?

Jeanette Bell: Well, I had never walked the property. Because it was so overgrown you could not walk past the first twenty feet. So once I acquired it, the plan that I had was to have a rose garden here. I already owned 300 rose bushes potted, waiting to go in. But I had to remediate the land and part of the remediation was having the hazardous removal group come out and remove the asbestos, because for years contractors had been dumping on this land at night because you could enter it from the rear.

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Jeanette Bell: I had to have it professionally cleared and there was a lot of debris left from the house that was torn down and I left two large pieces of concrete just as a symbol of what there was here before we started. But we did get it done. And six months after I acquired the property, we got an article in the *Times Picayune* about the rose garden.

Rien Fertel: And by then, six months, did you already have roses in the ground?

Jeanette Bell: Oh yeah, it was completely planted in six months.

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Rien Fertel: And I have to ask, how did you happen to have 300 roses in containers? This is a large number of roses right?

Jeanette Bell: Yeah, I had a plan when I started and the time that it took me to acquire the land, I was collecting the things that had to go here because it was my intention to get started immediately.

Rien Fertel: So I want to go back a bit. You love roses. So I want to kind of get at the root of where that love for roses came from. You're not from New Orleans, where did you grow up?

Jeanette Bell: I grew up in Mississippi. I went to Alcorn State University for undergraduate. And after only working as a teacher in Mississippi, for a year I moved to Detroit.

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Rien Fertel: Can I ask where in Mississippi you were born and grew up?

Jeanette Bell: Hazlehurst, Mississippi.

Rien Fertel: Okay, and what did you study at Alcorn?

Jeanette Bell: Business.

Rien Fertel: And so you moved to Detroit for a job?

Jeanette Bell: Yeah. I got married the first week that I started working in Mississippi and I worked there for a year. And my husband was in graduate school at Wayne State University. So after the first year, I moved to Detroit to be with my husband. I worked there for four years as a public school teacher and I always loved to garden cause I grew up in a farm country.

Rien Fertel: Tell me about your husband. What was his name and where was he from? What was his story?

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Jeanette Bell: My husband's name is John Bell. He was born in Brookhaven, Mississippi. We went to Alcorn together. He left Alcorn and went to graduate school in Detroit. And after

graduate school he started working for Ford Motor Company and he was a chemist and an environmental engineer for Ford Motor Company for twenty-six years, during which time we lived in Detroit and we lived in California.

Rien Fertel: In California, also working Ford?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, worked for Ford aerospace in Palo Alto, California.

Rien Fertel: I just have an aside. This very much parallels my own background. My mother's family was originally from Brooklyn, New York, and her father went to Detroit to work for Ford also. And so my mother was born in Detroit, her family was born in Detroit, my father is from New Orleans, but I very much am rooted in Detroit and the Ford Motor Company too.

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Jeanette Bell: After having two children I was a stay at home mom for nine years and during that nine years I lived part of the time in Indian Village. Indian Village is a historic area seven minutes from downtown Detroit and the homes are historic and lovely and there're beautiful gardens. And I was once president of the Indian Village Garden Club and I enjoyed the gardening experience in Detroit prior to my leaving. And when I wanted to go back to work after nine years — my youngest was ready for school — I did not want to go back to teaching.

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Jeanette Bell: I wanted a job working for the city of Detroit and I wanted to plant the flower beds because I felt like the nine years that I had been home and gardening, I had learned a lot and I could do a better job than some of the gardens that I saw. So I studied, I took the test for floriculturist for the city, I passed the test, and then I survived the interview, which was a challenge. [Laughs.] But at the interview I realized that they did not have Blacks or females because they didn't want any and they didn't intend to have any. So I realized I was probably not going to be hired so then I had to do something with all of the information that I had acquired during that study period.

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Jeanette Bell: So I started a business and my business was planting flower beds for commercial establishments. Because you have a very short growing season in Detroit, and business establishments — most of whom had someone to cut their grass but tiny flower beds that no one wanted to plant. So what I did was I contacted small businesses with small flower beds and I talked to them about planting their flower beds. But instead of using small plants, I used mature plants so that when the flower bed was planted it looked as if it had been there for three months.

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Jeanette Bell: My first planting was at Ross Roy Advertising on Jefferson, and I had a friend who worked there and she let me talk to the person who was in charge, she helped me talk to the person who was in charge. And one of the things that I did at Ross Roy was I planted some second-story window boxes with hanging geraniums, which looked spectacular. And I got a lot of publicity from that and then I went on to plant the Woodbridge Tavern, which is right off Jefferson. Because the restaurant had little flower beds and they had a balcony with some window boxes I could plant. It was a small business that was designed to support small businesses.

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Rien Fertel: I love that. And what was the name of the business?

Jeanette Bell: It was Bell Floricultural Service, which is still the name because wherever I've moved I've always done something in the area of planting, because I love planting.

Rien Fertel: Detroit, very different climate than where we are now. What were your go to plants when small businesses would hire you to kind of beautify the exterior of the building?

Jeanette Bell: My go to plant in Detroit was geraniums, because geraniums do very well. You can acquire them in a larger size, in a blooming size, and they make a statement right away but geraniums and petunias are spectacular.

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Rien Fertel: And what year was this when you founded your business?

Jeanette Bell: 1980.

Rien Fertel: And I want to ask about two gardens in particular. At that time while living in Detroit, can you kind of bring us back and describe what your garden looked like? Did you have roses? Were you growing food crops? What did your garden look like there?

Jeanette Bell: Well, there were a lot of flowers. During that period I bought a house with a vacant lot next door. That vacant lot was not being used properly so I acquired that lot, which meant that my garden was a half-acre. The opportunities in Detroit were different.

