Leo Gorman

Grow Dat Youth Farm — New Orleans, LA

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Rien Fertel: Alright, this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is May the 27th, 2025, just after 2 p.m. I'm at Grow Dat Gardens with Leo Gorman. Leo, can you please introduce yourself?

Leo Gorman: My name's Leo Gorman and I'm the farm manager at Grow Dat Youth Farm.

Rien Fertel: And if you don't mind, can you share your birth date please?

Leo Gorman: July 20, 1978.

Rien Fertel: When people ask what Grow Dat is, what's kind of like the baseline pitch that you give? What is this place, where are we?

Leo Gorman: So Grow Dat is a youth leadership project that has evolved over the years, but I would say, in our almost fifteen years of existing, our core mission has stayed central to our work, which is nurturing young leaders through the work of food and farming.

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Leo Gorman: And every year we hire about seventy young people, ages fifteen to twenty-one, to go through a core leadership program from area high schools, across race and class and geography school system. And the idea is for them to develop critical thinking skills, to learn from each other, to advance their leadership through political education of understanding the systems of our society — political systems and socioeconomic systems that have kind of shaped our world and led to the problems we face, that in part were some of the reasons why Grow Dat was created.

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Leo Gorman: Underemployment for young people, food insecurity for disenfranchised communities, and then crafting solutions to those problems. So critically thinking about the issues that we face today from climate change to point source pollution to industrial agriculture to political reasons why food insecurity exists. And then crafting solutions to them. And young people, I think, leave Grow Dat with a sense of self-esteem, a sense of their agency to be able to identify issues in the world, craft solutions, and work together across difference to address those issues.

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Rien Fertel: And I wanna ask about the nuts and bolts of how that works, but first I want to get to the origin of the organization. You said that it's fifteen years ago. Can you give some insight into how the organization was built from the ground up?

Leo Gorman: Sure, so Grow Dat was founded in 2010 and the principal founder is Johanna Gilligan. So Johanna and I went to Tulane University as undergrads in the '90s and we got to know each other through political activism, through friendship, through volunteering, and we stayed in touch. And she was living here, she evacuated for Katrina, came back, and was working in public schools. I graduated from Tulane in 2000. I majored in anthropology and Latin American Studies, I lived in Latin America for about five years.

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Leo Gorman: And worked primarily on issues about U.S. foreign policy including militarization, free trade. And it was through understanding and learning more about the impacts of free trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA, free trade in the Americas, that I was drawn to agriculture and farmers and how farmers specifically — both in the United States and in Latin America — were organizing for clean environments, for stable food system, and good prices. Meanwhile, I was also working on apprenticing on various market farms in Oregon, Virginia, outside of D.C., where I'm originally from, and also in Latin America. Meanwhile, staying in touch with Johanna who was teaching in the public school system and working for an organization called New Orleans Food and Farm Network, NOFFN.

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Leo Gorman: Which was founded after the storm, in 2005, and was a really important foundational organization for the establishment and kind of reinvigoration, or invigoration, of gardens, of spaces where growers, consumers, funders, and community folk could gather in both community garden spaces and also doing fundraising and leveraging resources for building a food infrastructure, both production and distribution and education that in many ways didn't exist before Katrina. So she was working with New Orleans Food and Farm Network and was inspired by other organizations in the country like The Food Project in Boston, like Urban Roots in Austin, Texas.

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Leo Gorman: That were doing projects similar to Grow Dat, in which they were hiring young people into jobs, paying them, as a way to both pay them to earn money but really to create experiences for teenagers in which they were earning money but also advancing their leadership. And so she took inspiration from this and saw the issues that young people were facing in 2006, [200]7, [200]8, [200]9, in which the few jobs that were available were at fast food restaurants that didn't pay very well and working conditions weren't great. Meanwhile growing spaces for local food production were limited.

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Leo Gorman: Because of all kinds of reasons: folks were still coming back, land tenure was nebulous in various neighborhoods, institutions were rattled. And there was a need for more coordinated efforts to grow food. And so that kind of intersection of wanting to serve young people and create opportunities for young people to have jobs but also learn skills, learn critical thinking, and then apply them and advance leadership through kind of the work of growing food and talking about food, the history of food, cooking food, understanding how food is a culture pathway, how foodways impact our history and our landscape.

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Leo Gorman: This was all part of not just Johanna's vision I think but other New Orleans elders: Pam Broom and Jenga Mwendo, other food leaders at the time who were creating similar projects with young people. And she wanted to do this with teenagers.

Rien Fertel: Was there a similar organization? You mentioned some other organizations in Boston and Austin, but was there one with a one-on-one correspondence, like a model that mirrored what this eventually became?

Leo Gorman: Definitely, I would say both of those organizations. With the Food Project, they offered a leadership institute specifically for folks like us to train and learn kind of their model.

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Leo Gorman: And so Johanna reached out to me, I think, in early 2010. I was teaching American history at Warren Easton Charter High School, which continues to be one of our main partner schools. And she proposed this idea of helping to start Grow Dat and it was a tough decision cause I loved teaching, I loved being at Easton, but I saw it as an amazing opportunity to where I was able to mix passions of growing, community engagement, working with young people, teaching, and starting a new project. And the two of us set it upon ourselves, first as volunteers and then later as paid staff, to learn as much as we could from these model organizations. So we went to Boston twice to train at their leadership institute.