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Jeanette Bell: For example, one year the Frank's Nursery got the tulips in too late and they sold them for a penny a bulb. I bought 4,000 tulips and daffodils and planted them in my garden, in my half-acre garden, and I'm on the corner. So when you have 4,000 tulips and daffodils in one garden, people are almost having accidents looking at all these tulips in the garden. [Laughs.] I had a small rose garden there. I got a Keep Michigan Beautiful award for the garden and I got a

keep Detroit Beautiful Award for the garden there. And the garden was on the Indian Village Housing Garden Tour one year so it got quite a lot of attention there and being president of the Garden Club for one year there was a lot of attention.

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Rien Fertel: And what made Indian Village a historic community? What was special about the neighborhood?

Jeanette Bell: Well, the development of Indian Village started in 1895 and it was the area where the first auto developers built their homes. There was a Dodge home mansion there and there was a Ford mansion there. It was 250 homes, three streets wide: Burns, Iroquois, and Seminole were the three streets and it was a mile long.

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Jeanette Bell: And it ended up at Jefferson, and of course that's right across from Belle Isle, so it was a lovely lovely area. And when the people in the auto companies left Detroit and moved to Grosse Pointe, they left magnificent homes there, mansions there. I didn't unfortunately have a mansion, it wasn't in our budget at that time, we had two little kids, so we bought a nice little house and enjoyed living there. But because of the nature of the homes there they attracted middle class, middle income individuals with children who could buy a 3,000 square-foot home

for actually less than what you could buy in the suburbs because people were leaving at that time.

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Jeanette Bell: There were homeowners who left and left and left the contents of their house because they were moving into a senior facility. The seniors were leaving Indian Village and new people with children were moving in. And my daughter was going to the Waldorf School there, and so it made it convenient for us to live there and have her attend the Waldorf School. But it was really a beautiful, beautiful neighborhood. And many of the individuals living in Indian Village were attorneys, young attorneys, because it was so close to the courts that it was very convenient for them. So Indian Village was a close knit neighborhood that had twenty-six events a year.

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Jeanette Bell: So we had monthly meetings from the Garden Club, we had monthly meetings from the Association, we had the Halloween party where all of our kids went to a church. We did things within the community. And Indian Village had its own directory, and in the directory was the name of the homeowners, the name and ages of their children, so that if you were having a party, even if you didn't know them, you knew the kids that lived there and you knew how to interact with the kids that lived there, which was great. It was just absolutely wonderful.

Rien Fertel: It sounds like such a lovely way to raise a family.

Jeanette Bell: Yeah.

Rien Fertel: The other garden I want to ask about is if there was one that you had growing up in Mississippi. Can you tell me about that home and if there was a garden growing up? Did your mother or father garden? Tell me about that.

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Jeanette Bell: Well, my mother died when I was nine-years old and I lived with family members from time to time. But one of the family members that I lived with had a garden and it was ten miles outside of Hazlehurst. It was near Dentville, Mississippi. It was forty acres, so there was farmland around it. But she had a garden at the house. And because we were slightly on a hill, when you were driving down the road you could see her garden from the road.

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Jeanette Bell: And as a child I remember her visiting other members of the neighborhood who gardened and they would exchange bulbs and cuttings and things like that. And my uncle built for her a pit in the ground that was elevated at the rear and it was concrete, it was probably six-

by-six feet. And in the winter she would put her houseplants in this pit, which was a couple feet below ground level but raised at the rear, and the front was covered with windows, so that she could cover the windows with straw and a tarp when it was really cold. But when the sun was shining, she could pull back the tarp and the straw and have the sun on her plants. And she was the first person that I knew that ever had tulips. And she would mail order it and she would have like five or six little tulips.

Rien Fertel: Were they in the ground or in containers?

Jeanette Bell: In the ground.

Rien Fertel: And growing tulips in Mississippi is even hard right? Because in New Orleans you can't really grow tulips.

Jeanette Bell: You'd have to order them every years, but if you wanted tulips that's what you did. And she had roses and she had dianthus, and dianthus as a child was my favorite plant because I had to deadhead the dianthus and the fragrance from the dianthus was just intoxicating, absolutely intoxicating for a seven or eight year old.

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Jeanette Bell: But I also had to deadhead the roses too, my job was deadheading. And because we were probably five-hundred feet from the road and it was a little incline, she planted daffodils along the side so in the spring you would see this 500-foot row of daffodils leading up to the house.

Rien Fertel: And because she's so important in your life, what was her name?

Jeanette Bell: Christina Haynes, she was my aunt, and for as long as I could remember, she was president of the PTA for Covich County.

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Jeanette Bell: Which meant that she had to go to meetings at different places in the county and also go to the meetings that they had in Jackson, Mississippi to support the Parent Teachers Association, which were very important back then.

Rien Fertel: And just for listeners who don't know, can you tell us what deadheading is? And I ask this because I was with my partner, we were just talking about deadheading a week ago, we were discussing, "What do you think our son — who is not even two-years old — what do you think Francis's first chore is gonna be? Will it be washing the dishes or taking out the trash?" And my partner — she's a wonderful gardener and there's a bunch of roses in our yard — said,

“Oh, no, he’s gonna deadhead, that’s gonna be his first chore.” And it sounds like it was one of your first kind of chores or activities as a young person.

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Jeanette Bell: Yes, some of the roses that she had were older, old garden roses, which means that they produced a lot of flowers. And in order for you to have them looking pretty, you’ll have to keep the old spent flowers out of the mass to make it look pretty, so that’s the job. So if you’ve got a mass of flowers and you leave the deadheads in there, it interferes with the appearance of the bouquet.