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Leo Gorman: So they're training other, either founders or aspiring founders of small food or land based projects to learn about fundraising, about infrastructure, curriculum, how to kind of set up and maintain these kinds of projects. And then we also went to Austin, Texas, where the founder of that organization, or one of the cofounders, Max Elliot, who also went to Tulane, and Johanna knew, he's from Shreveport, we trained with them. And so we very much were not reinventing any kind of wheel but tailoring what we learned to New Orleans, to our climate, to the school system.

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Leo Gorman: To a number of things. And once we had that training, Johanna understood to be able to do this kind of project at a certain scale and at a certain budget, we needed land and we needed resources. And the Tulane City Center, which is now the Small Center, which is the public interest wing of their Tulane School of Architecture, was a prescient and very important partner to help us launch the project.

Rien Fertel: So how did that work? Did you go to Tulane? Did you already have contacts within that department? How did that communication start?

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Leo Gorman: So we already had contacts with them. Both Johanna and I were alumni. We had social and professional contacts with folks in various schools that we ended up working with, but it was primarily in the School of Architecture. Dan Etheridge, who was one of the cofounders of the City Center. City Center was founded after Katrina, as a way to harness the sheer pain and ideas that were generating from the trauma of Katrina around the failure of the levees and of how the city could be redesigned in a more sustainable way, in a safer way, in a more equitable and just way. And so the City Center was created to help community organizations build infrastructure and do design work that could help them achieve their mission.

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Leo Gorman: And Dan really was excited about this project and connected Johanna — well Johanna had I think some of these connections already. But at the end of the day a number of different individuals — Stephanie Barksdale, Emily Taylor, and others from Tulane — helped to make a pitch to Scott Cowen, the president, at a time in which Scott Cowen was looking for flagship projects to help bolster Tulane's reputation as a leader in the city in a post-Katrina rebuild, and to support worthwhile projects.

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Leo Gorman: The way I like to describe, Tulane functioned as an incubator for this project. Tulane never gave us directly any money but helped us fundraise for this site that we're on now. They helped us fundraise for general operating costs for the first five years, when we were just getting on our feet. And we remained in close collaboration with them. They helped us negotiate and secure our initial lease with City Park, and that lease was actually signed by Tulane so we were — at that point we didn't have our 501(c)(3) status and then we received that a few years later. Tulane stayed on the lease, and our most recent lease we signed last year is our name now. One last thing I'll say is, before we arrived at the land at City Park,

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Leo Gorman: we started our first year, our pilot year we like to call it, was at Hollygrove Market and Farm in the Seventeenth Ward. And Hollygrove Market and Farm was a real important institution — I would call it an institution — serving both that neighborhood Uptown, but I would say the city, as a food hub, as a food aggregator. There's also growing spaces for local gardeners, for community members. It served as a place for education, for workshops, for community events. It closed down, I think, in 2015 or '16, but really it was an important place for both growers to sell their products and for consumers to find fresh food, particularly after the tumult that Katrina wrought. But we spent six months there with one crew.

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Leo Gorman: Crew is kind of the family unit of young people that we have on the farm. And we kind of tested out the curriculum where young people are spending half their time doing physical agricultural work: planting, seeding, hoeing, bed preparation on beds with my mentor-grower Macon Fry. Macon Fry, garden guy, he taught me how to grow in New Orleans. One thing to say just about New Orleans, growing is it's kind of a different thing. I learned kind of the basics, kind of the theory, on some of these other farms that I worked on. But it was really working with him and his garden, where I had a plot also called Gathering Tree by Xavier.

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Leo Gorman: I learned how to grow in New Orleans, in a subtropical environment, with the various seasons that we have, and learning the timing, what to do in summer, when to stop doing things, cover crop rotations, all these different kinds of things. And he was one of the first team members of Grow Dat as well as a farm advisor and then hosting us at Hollygrove.

Rien Fertel: And this is the same man Macon Fry whose become locally known for having a house on the river?

Leo Gorman: Correct.

Rien Fertel: Okay, is there a very specific lesson that you remember him hammering home?

Leo Gorman: Great question. Agriculturally, one of the things he taught me was get stuff in early.

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Leo Gorman: He was a master, and still is, I learned so much from him and his ways, like really paying close to detail to what I call windows. The windows when the planting season for a certain crop kind of begins and when that window closes. And in our climate you can grow a lot of things throughout the year, but how well you can grow them, if you're growing them organically, is another question. And so he was very good and taught me, for example, with tomatoes, right. He liked to have his tomatoes start at the first week of January. Now this would

be in a covered environment in a greenhouse or propagation house, high tunnel. And then he'd like to have those plants in the ground, ready to go March 1st, at the very latest March 15th.

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Leo Gorman: Which is when the USDA hardiness zone map tells you that you could put that in. You don't wanna be a day later, he would say, because you want to take advantage of the time. And then he also taught me when brassicas, like kales and collards and mustards, those are cool loving crops. If those plants are not producing well, rip 'em out, and put in something that's gonna grow well, like okra or eggplant or squashes. And so he was very good at growing intensively. And in urban growing and small market farming in general the tendency tends to be intensive, aka, growing a lot of things in a small amount of space.

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Leo Gorman: Maybe because you're constrained by not having as much land or you're just not at the scale, either with your labor or if you're mechanized or not to be able to grow more than a certain amount. So the path is to grow intensively and that means being very on top of succession planting, getting things out when they're not producing or when the season changes, and getting things in that are appropriate. And he taught me that well.

Rien Fertel: And one quick question, you mentioned that you called the groups of young people that come in each year “crews.” Of course New Orleans spells crews in two different ways. Just for transcription purposes, which way do you spell it here?

Leo Gorman: We spell it the c-r-e-w, just kind of normal crews. Yeah, we haven’t coopted all the New Orleans vernacular just yet.

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Leo Gorman: But I can say some of the basics about Grow Dat, the young people who come as employees are called crew members and they are ages fifteen to twenty-one. They go to a variety of public schools, private schools, parochial schools in Orleans Parish, Jefferson Parish, and even from Saint Bernard Parish. The majority of their public schools from Orleans Parish. One of the concepts also around Grow Dat’s founding was understanding this reality, both in the South but also more and more in school districts around the country, is this fact that the racial desegregation of our school systems never really happened. And places where it did, it’s resegregated, particularly along race and along class.

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Leo Gorman: And so one of the ideas around Grow Dat was to speak to this by hiring young people across race and class, and that often means across geography. For example, if you live in

the East or if you live Uptown, you might go to a certain school. That's changed a little bit with the charter school system, but the idea is to bring kids together across differences and to speak to that kind of de facto school segregation that persists. And the idea is not necessarily to bring young people together across those differences and just hope for the best. Our curriculum is very intentional and specific in talking about, not just differences but how those differences have been exploited by the ruling class,

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Leo Gorman: by systems of oppression, including capitalism and patriarchy and colonialism and imperialism and all these different historical processes that have led us to the current day. And analyzing, creating spaces in which young people are taking a critical eye to these systems and understanding more how we can dismantle them, even across these differences. And so that current, I would say, has deepened each year at Grow Dat, with new staff, with changing times of Black Lives Matter, of continued racial injustice, of the climate crisis, of the pandemic, of all kinds of societal changes, our curriculum has adapted for that.

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Leo Gorman: And so young people come, they apply for the position, it's a paid job, which is important and is mirroring some of these other food project and urban roots programs that I mentioned, because there's just the basic value that all work is valuable and should be

compensated for. This has never really has been thought of as an enrichment program. Also, because paid work is often times — and really cool learning experiences can often skew along class lines, where working class young people might have to actually take a job after school and not be able to do a cool piano class or band or whatever. Where the idea around this opportunity is you can get paid but you're also doing some really, really cool activities, making friends, learning new things.

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Leo Gorman: And so young people are coming. They're coming after school on Wednesdays and Thursdays, half and half for two hours, and then everyone on Saturday. And they're divided up into crews of about ten to fifteen young people. Each crew has a crew leader, who is usually in their early twenties, kinda college-aged, that has a little more life experience and is excited about leading workshops, mentoring, and doing education work with young people. They're spending half their time doing agricultural work, half their time in workshops, including cooking classes, lessons around history, history of the land — which is the cultural environmental history of City Park, including the very land that we're on now.

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Leo Gorman: And going on field trips, visiting community partners, and learning more about how Grow Dat's food production and kind of footprint it back to New Orleans.

Rien Fertel: I'm interested, because I believe it is rare in these types of programs, that the young people are paid. You called them employees. Could you share how much they are paid, and are they allowed to do more than one year? And I think this would be a good opportunity to talk about funding. You said that Tulane did not provide the seed money, they were kind of more offering guidance and acting as a middle person. Where does funding come from? We're talking money now.

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Leo Gorman: Yeah, so young people are paid, I believe, $10.25 an hour. Now, maybe I can come back and confirm that, but we started at $7.25. So $10.25 is above the minimum wage. But what is the minimum wage in Louisiana? It's at the federal minimum wage, I believe, which is certainly not a living wage. Now, they're young people and it's a part time job and they're staying with family. But we are committed to, and this has been something that we've between discussing in our organization in the last few years, is committed to analyzing and doing the best we can as an organization to analyze what wages are being paid to young people.

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Leo Gorman: Like around the city like at Rouses [Supermarkets] or at a fast food and be competitive with that, at the very least. And second, to where and when possible, within our

budget, go beyond that. And so another thing I'll share about the program, which I like to really highlight, is part of the leadership model is geared towards peer leadership development and tiered leadership. For example, we have our core leadership program that runs January to the end of June. It's twenty-four weeks. Young people go through that program, graduate, and those graduates, who tend to be sophomores to seniors —.

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Leo Gorman: The sophomores and juniors and sometimes seniors will say, "Hey, this is awesome. I wanna apply for the next year to then train up as an assistant crew leader." Or in some cases they can become crew leaders to then lead the next cohort. So we've done this, this is our fourteenth year. It's a really powerful way to, one, retain really skilled and knowledgeable young people who know about Grow Dat, know about the lessons. And, two, build on enthusiasm, motivation, inspiration to then lead their peers, which to me that's one of the top three things, folks who return to the program are taking away from —

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Leo Gorman: is the ability to hold space within a group, set the tone, command respect, give instructions, hold space for an activity to where there's a beginning, middle, and an end, do a debrief, deal with problems that arise. These are all real world skills that we all have to deal with, whether in family, whether in business ,within our community organizations, etcetera. And so

young people are learning how to facilitate conversations, sometimes complicated ones, about topics that matter. And they're learning how to facilitate conversations, interpersonal stuff that might come up with other crew members or with their peers. So that's a big part of the program.

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Leo Gorman: In terms of funding, Tulane was an important incubator in helping us establish our financial solvency, I would say. So, for example, this eco-campus, which is made of repurposed shipping containers, and most of the building of it was actually done by graduate students of the School of Architecture. So, in those initial years, there was fundraising for us, they were doing fundraising on our behalf, for example, to procure the shipping containers, to procure the budget to build the campus, and a lot of the labor was performed by the grad students, which was part of their study.