Rien Fertel: Bringing us back to Detroit, how did you find yourself in New Orleans? When did you move here? And we’re skipping over California. When did you move to California and did you have a garden there?

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Jeanette Bell: No, I didn’t have a garden there. I moved to New Orleans in 1982 and, as you know, in 1983 there was the oil embargo, which affected the auto industry severely and my husband took a layoff at that time. He was a career employee, he had been at Ford Motor Company for seventeen years at that time, and he accepted a layoff prior to the time when he

would've expected to be laid off in the hope that he had a little bit of an edge in tryna find another job. Unfortunately, for two years he was unemployed.

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Jeanette Bell: At the end of two years, he was in the process of accepting a job in Las Vegas cause he was a chemist in environmental and a company in Las Vegas was having some environmental issues and they needed his expertise. So he was in the process of accepting a job there when his previous supervisor from Detroit had — in the process of relocating all of those employees during that difficult period — she had moved to the Ford Aerospace division in California and she contacted him and said, “No, don't take the job in las Vegas, come on back to Ford. The aerospace division has positions for environmental engineers.” And environmental was much more of an issue in California in '84 than it was in other places. So he took the position with the aerospace division.

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Rien Fertel: I see. You moved here in '83 you said?

Jeanette Bell: I moved here in '82. In '83 he accepted the layoff and so we ended up moving to California.

Rien Fertel: I see. I see. And so when you moved to New Orleans did you move to the block of Baronne?

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Jeanette Bell: No. Our house in Detroit was for sale, it had been on the market a long time. People were having trouble selling houses because it was a really down period. And so we rented and I rented near where my children went to school; they went to St. Stephens. And my oldest was a year at Ursulines before we went to California. My children had six more years of school before college when I relocated them to California.

Rien Fertel: So you were here for a short period, then California?

Jeanette Bell: Then California.

Rien Fertel: And then you came back here.

Jeanette Bell: Yeah. In the months before I left here I purchased the house at 2219 Baronne, and at that point it was a rental with eight units.

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Jeanette Bell: So the rentals helped with the purchase of the house. And it was my intention to come back to New Orleans after the children were in college. And during the time that I was here, I did a small amount of substitute teaching. And in my backyard I grew plants that I sold at a farmers market, and I think the farmers market is still there. It's across the river, it's near the bridge.

Rien Fertel: Yeah, well, I know there's that seafood market that's there, right? That's just under the bridge in Algiers, correct? On the West Bank?

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Jeanette Bell: Yeah, it was kind of off the expressway and it was a small market, little people bringing whatever they grew in their yards. And so I would go over there and send my little plants from my backyard. I had to have some kind of structure, so I would go to places that handle glass. Glass is always shipped in crates, so I would take the wood that they were disposing of from the glass company off Earhart [Expressway] and make boxes to keep my plants off the ground in the backyard. And I have a lot of plants in little pots and I'd sell them at the farmers market.

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Rien Fertel: When you lived in Indian Village you talked about the garden and the garden society that you were a part of.

Jeanette Bell: Indian Village Garden Club.

Rien Fertel: Indian Village Garden Club. When you moved back to New Orleans were you part of any gardening organizations?

Jeanette Bell: No, but I was always interested. I would go to everybody's meeting. [Laughs.] If you had a club, I went to your meetings and introduced myself and interacted with people there. And most of the time that I was in New Orleans, I worked with different groups but I was the longest time with Scholastic Publishers.

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Jeanette Bell: I was an educational consultant doing per diem work here in the city and interacting with the schools. Because I recognized the quality of Scholastic products and how they could really help in the system like this one where the students were underperforming. And of course I spent six years in California where everyone performed.

Rien Fertel: And so what did that look like when you'd go to schools working for Scholastic?

Jeanette Bell: Well, it was very difficult to have people understand that things could be different. And they would say, “Oh, you’re coming from California it’s not the same here, you need to put aside those California ideas.” And I would say, “But those California ideas work and what we’re about here is performance.” And so they would say, “Oh, she’s from California, she’s different.”

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Jeanette Bell: They wanted to continue doing what they had always done. And corruption was problematic here because there were sales reps who were entrenched in the system here and those sales reps were from companies who had different policies about compensation to their customers and that was not an idea that ever crossed the table in Scholastic.

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Jeanette Bell: We had the best product, we were the oldest company, there was no reason for us to do anything different than what we had always done. And a principal said to me, “You need to find a job with another company.” He said, “Because your company is so strat-laced they’re never going to spend the money on us that would allow us to buy from you.”

Rien Fertel: [Laughs.] That sounds troublesome. And I neglected to ask why did you and your husband, why did your family choose to come to New Orleans originally?

Jeanette Bell: Well, we chose to come to New Orleans because my husband was involved in environmental work by that time, and New Orleans was our best chance of finding a job that was related to environmental. Whereas, another part:

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Jeanette Bell: I loved Biloxi and Gulfport, but there were no jobs there for environmental engineers.

Rien Fertel: So let's skip ahead, 2003, you've acquired this lot where we are, the garden d'Eden, right. You have several hundred roses in the ground the *Times-Picayune* has written about what you're starting here. Do people come, do they volunteer? Were you planting all of those roses yourself? Were you tending the garden all on your own?

Jeanette Bell: Yes. I was doing all the work myself because this garden was originally designed and developed for a book about roses. And I had roses here.