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Leo Gorman: And then there were contractors that also built it and Tulane helped us fundraise all of that. And then as we were getting our 501(3) non-profit status established, Tulane helped again with fundraising and then gradually kind of pulled away in an official relationship, but still maintained an important both political and relational engagement with Grow Dat till this day. Our board chair Becky Otten is faculty at the Taylor Center at the School for Social Entrepreneurship

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Leo Gorman: and is a huge asset. And then we have various professors and other departments at Tulane that bring volunteered so we still maintain a really close connection. And the institutional weight and support that Tulane threw was absolutely critical to us being able to site this project in City Park, to kind of establish ourselves, and create a financial sustainability. So today that leaves us to our current budget. We have a budget of about $1.3 million and the vast majority of that is coming from grants.

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Leo Gorman: A mix of federal, private, individual, and family foundations, and that's about eighty percent, eighty-five. We're making about twelve percent, thirteen percent of that budget from farm sales, from produce sales with our CSA, our Community Support and Agriculture program, and the rest is through individual donors.

Rien Fertel: Because you talked about grants, because this is 2025, I have to ask this: have you seen a change, are you anticipating a change, are you gearing up for changes regarding state or federal grants that help support this organization?

Leo Gorman: Yeah, like most organizations who depend on grants, especially state and federal funds,

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Leo Gorman: these are hard hard times with the current federal cuts. Fortunately, we have a pretty diversified funding grant portfolio. I'm not in the development program but I do know our federal grant numbers are relatively low. We have two USDA grants, one of which is going to expire this coming fiscal year. And the ones we have coming down the pike are very small, so we're more concerned, I think, about the impacts and kind of the trickle down of multiyear foundation money that we've been receiving and how that might be impacted.

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Leo Gorman: But so far the program officers have told us that we're in good shape.

Rien Fertel: That's good to hear. I wanna ask about this site and how that came to be, the City Park location, and it's kind of a two part question. So what was the process of finding a home here? And also I know part of the curriculum is, you said, talking about the history and culture of not just New Orleans but of this specific site. I'm a historian of New Orleans and I could not tell you much about City Park. I can tell you about the surrounding neighborhoods, the historic

cemeteries in the area, the Esplanade Ridge. City Park I think is difficult, not a lot has been written about it, so I'm very interested in the work that was done to dig that up.

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Leo Gorman: Yeah, I'll just start with that. Yeah me too. I also have studied history and I, truth be told, was pretty ignorant about the park's history besides understanding that it is once a plantation under the Allard family's name. There's a plaque on City Park Avenue. Other than that, I didn't know much and that changed in the last couple of years with research that's been done by a couple of different people, but particularly Kalie Ann Dutra who is in the department of Anthropology or Urban Studies at UNO.

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Leo Gorman: I can share some of the links to this stuff. But she did quite a bit of research that added to this history of the land lesson that we teach as part of the cornerstone to the curriculum here. And what that lesson highlights is that this land, like much of New Orleans, was inhabited by, visited, and engaged by a variety of Indigenous tribes that called it Bulbancha, which in Choctaw means "the place of many tongues." Which tells you that this was a place for trading and exchange, less of a place for firmly held territory by one people, but rather kind of a confluence.

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Leo Gorman: Just like similar the way I've heard it say by Indigenous folks here too is the confluence of the Mississippi River, Bayou St. John, Lake Pontchartrain and these other waterways was also a confluence of people. And so this land, before colonization in this area of City Park, was a site for cypress swamp with many different ecological features that continue to persists today, even though the landscape is still a bit altered. So live oaks and cypress trees, palmetto trees, other trees that would've been here. And Indigenous people would have been gathering here, trading here along the banks of Bayou St. John,

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Leo Gorman: which we are. And then when the French came, without going into the whole history of European colonization, things changed. Enslavement of Indigenous peoples happen, the transatlantic slave trade began, and the area that is now City Park was gradually allotted and sold off to French families. And from Kalie's research, from the French period from 1719 all the way to the end of the Civil War to the end of the American period, there were over nineteen different plantations parceled out throughout what is City Park now. And I can share like a link with more of that research. On the land that we're on now, it was at least four or five plantations that have been there.

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Leo Gorman: And these were mostly French families and then later American families that were growing indigo, cotton, sugarcane, a lot of woodlot probably for timber, food stuffs maybe for the city where enslaved Africans and then later African Americans worked and also resisted. And part of Kalie's research has been to document the various stories, especially of women, who resisted and many of which successfully escaped slavery by kind of smuggling themselves out on boats or canoes down Bayou St. John, over the lake, through the Rigolets to Mobile. There's some really amazing stories of marronage and resistance of slavery that happened on this land.

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Leo Gorman: And so we talk about that and that's something that we discuss quite a bit, is that particularly in the history of colonization and of slavery, this story is not just one of oppression but also of agency and of resistance. And after enslavement the land was kind of donated by the descendants of the Allard family — or maybe it was John McDonogh**,** I'm forgetting, who it was — to the city. And technically this is actually state land, it's administered by the city but we're still not totally clear about what's the legal entity of City Park, but my understanding it it's state land.

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Leo Gorman: And in the 20th century it was primarily developed as a park in the 1920s and ’30s, the Works Progress Administration — WPA — was quite present here building large pieces of infrastructure like Tad Gormley stadium, the lagoons that I’m looking at right now, and other features. And the 20th century also was a time of Jim Crow and of both legal segregation and then de facto segregation for excluding Black people, especially from what would become the St. Bernard Housing Project, across the Bayou over here, where I’m part of a social aid and pleasure club that was founded by folks that came out of that project

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Leo Gorman: and talked about the sundown rule in City Park. This is the 1970s, ’80s, that if you were a Black person, especially a Black young person you shouldn’t be walking around. So there’s a lot of interesting history both earlier during the colonial period and then more recent. Katrina hit and so the land it became kind of wild back here, and I think a lot of folks, including City Park administration, were looking for projects to help do something. And I think the timing and the founding of Grow Dat was I think there were some stars aligning, where I think the area that we’re on right now, we probably wouldn’t get sited here in 2025.

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Leo Gorman: The master planning process, which has been going on, really has seen this area as kind of an entryway to the northern side of the park, which it is. And we think we’re actually a

great fit for that kind of welcome to the northern side of the park and, that said, if we came to City Park and said, “Hey we want to build a farm here in City Park,” they probably wouldn’t put us here. But we feel so fortunate to be here because we have road access, we have a beautiful lagoon, our soil is pretty tough to grow on here, understanding that this was all a wetland and, arguably, there are some fields that are still kind of wetland featured.

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Leo Gorman: Drainage is an issue and we’ve made it work by adding a lot of organic material, composting, and practicing the key tenants of sustainable agriculture to build soil to grow.

Rien Fertel: And we’re definitely gonna discuss kinda more recent developments about this home site, about his base, but I wanna back up a bit and kinda get at the root of you and ask some questions about your background. I wanna ask where you grew up, where you’re from, and if there were any formative experiences or people come to mind that informed your activism, your progressivism, for lack of a better word, your politics?

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Leo Gorman: So I’m from Washington D.C. and I went to college in New Orleans, went to Tulane, and I went to a Jesuit high school and, I would say, the beginning of like my political formation started with the Jesuits, in which I learned about liberation theology, which is like

catholic social teaching around Jesus as an example as serving the poor. And when I got to Tulane I became interested in environmental justice issues, particularly in the Cancer Alley corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and that, I would say, is my first political activism was learning about and then attending protests

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Leo Gorman: against petrochemical companies in that corridor. There was also a superfund site called Agriculture Street, near the Desire area, that there was a movement to seek justice for. And then my senior thesis in anthropology was actually about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project to expand the Industrial Canal in the Lower Ninth Ward. So this is one of many attempts by the Corps to try to expand it or widen it or do something that would've dismantled or really disrupt a multiethnic, multiracial community, particularly in the Lower Nine. So I learned a lot.

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Leo Gorman: Pam Dashiell was one of the organizers of that movement. John Koeferl was another mentor. These are kinda like local heroes of mine that I did and continue to look up to that taught me a lot. And then I went to Latin America and I was just blown away, as I began to understand more of the impact the U.S. foreign policy, both military and economic policy, and how U.S. imperialism has shaped the current reality for Indigenous people, for women, for small

farmers, and then also for workers and farmers in the United States and that we're a part of a system that has causes and can be changed.

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Leo Gorman: And I worked for an organization called Witness for Peace, which tried to advocate for a more just economic policy toward Latin America, promoting trade agreements that were more beneficial to workers, the environment, to Indigenous people. And I learned Spanish and Portuguese and I was working a lot with farmers. That's where I started to really become inspired by farmers who were not just growing for themselves but growing for their communities whether they were selling or trading or giving. I have one man in particular named Don Zenon in Peru, in the highlands in the Altiplano region. This is where like potatoes are native to and quinoa and alpacas and llamas, a place I visited four times and spent time with him and his family

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Leo Gorman: and were very inspired by his ethos, his connection to the land. And then I also worked on farms in the U.S. My friend Pablo Elliott's farm outside of D.C. and Virginia. And then the first farm I worked at called Whistling Duck Farm in Southern Oregon, Mary and Vince Alionis are the owners, they still run that farm, mentors, amazing people, I learned a lot. And then Macon Fry, garden guy, here in New Orleans was my garden mentor. And then I've had so many other teachers and people who've inspired me along the way. But I would say that kind of

mix of understanding the importance of land, of land work, of growing food, and then of education.

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Leo Gorman: I love teaching, that was kind of my original path. I came back from Latin America and wanted to teach high school, and so I got an MA in History at UNO, specifically wanting to beef up my skills around American history. And I did and I was enjoying it and I had the opportunity to help start Grow Dat. And I'm glad I took the opportunity and I'm so grateful for an opportunity here at Grow Dat to find this intersection between teaching and history of place, history of land, cultural and environmental history of this place, with growing food. Cause this whole idea of like the past certainly informs our present and can help guide us into making wise choices.

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Rien Fertel: You graduated from Tulane in 2000; I graduated three years later. To the great annoyance of the city of New Orleans and, I think, especially of people who are New Orleanians, who are born in New Orleans, the vast majority of Tulane graduates do not stay in New Orleans, they leave. You chose to stay. I chose to stay. I am from just a few hours away and I had family roots here. But I've taught at Tulane on and off for many years and I enjoy maybe the one or two students per class that show some drive to stay in the city, and I latch onto them and I encourage

them the best I can. So I'm very interested when Tulane graduates chose to stay. Why did you choose to stay? You are rare and it's always been this way, it's just kind of a sad fact of that university's relationship with the city.