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Jeanette Bell: I searched the country to find roses that I thought would be an education for a person who loved roses. And I had roses here that I had gotten from California that dated back to the 1600s and all the way to the present, because I wanted people to see how roses had spanned

time and still the most popular plant in the world. And when I was in California it was just like being in heaven. [Laughs.]

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Rien Fertel: The weather.

Jeanette Bell: No, the flowers.

Rien Fertel: Oh, the flowers.

Jeanette Bell: It was just like magnificent everywhere. And I lived in San Jose, so it was just magnificent all the time. Everything is just beautiful all the time, so it was easy for me to continue my love of flowers. So when I came back to New Orleans I already had in mind all the beautiful flowers that I had. And I was in a community garden and I was at the farmers market and it was just an experience. I went back to the farmers market. Even though I was an education consultant during the day, on the weekends I would have my little booth at the farmers market.

Rien Fertel: And what would you be selling there?

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Jeanette Bell: I would be selling bouquets of flowers that I was growing in my yard, at my little community garden spot. Then there was somethings about flowers in New Orleans that was distressing to me, because I'm a business teacher and because I had lived in places where the economies were different. Being in New Orleans where the economy for the average person was so depressed, I felt like flowers could be a way for a family to have additional income.

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Jeanette Bell: But this is the only tourist city, probably in the U.S., where flowers cannot be sold on the streets.

Rien Fertel: Is that a law?

Jeanette Bell: That's the law.

Rien Fertel: Do you know anything about that law, why it exists?

Jeanette Bell: I know more about this than I want to know about this. It's a horror story and it's a horror story that's rooted in — I don't wanna say racism, even though that's a part of it.

Capitalism is at the root of it, because Louisiana is the only state in the fifty states that requires a test to get a license.

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Rien Fertel: To sell flowers?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, to be a florist. You had to take a test and the test was designed by florists. So when a florist designs the test, the person who doesn't have the training is unlikely to be able to pass the test.

Rien Fertel: So anyone that sells flowers in Louisiana is considered a florist, so whether you own a shop or were to sell flowers on the street?

Jeanette Bell: Okay, but you see it's all very contrived to support the florist industry in New Orleans. And if you think about it, it makes sense.

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Jeanette Bell: For example, if you've got a beautiful yard of flowers and your neighbor has a wedding, a reception, a funeral, if they could buy flowers from you, why would they spend the money to go to a florist? And you could grow anything here that you would need to compete with a florist, you could do it right here in your yard. Okay, so the florist industry decided that the thing for them to do was to have their legislators put laws on the books that prevented a

neighbor from buying from a neighbor. You see you need to cut that because that cuts into the flowers that I'm gonna sell.

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Jeanette Bell: And I don't know this for sure but I've heard stories about it. Originally, in order for you to get the license, you not only had to pass the test, survive the arranging part of it, but you needed to have two employees. Which means that if you're a little person, it just really cuts you out. And it is illegal for you to sell flowers on the streets. So a person who could buy a package of 500 gladiolas and grow them in succession and sell them on the street is prevented from doing that.

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Rien Fertel: Right, and now thinking of the French Quarter is this perfect atmosphere for people selling flowers to tourists on the street. You see it in every European city and capital.

Jeanette Bell: Yeah, and when you get off the plane in Hawaii, there is someone there to sell you a lei. No one is checking to see if they paid their taxes or if they've got a license or anything. And where do you find lei needles in Hawaii? You find them at the check-out counter, right next to the magazines. So if you wanna make leis, you just go to your supermarket, buy a needle, and

go to your yard and make leis, and buy some dental floss. All you need is lei needle and some dental floss and you've got the makings of leis. And you've got the flowers everywhere.

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Jeanette Bell: So when my daughter and I took the grand-baby to Hawaii, we were visiting a friend. She said, "Don't buy leis when you get off the plane." She said, "Because I have a neighbor who makes leis and I want to support her."

Rien Fertel: Yeah, so you envisioned people, New Orleanians, selling flowers?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, I wanted to fight that but I haven't found support to fight it. And I speak at garden clubs cause everybody's looking for a free speaker, and I'll speak for free. And at one of my free speaking engagements, I met a woman from Alabama who had a small florist business in Alabama.

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Jeanette Bell: And when she and her husband had to relocate to Louisiana, she thought, "No problem, I'll just start up my flower business in Louisiana." Well first, they did not accept her license from Alabama because Louisiana will not accept a license from another state, another state where you just go in and pay the license fee and get a license. Okay, so they won't accept

your license. And she was not in a position — and these were her words: “I wasn’t in a position to take the test to get a license here.” So now her business is clawed back, that little extra business she was getting in Alabama, they can’t get here because of Louisiana. And I think that’s wrong. I think it’s so wrong to hurt people who haven’t done anything, I mean how does it really hurt people.

[00:50:11]

Rien Fertel: So back to 2003, you acquired this garden and it’s not soon before Hurricane Katrina, August of 2005.

Jeanette Bell: By August of 2005, the entire garden is done. I’ve hired a photographer to do the photographing for the book, I have the outline of the book, and I’m starting on the text. I’ve got all the pictures of the different gardens because this was originally for the book was gonna be a rose garden, then it was gonna be a tiny spring garden on one side, it was gonna be like fifteen-foot wide, it was meant to be the size of a backyard in a shotgun double.

[00:51:11]

Jeanette Bell: And then there was another little garden on the other side, again fifteen-foot wide, the size of a garden in a shotgun double but it was a vegetable garden. And then there was the patio, which was concrete, and that was meant to show how you could have the space. If you had

a thirty-foot wide backyard and it was all concrete, how you could use containers and do that. So all of this was all done, all photographed, ready to go, and Katrina —. As a matter fact, the week prior to Katrina, I was fertilizing all of the roses because we were going to do a photoshoot for a magazine, a local magazine, and so I needed all of the roses blooming, so there were lots of fertilizer and so Katrina came and that didn't happen.