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Leo Gorman: Yeah, New Orleans, I couldn't really live anywhere else permanently. I like to say, I came back cause I graduated and then I was ready to go check out something else, especially to live abroad. And for a while I thought I was gonna live abroad, like make a family and maybe live in Mexico or Columbia. And then when my partner and I were looking at grad schools, we still had a lot of friends here, we came back we were like, "Oh, yeah, this is it." And that was in 2007 and then this is my home. I'm going back to D.C. next week and I like visiting there but every time I go back I'm like, "I love this place but this is not my home anymore."

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Leo Gorman: New Orleans is my home and my work is here, my children were born here, my friends are here, my core community is here. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. I have a lot of friends at Tulane, friends that have left, some of them stayed. It's just like where life takes you, but straight up I couldn't live in any other city in this country, no way.

Rien Fertel: And people who choose to stay in New Orleans kind of latch onto certain social, political, cultural aspects of the city and kind of call it their own. You mentioned your ties to a social aid and pleasure club. Can you talk a bit about that and how you joined that organization but also anything else that really you think of as bringing you into the fold of New Orleans. For a lot of people it's the basics, it's food and festivals and music. But what kind of brought you back here and kept you here?

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Leo Gorman: So what brought me back really was school. So I went to UNO to do my masters in history with the intention of teaching high school, which I did, two years at Warren Easton, which was an amazing experience. And so my masters work, my course work, a lot of it was around justice studies but especially of Black history, which I like to call — when you say Black history, I think there's Black history but Black history is all of our history.

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Leo Gorman: I'm not Black, I'm white. The way I like to talk about — people are like, "Why'd you study Black history?" Because, well first off, I'll say Black history is all of our history and it was important for me as a white person, also as a white person not from New Orleans teaching history to predominantly Black students, to understand that history the best I could, or the best I was able to at least study for it. And so through that journey I also became involved with the

politics and organizing around worker rights within the post-Katrina landscape. And so my coursework was primarily about slavery and civil rights, but my thesis was focused on Latino migration and then labor rights struggles from 2007 to 2009, ’10.

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Leo Gorman: In which wage theft and deportation threats and deportations and on the job injuries and malfeasance contractors were running rampant and there was a movement to help support those workers. And there was also movements at that time to defend beloved public institutions like public housing, specifically the St. Bernard Housing Project, which is right across the Bayou here. One of the ways I became involved in the original Big Seven Social Aid and Pleasure Club was through activism to defend the St. Bernard Housing Project.

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Leo Gorman: Which is in the Seventh Ward. And then other movements, such as the movement to save Charity Hospital. These are all kind of very disaster capitalism, as Naomi Klein would’ve described it, moments. Charter system, establishing charter schools across the city, these kind of blank slate moments that I felt really called to participate in. And so that along with my partner, Nikki, and other friends I made were really pivotal in building community and wanting to stay. And then Grow Dat of course and then I had children and then the rest is history.

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Leo Gorman: But yeah, I've had the great fortune and privilege, honor really, to parade with the Original Big Seven Social Aid and Pleasure Club, which is, for those that don't know, social and pleasure clubs are historically Black benevolent mutual aid societies that started, arguably even before Emancipation with some free people of color, and then proliferated in New Orleans and then elsewhere in the state and maybe in different forms in other states in the South, to support freed people with loans, with support on burials for a dignified funeral, for acting as a mutual aid resource when things got tough. And also in New Orleans to throw a party, particularly like the jazz funeral that would kind of evolve into the second line.

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Leo Gorman: So I met the president of this club, Ed Buckner, at a friend's wedding. Actually, Rien, you know Rachel Breunlin, who runs Neighborhood Story Project, it was her wedding that I met Ed. He invited me to participate and I said, "Ed, I'm white, I'm not from here." And he was like, "It's okay." And that's something I think about and really consider then and now. We just paraded two weeks ago, this is my eighteenth year, and people ask, "Oh, you're not from that culture?" And it's like, "No, I'm not." And the main way I feel comfortable is feeling not just accepted and encouraged by my club members but by people on the streets and then having that conversation

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Leo Gorman: and making those relationships and having that kind of knowledge that I am not of this culture. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I can't participate in it with folks in a respectful and in an invited kind of way. And so that's been a tremendous way, not just for me but, I think, for club members, for us to build community with each other. Something I'll share about that mixed with Grow Dat a little bit, was in — I think it was '15 or '16, I can't remember — we were having our annual parade, which is on Mother's Day, and there was a mass shooting and it was horrible.

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Leo Gorman: Our mutual friend, Rien, who has now passed, Pableaux Johnson, who was an amazing photographer and foodways person and friend, he was there, and it was a horrible afternoon. It was scary to — miraculously no one died that day but "Big Red," Deborah — I'm forgetting her last name now — Cotton died actually just two years ago I think of complications from that. And it was an interesting thing because the shooter was a young man, who actually I didn't know but I had connections to kind of indirectly. Just like New Orleans is small.

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Leo Gorman: Like we're always like two to three to four degrees removed, one of my students at Easton was pretty close to him. And it didn't just impact me but there were staff from Grow Dat who were at that event. And just like in any kind of thing that's beautiful or tragic anywhere, but I would say maybe even more so in New Orleans, that reverberation is felt because of close ties and these small degrees of separation. I remember that Sunday that happened and then that Monday we had a mourning kind of trauma, getting it out kind of circle here at the farm that was really really healing and helpful so.

Rien Fertel: For the men in the organization?