[00:52:23]

Rien Fertel: What effect did the storm have on the garden itself?

Jeanette Bell: There was no damage to the garden, it blew apart my little workroom in the back, which was no big deal. But the roses were fine, some of them were blown over, but they take the wind well. There was no water here. And Hurricane Rita came after, which put a lot of rain water here, which meant that the flowers were really perky. And so five weeks after Katrina I was back.

[00:53:05]

Jeanette Bell: My house was slightly damaged, so I was able to go back into my home down the street. And what I did was, I cut the flowers, I took little cups, little Styrofoam cups, and I would go to the centers where they were handing out supplies and I would give them to the workers so that they would have, a little something, a little beauty, yeah. And so I got to be kind of known

for that. If people stopped by — cause there were so few people — if anyone stopped by, and they gave me a few minutes, I would cut them a bouquet because I had so many.

[00:54:04]

Jeanette Bell: So later there was a *New York Times* reporter in the city and someone said to her, “You should go and see Jeanette Bell.” And she came by on her way to the airport and she walked from the front of the garden, to the rear, and then back to the front, and she said, “We’ll be in touch.” And I didn’t hear from her for a while, but then a week or so later I got a call from a photographer and he said, “The *New York Times* has ordered a photograph of you and your garden.” And that’s when the first article in the *New York Times* appeared.

[00:54:59]

Jeanette Bell: And it was an article about recovery in New Orleans but it talked about my cutting flowers and it showed me cutting a rose. And news people would come through and they’d stop because there were so many flowers here, so much of the other parts of the city were grey, and so I got on national news and things like that because of this.

Rien Fertel: And was it in those immediate years after the storm that this space became a space for volunteers?

Jeanette Bell: No, this never became a space for volunteers. The volunteers were at the non-profit.

Rien Fertel: Oh, that's right, okay, cause I used to volunteer with HandsOn over there I used to lead groups but I'm getting them mixed up. But what did your first years look like here? [Phone rings.]

[00:56:01]

Rien Fertel: And if we need to pause.

[00:56:36]

Rien Fertel: But the role of this did change a bit, you started doing different things here.

Jeanette Bell: Because I was ready to contact a publisher at the time of Katrina and then I realized that things were gonna be difficult. I wanted to use a local publisher and I did submit my information to Pelican Press but they were not able to do anything, because most of the printing of coffee table books is done in Singapore and its very expensive. That was not the time when thirty-five dollar coffee table books were popular, and this is what that would've been.

Rien Fertel: Right. Is that when you started growing for restaurants here?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, I started growing herbs because I recognized that fresh herbs would be a thing that a restaurant would have difficulty acquiring. Because an herb that's been in a refrigerated truck for seven days is not good, and so I started growing herbs and selling them through Hollygrove Market.

[00:58:24]

Rien Fertel: What herbs were you growing?

Jeanette Bell: I was growing things like parsley and sage and basil. I would grow the herbs and make a little bundle that a person could buy for, I think it was three dollars, and you'd have some herbs to spice up your food, a little bunch. And of course I went back to the farmers market. I'm a big believer in farmers markets. I dabble a little bit in farmers markets even now.

[00:59:04]

Rien Fertel: And did you start working directly with chefs in restaurants?

Jeanette Bell: My first chef was Ian Schnoebelen, and I had some kale and I was selling the kale at Hollygrove Market. And Ian's neighbor was buying the kale from Hollygrove Market, bunches of kale, fresh kale, and he said, "Where you getting the kale?" And his neighbor told him, and he

contacted me and he said, "I understand that you're growing lacinato kale." And I said, "Yes."
And he said, "Can I come and see it?" So I said, "Yeah."

[01:00:03]

Jeanette Bell: So he came out here and looked at the kale. Now that was my first herb contact with a chef, but five years before Katrina I had sold flowers to another chef and that was the Santa Fe. I loved them.

Rien Fertel: The old Santa Fe on Frenchmen Street?

Jeanette Bell: Yes.

Rien Fertel: Wonderful restaurant, I remember it.

Jeanette Bell: Yes, the wife was from England and she more than any person that I've ever known had absolutely no tolerance for a commercial flower.

[01:01:00]

Jeanette Bell: Their set-up was fabulous. They had a little sitting room. And the flowers that I sold to them every week for five years went into the little sitting room outside the bathroom.

Now the flowers that I sold to them were flowers that I grew, either in my community garden or the two years that I was here before Katrina, and of course Martin did not survive an illness after Katrina and they sold the restaurant. But that was my first restaurant experience, the five years before Katrina was Santa Fe.

[01:02:00]

Jeanette Bell: And in Detroit one of the things that I did, as part of that little business, was providing flowers for restaurants for the tables. So now I'm still providing flowers for restaurant tables. [Laughs.]

Rien Fertel: So you still do that now?

Jeanette Bell: Yes.

Rien Fertel: Where can we find your flowers?

Jeanette Bell: Dakar's tables. [Laughs.]

Rien Fertel: Do you also provide any herbs for him?

Jeanette Bell: No.

Rien Fertel: Which is like the hottest restaurant in the city for the past couple of years and he's become a big name in chefs, in the nation.

Jeanette Bell: Oh, okay [Laughs.] Well I met him eight years ago when he had just come from Senegal and was working at Commander's [Palace].