Leo Gorman: No, not for Big Seven, we had that somewhere else. But just for folks in the Grow Dat community who were at that parade.

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Rien Fertel: Right, right.

Leo Gorman: Umm, yeah.

Rien Fertel: I want to get back to Grow Dat. For the hundreds of young people who have come up through this organization, are there any stories that particularly stand out when you think about all the faces that have been through here?

Leo Gorman: Man, there are a bunch. I can think of two, I can think of several, but I'll just share two. One is our assistant farm manager, Alex Sanders. It's not common that young people want to go into farming from this and we're pretty clear in that this is not a vocational training project.

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Leo Gorman: We're not explicitly training young people to go into food policy or advocacy or farming or culinary arts. It's really kind of leadership through food and farming land work and whatever that leadership means for you, that's what it means. Alex came as a crew member, was assistant crew leader, became a farm fellow, which is like a full-time farm team role, and then became assistant farm manager about four years ago and takes on a lot of great responsibility. And it's not just an awesome story, coming up in the program and staying in an organization, it's just really grown and developed as a man, as a young man.

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Leo Gorman: And that's not just because of Grow Dat, of course, that's him. But I think he would say that Grow Dat has played a role in that. And another story that I'll share, actually I talked to him yesterday, Tre Spadoni. I talked to him from jail, he's been in prison for the last ten years and he's getting out, he's coming home on July 9th, and we're so excited for him and his family and to see what next steps he will take. He was one of the first graduates, I think year

three or four. He graduated from Grow Dat, came back and worked as an assistant crew leader and got charged with a crime that sent him to prison.

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Leo Gorman: Way longer than anybody should go, if you should go at all, and was one certainly one of the hardest things for him and his family but also for Grow Dat. I think I'm sharing this story because when I talked to him yesterday he still reflects fondly about Grow Dat and just reflects how much Grow Dat, even for the short amount of time he was here, the two years he was here, meant to him and has meant to him in prison, sparking his interest to start a garden there, where before no one had done that, inspired around his art, communication skills, knowledge seeking and just being curious. This is Tre but he would say that a lot of that is from Grow Dat, and we're excited to host him when he comes out.

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Rien Fertel: Thank you for sharing his story. You talked a bit about the layout of the front of the site with the repurposed storage units. Can you kind of give us a map of what the site looks like beyond that?

Leo Gorman: So our site is around seven acres. We're in City Park, just north of Interstate 610. Our southern border is Zachary Taylor Drive, our western border is the lagoon, our northern

border is this pathway that is also near the lagoon, that kind of curves around, and then our western border is between here towards Pan Am Stadium.

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Leo Gorman: And we're growing crops on about an acre and a half. And our campus footprint plus some other buildings is maybe half an acre or something. And everything else is either kind of seasonal wetland or forested or grass. So once we go north from our campus, on towards the west, we have the beautiful lagoon that was built in the '30s by WPA, we have gators and beautiful herons and egrets and ibis and all kinds of other wildlife. We have some old grove oaks, there's live oak which we call the big oak, which is probably 200 years old, and also some old grove cypress on site.

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Leo Gorman: We've got a bunch of beautiful palmetto. We've received a grant this last year from the National Fish and Wildlife, associated with USDA, to do invasive plant removal and rewilding or ecological restoration work of planting natives and incorporating more of that into our mission with young people. And as you walk around the farm, you'll see fields, you'll come across little kind of glens of paths of seasonally mowed grass where it's too low to grow, and then hammocks or little areas of trees that serve as habitat for animals and species. And it's a gorgeous space, I'm so grateful to be here on it.

Rien Fertel: What about the farming? What do those spaces look like?

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Leo Gorman: So our fields are unlike many farms, our fields are not standardized shape or sized. Why, because we're really tryna grow anywhere that is well-drained and makes sense to grow. And we're pretty close to that limit. We've done quite a bit of trial and error, of trying to grow in some spots and realizing its just too low. And without adding, bringing in hundreds of tons of fill or soil, which would be very expensive, it's just not possible. So we just choose to grow as much as we can very intensely on that area. So we have six fields that we are growing on. Our market season, we're growing from October to the end of June.

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Leo Gorman: So those are our annual crops. And then from July until September we're growing cover crops, which are crops that we're growing for the purpose not to harvest and eat but to replenish soil. So to fix nitrogen, to aerate soil with root penetration, to grow very leafy material that will function as biomass that, then once is mowed and incorporated will breakdown, attract microbes, and do the process of making new soil. And so in the summer we'll usually grow those things plus an assortment of some heat loving market crops like ginger, turmeric, roselle hibiscus, and sweet potatoes.

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Leo Gorman: The other time of the year, during our market season from October to June, we're growing most of the annual vegetables that you would find on a small market farm.

Rien Fertel: And where do those crops end up? You mentioned the CSA?

Leo Gorman: So we sell 80% of our produce and donate 20%. The 20% is donated to what we call "shared harvest partners," so these are mission-aligned, often times nonprofits or community organizations that are doing great work, such as VOTE, the Voice of the Experience, which supports formerly incarcerated people, First 72+, which has a similar mission, Community Kitchen, First Grace monthly kitchen, which do more cooking-hunger relief kind of work, and occasionally Second Harvest.

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Leo Gorman: And our market crops are going currently 100% to our CSA program, community supported agriculture, which is essentially a program in which customers sign up for the season, pay up front, either in one, two, or four installments, and are kind of in it to win it with us for the season. So they'll come once a week, Wednesday or Saturday, to pick up their box. And that box tends to include a lot of leafy greens but will also include rotational crops based on the time of

year. And there are add-ons like eggs from Local Cooling Farms. Next year we're gonna have a pork add-on. So when we first began the farm, we didn't have a CSA. CSA started in year four.