[01:02:58]

Jeanette Bell: He was having a dinner and a friend of his was also a friend of mine. And the friend offered me two dinners in exchange for flowers for the table. I said, "That's a good deal." So I gave him flowers for the table, I did bouquets in exchange. But that's when I first met him and I'd just seen him that one time, I didn't know. But when he got the James Beard Award, someone recommended me to him and him to me, so you know how that works. And so I happen to have had a picture of the two of us from that dinner that night and I sent him a copy of that. I text him that picture and I said, "Maybe we can talk about some flowers for your table." And so I've been supplying them with flowers ever since.

[01:04:06]

Jeanette Bell: So we have flowers at the hostess stand. [Car starts.]

[01:05:00]

Jeanette Bell: Flowers for each of the tables, a bouquet for each of the two bathrooms, a bouquet for the table in the hallway outside the bathroom, that's where all of the information, all of these articles and things, there's a table there with flowers on it.

[01:06:00]

Jeanette Bell: I provide garnishes for the pastry chefs and for the bartender. So that's my weekly order to Dakar.

Rien Fertel: Do you do all the gathering yourself these days?

Jeanette Bell: Yes, even with the surgery I still do all the gathering. When I've done flowers for events I have done all of the arranging myself and I'm trying to be an example that could be replicated. I had a group — this was seven or eight years ago.

[01:06:58]

Jeanette Bell: I had a group from Chicago, Lutherans, who were in town and they wanted to have a banquet at the Convention Center. They wanted a nonprofit, if possible, to do herbs, potted herbs, for the tables, and they would give those herbs, donate those herbs, back to the

organization. They thought that would be a good gesture. And they had a budget of four dollars so they needed a 180 of these. Which is reasonable, right? Because you can get an herb for four dollars for the table.

[01:07:58]

Jeanette Bell: And I thought, this is the La Nouvelle banquet facility, a potted herb is gonna be virtually impossible for me to make a potted herb look attractive. I can make it look attractive, but not for four dollars because it'll cost me more than four dollars to get a container that goes on that table to put an herb in. So I said this isn't gonna work. What I did, is I worked thirty-six hours, I did 180 bouquets, delivered them, set it up for four dollars a bouquet. Now, at four dollars you could barely — I mean it's a real genius thing to put together a bouquet for four dollars that looks like it belongs on that table with all of the stuff that they put on that table for a banquet, its amazing.

[01:09:08]

Jeanette Bell: So I did it, got it done, not as many photographs as I'd have liked but some photographs — and I documented every single thing. I put it in a little folder with pictures and all of the information and I said, "Okay, now we're ready to teach the young people how to serve a banquet, okay." No one was interested. I took it to the person who was head of the local flower growers group, she wasn't interested.

[01:10:01]

Jeanette Bell: I still have it. I thought, “All that work I did.” Because I’m a teacher at heart, whatever it is that I want to do, I want it to be teaching experience for somebody, anybody so it can be done. So we’ve got all of these banquets, all of these facilities here that local people could be benefitting and they’re not. When there’s a banquet there I assure you that no local suppliers benefit from it. I would guess that every bit of that money goes out.

Rien Fertel: On the subject of teaching, you used to lead classes at this site, correct? Because my mom and I took a container growing class back in 2010, maybe 2012. How often did you and tell me about the teaching here?

[01:11:09]

Jeanette Bell: Whenever there’s a group that wants to do anything about gardening, I’ll do it here. The Herb Society, I hosted one of their meetings here because, actually, rose is an herb, most people don’t know that. Yeah, it is an herb. You have rose hip jelly, you have rose water, and in India I am told that children get a little rose-flavoring that they put in their milk, they flavor their milk with rose.

[01:12:01]

Jeanette Bell: Roses are used all over the world for various different purposes. So it is an herb that we don't think of as an herb because what has happened is commerce has grown them like corn in third-world countries and sprayed them with all types of pesticides and you don't dare put that in your —. And the other thing that I would like to see is — okay, weddings are a thing here. Why aren't you using fresh, pesticide-free flowers on cakes and pastries and so forth? Just so hard.

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Tell me about the sites in the Ninth Ward, how that came to be and what was involved?

[01:13:01]

Jeanette Bell: I went after Katrina and then it was 2013 that I started the first garden. I thought that the thing to do would be to try to get people in the Lower Ninth, where they were not going to get a supermarket anytime soon to grow some foods, some of the basics. And I thought this was a natural thing because that part of Ninth Ward was originally a place where low income families from the surrounding area were able to live, acquire a piece of land, and grow from that land to support their table out of necessity. So why not? I thought that was just so natural, but it wasn't because so much time had passed since those families did that that the new people there were not.

[01:14:14]

Jeanette Bell: And the post-traumatic stress of Katrina was overwhelming. But I started the garden there and then HandsOn helped me start that garden. It's in Gert Town and I had events that people never showed up, people didn't show up for so. They said, "Okay let's move you to the Lower Nine. So I went to the Lower Nine, I set up five gardens there, one for cut flowers, one for herb-servicing restaurant products, one it was an orchard, one was for container gardening, and the other one was for events. And that worked out well in terms of development because I had volunteers.

[01:15:11]

Jeanette Bell: I was just inundated with volunteers and it was beautiful and my gardens have always been privately funded, I'm not someone sitting around waiting for grants and I don't have a staff, so there's no petty cash to worry about. And so we just do, we just volunteer and do. So we had a beautiful garden. The Ninth Ward just didn't come back, distinctly back. So here it is now we're closing.

Rien Fertel: Those are being phased out.