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Leo Gorman: We were principally selling our produce through Crescent City Farmers Market, when it had a Saturday market, and selling to restaurants. As the CSA program expanded, we gradually tapered out sales to restaurants and we stopped doing the market because they don't have one anymore on Saturdays, and we really wanted to do that one because that's when young people can go. Currently we have 160 CSA members and that's about our limit. We're about maxed out with land capacity and we have about 160 members, that is probably our ceiling.

Rien Fertel: So I want to wrap up by asking about recent events regarding the site. If New Orleanians weren't aware of Grow Dat,

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Rien Fertel: a lot more were certainly aware of the organization last year, 2024, and what I think of as a forced relocation scheme that popped up. Can you talk about that?

Leo Gorman: Sure, so this was one of the most challenging moments in the history of the organization on a variety of levels, personally, emotionally, and work-wise. Essentially, in December of 2023, we went to a community meeting at Warren Easton High School.

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Leo Gorman: Sorry, not a community meeting, it was a meeting sponsored by City Park, it was a second meeting as part of their master planning process. That previous June they had hired a firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh, MVVA out of Brooklyn, to lead their master planning process for City Park, and they had a meeting in September. And the second meeting in December was to showcase ideas for this master planning process. Now, very little input had been provided by the public before this December meeting and we went into that meeting and we saw three scenarios

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Leo Gorman: of a road, which they were calling “the promenade,” and all three would’ve bisected our current footprint with a vehicular road. And my personal response was surprise, because we had historically had a really good relationship with the park, and it just kind of came out of left field. We hadn’t been communicated with or asked our opinion about this or even given the heads up.

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Leo Gorman: We hadn't been given a heads up, so we left that meeting just really with a lot of questions about what's going on. Is this a done deal? If this is not a done deal, if it's just an idea, which the park was insisting, what is the community engagement process to decide what the priorities are? And so it was becoming clear that in the early months of 2024 that the park was serious about moving forward with this kind of project, and so we mobilized, we organized our supporters,

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Leo Gorman: CSA members, donors, community folks, in a series of meetings, both online and in person, and discussed ways that we can participate in the process and lobby and make our case and influence with the most efficacy we could muster with decision makers, including local politicians, the media, City Park board members, to, one, say no to a road, and, two, to at least allow Grow Dat to sit down with a park to negotiate a win-win new lease agreement.

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Leo Gorman: Cause our lease was running out in 2027. And so those months from January until May were very hectic, very stressful, and I'm so proud of the work that we did and also how New Orleans showed up, not even for Grow Dat but for young people and for projects that have a track record of success that are demonstratively supporting young people and the ecosystem in

New Orleans, and making it very clear that those kind of projects need to be not just supported but put in a position to thrive.

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Leo Gorman: And I think part of this was a response — a lot of the folks who were involved in the organizing effort were veterans from some of these movements that I had mentioned earlier, the movement to keep Charity Hospital open, the movement to protect public housing, the movement to stop the charterization of our school system. Now all three of those movements failed, however, they still cultivated organizers, a cadre of organizers and politically educated people, and a lot of those people understood that this is not a project to be messed with. And, two, there's tons of ways to keep Grow Dat where it is or to have Grow Dat thrive and still achieve some of the goals.

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Leo Gorman: And I also think in retrospect that it was clear that the process in which the master planning process was seeking and soliciting and then gleaning community impact was flawed. There wasn't enough time, the methodology at these events was insufficient at best and didn't feel accessible, democratic, or participatory. So I think the community was rebelling against that, kind of like we don't want to have something rammed down our throat, particularly in the

comments, like a public space. And then, two, Grow Dat as kind of representative of a beloved institution,

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Leo Gorman: a successful track record, one that is serving young people, please don't mess with this. And so we were able to build support and I think we got lucky, where we gained a lot of political support from certain members of city council, JP Morrell and others, we had a very strong showing in the media, and I think enough pressure built to where, in the early summer, I think the park started to understand that the whole fiasco was not worth it and that a pivot needed to be made. And so we were able to sign a new lease, what we consider a very strong lease, for ten-plus years with really good terms,

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Leo Gorman: really reasonable terms. The park has new leadership that we negotiated that lease with, that we have and continue to work really, really well with, they have a great team in place, and we're excited to move forward collaboratively. We've already started doing a variety of collaborations, and I'm so grateful. We've been participating in the more recent master planning process, which, I'll just add, is a 180 turn from I think what was happening last year and, in my opinion, has been very effective in soliciting and making more accessible these kind of

workshops to solicit community input, to really design landscapes and facilities an amenities that people want, that are by popular demand versus an imposed idea.

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Rien Fertel: Well I think that's a good place to end, I wanna thank you for sitting down and if you have any comments to bring us out but otherwise I just wanna thank you.

Leo Gorman: Thanks, Rien, this has been super fun, I really appreciate you and this project. Your questions were awesome, really insightful, and I think I'll just add, as a historian and also as someone who appreciates a good story, not that I'm a good story teller, but I think these kind of projects are so neat because you get to hear people's voices and I encourage folks to visit our farm, maybe listen to some of the other recordings in this series, cause the gardening and farming landscape of the city is such a rich history and expression, that it really helps to make New Orleans as unique as it is.

Rien Fertel: Alright, thank you so much.

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