Jeanette Bell: Four of them phased out a year and half ago and the last one, which I hope you'll see is an — cause I like to see photographs of it — is a beautiful orchard with a teaching space in the rear.

[01:16:05]

Jeanette Bell: I have seating in the round and we have there a space, I call it an “instagarden.” And the reason I call it an instagarden is because I need to get peoples' attention and if I say, “your backyard garden,” nobody's gonna pay any attention. Instagarden, what does that mean? It means that you build a frame and fill it with your planting material, during which time you are collecting and repotting the plants that are gonna go in it and when these two things come together, you make yourself a mug of your favorite coffee, and you go out and you plant all of these things and you have an hour later. We did it in an hour, we planted it in an hour, but everything was planted into one gallon pot and we had an instagarden.

[01:17:15]

Jeanette Bell: And the garden would fit any thirty-foot lot because of the size of it. It's designed for you to access things from the entire space. Because, if you could imagine, it looks like an M. So you could walk behind it, you could walk on the sides of it, you could walk in the inner compartments in it. It's my claim to fame for the community garden and what I'm hoping to see is this approach being used in the community gardens of the future. So that if you got a piece of

land that's gonna be for a community garden, you can take six or eight families, give them this instagarden-size space, and have them produce enough food to impact the bottom line.

[01:18:34]

Rien Fertel: I need to go see this cause I have not seen this site, what is the address?

Jeanette Bell: It's 6313 North Prieur.

Rien Fertel: Okay, I'll find it. And just one or two more questions. I think a lot of the kind of work, and I do think that the activist work that you've done especially here in New Orleans, is getting people out into gardens and building their own gardens and helping volunteers in the Ninth Ward gardens.

[01:19:08]

Rien Fertel: And we've talked about the possible financial benefits this could have for people selling to weddings and banquets. But maybe on a more metaphysical level or on a higher spiritual plane, what do you think gardens can do for a person or for a person's soul, a person's body and being, their health even? What do you think gardens represent? Why are they important?

Jeanette Bell: They're important because they take us back to our source. We came from the ground. We should always be connected to that.

[01:19:51]

Jeanette Bell: And I go to the Unity Church on St. Charles and my children were born into Unity, so they've been a part of it all along and they're in their fifties now. But what I'm starting — attempting to start at my church — is a little growing group with thirteen year-olds and we are just three months in. And this Sunday we're coming up to our second giveaway. What I do is, I have them start plants and when they get a little past the starting stage, we give them to the congregation, so they don't have to worry about how do we keep the bugs off, how do we keep enough water and so forth. We give them to the congregation. And this Sunday we'll be giving away the materials for the Three Sisters: the corn, the squash, and the beans.

[01:21:00]

Jeanette Bell: So what I had my students do, I dried an ear of corn and I took it in and they shelled the little kernels off and put them in soil and so now those corns are about this tall and on Sunday we will give their little giveaway. They'll have a little table outside of the front door of the church, and they'll have table, and on that table there'll be an example, there'll be a pot with the corn in it and then there'll be some soil and two beans, two pea squash. And we're gonna give those to every person. So they'll get a recycled pot, so we talked to them a little about

recycling, we give them the soil, and we give them a corn plant that's this tall and two bean seeds and two squash seeds. And then we tell them, when you put the soil in your pot and you plant your corn in there, plant the two beans and two squash and it's the Three Sisters that the Iroquois Indians are credited with.

[01:22:21]

Rien Fertel: I love it. What do you want your two children — I've communicated with one, I believe she lives in Atlanta — do they live here? Do they come here? This is a way of asking, what do you want the future and the legacy of this space to be?

Jeanette Bell: I've thought about that an awful lot, and we're in year number twenty-three. This was a low-income area when I purchased my house in 1984, and one of the things that I've noticed of how low-income neighborhoods is they don't think very much about beauty. And I'm looking for a way for this to always be a garden. I don't think that they need six condos.

[01:23:28]

Rien Fertel: The neighborhood has changed, the block has changed, yeah

Jeanette Bell: I'm constantly being contacted by people who want to put six condos here. Six condos do not need to be on this lot. I don't know how we'll keep it as a garden but it is a green

space that people enjoy. If someone comes and I'm working here, my daughter cringes because we don't have liability insurance on it but I let them walk through the garden.

[01:24:01]

Jeanette Bell: When the lady on the corner has her teaching, has her cooking classes, one day of the week they bring the kids down, and I have an activity for the kids. Last year when they did it, I was growing okra and I taught kids how to eat raw okra.

Rien Fertel: I have never eaten raw okra. I love okra. How do you eat raw okra, not too fibery?

Jeanette Bell: What we did was I put seating out, I had the kids sit around here, and then I had harvested some okra and then I'm passing around there, I give each one, I pass around the different types of okra, and I pass around dry okra seeds. And while we're passing all of this around, I've got a little tray of okra and I'm picking the okra up and eating it, all while I'm passing this around. [Laughs.]

[01:25:13]

Jeanette Bell: I'm just continually eating raw okra. So then, when I get through my little lecture and everybody had felt everything and we go into the back and we go to the okra plants and everybody sees how quickly they can pick an okra off and eat it. [Laughs.]

Rien Fertel: You have to go for small okra when you eat raw okra?

Jeanette Bell: Yeah, I can eat any size, but anyway I made sure that the okras were just the length that I wanted them to eat so they had no problem eating raw okra, not at all. [Laughs.]

[01:26:04]

Rien Fertel: What was —?

Jeanette Bell: Now, when I did it for adults, it was different cause I had an adult group come and we had to have dips to go with the raw okra. [Laughs.]

Rien Fertel: Adults are not as adventurous as kids.

Jeanette Bell: Right, no, but we had various dips, three different dips, and I had cut the okra pods and I had people to sample the okra with the different dips. And we have information about the advantageous of okra. And of course you get more health benefits if you eat it raw.

Rien Fertel: I need to eat some raw okra.

Jeanette Bell: Actually it's not that bad and I need it for my eyes. And I know that I'm not gonna keep it harvested properly in my yard so if I'm out in the yard and there's a pod about two inches long I just pick it up and eat it then. That's the best, the easiest way to do it, just eat it right off the pod.

[01:27:10]

Rien Fertel: I always call this space Garden on Mars, but I think I was misinformed. What is Garden on Mars?

Jeanette Bell: Garden on Mars are the gardens in the Lower Ninth.

Rien Fertel: In the Lower Ninth, that's what you call them. So just I think wrapping this up, do roses remain your favorite plant? How many roses are here, where we're sitting now, and do you have a favorite rose? I kinda want to end this on the rose right, it started with roses — your story that we're telling today started with roses.

Jeanette Bell: Originally there were 500 rose bushes here, and after Katrina I was concerned that I might have problems with the book.

[01:28:04]

Jeanette Bell: So I bought a piece of land in Mississippi, in Hazlehurst, and I replicated this garden there so if in the future I needed photographing, I could photograph in both places cause they would look exactly the same. Okay, that garden in Mississippi has gone by the wayside now because I wasn't able to keep them both going and the nonprofit. And so I still own the property in Mississippi, there are no roses there. My front yard is roses, is knockout roses across the front. And I got an article in the newspaper in Hazlehurst about my rose garden there.

[01:29:01]

Jeanette Bell: Roses are still my favorite but I picked up a lot of other favorites along the way, and one of the things that I'm focused on now is the purple sweet potato. I have, and I'm attempting to sell, a thousand purple sweet potato slips. But I want to sell the one thousand to one person, which is a challenge. And the reason I want to sell them to one person is I tried to give them away to one thousand people through the Tulane, that didn't work, their service learning program is not organized enough to do something like that, but I still have the 1,000 starts here.

[01:30:01]

Jeanette Bell: So I would like to sell them to a farmer here or somewhere. A farmer in Louisiana or Mississippi, doesn't matter. I'd like to sell them to a farmer who can plant 1,000 and as a result of planting that 1,000, enough of them will go into the market place for people to become

more educated about them, more educated about the health benefits of them. Because there is a reason why the blue zone in Okinawa, Japan has the highest percentage of woman that live to be 100, of all of the blue zones. There is a reason for that. But if you piecemeal it, the message doesn't get out. I'm tryna send a message by finding someone to plant 1,000 of these.

[01:31:09]

Rien Fertel: This purple yam has incredible health benefits?

Jeanette Bell: Incredible health benefits.

Rien Fertel: Do you eat them often?

Jeanette Bell: I don't eat them as much I should because I'm so busy promoting them. And part of the problem of growing them in here is we're pesticide free here, which means that it's impossible for me to control the leaf hoppers on them. But if you put 1,000 in a field it doesn't matter about the leaf hoppers because you're going to be focusing on the tuber underneath the ground, so that's not an issue.

[01:31:55]

Rien Fertel: So you recently had surgery on both hands, how do you manage to keep working, to keep gardening?

Jeanette Bell: A lot of things fall, a lot of balloons fall on the ground. I try to focus on the things that need to survive and just kinda leave it at that. I have, I just purchased \$1,000 worth of Gerbera daisy stock and my goal is to have florists, local florists, small local florists be able to come here and buy from here. I will sell them one flower. They don't have to buy a bunch of ten or twelve or whatever.

[01:32:59]

Jeanette Bell: And one of my favorite people in the whole world is a florist by the name of Meade Wenzel, we've had some similar paths. She was a public school teacher and went into flowers. And I'm a public school teacher who went into flowers. She is eighty-five years old and last week she came here, cause she's been buying from me for twenty years, she came here and I cut the gloriosa lilies for her because they were from all over and I worry about her being eighty-five and walking over this uneven terrain.

[01:33:57]

Jeanette Bell: She cut for herself two bunches of pittosporum, she cut some blackberry vine — I don't know how she's gonna use it, but anyway that wasn't my issue — and then she cut a

bouquet of flowers herself. And so that is what want people to do. This'll be my give away for Sunday at church, they'll get the pot and all of that. But what I want them to do, I want a florist who can come here and this is what they call order. Those are flowers for the table.

[01:35:01]

Jeanette Bell: That's the pastry chef, that's the bartender, that's the hostess stand, and that's the bathroom. Okay, so what I want is me, a florist like me, to come and just what you want. Don't buy what you don't want. If you need three, don't buy a bunch of ten, buy three. Buy the color you want, they don't have to be the same color, I don't care. If you want twenty-five, take twenty-five. Just walk on over, cut whatever you want. And when she left — she's a darling — I don't have to invoice her. She gave me the \$180 cash, took the little thing and went on about her business. She had an event at the Audubon Tea Room and she wanted something local, she loves local. So what I'm trying to get her to do is bring her staff here because, you see, she knows about garden flowers, but I want her to, while she's still moving around, still doing this wonderful stuff, I want her staff to be taught how to do this.

Rien Fertel: Well I want to thank you for sitting down with me.

Jeanette Bell: It's a pleasure to talk about what I like.

Rien Fertel: This was an amazing conversation. Can we walk around the garden for a little bit?

Jeanette Bell: Yes.

[01:36:59]