



J Jackson-Beckham

Crafted for All

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Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. I am here via Zoom. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

J Jackson Beckham: Sure. My name is J Jackson-Beckham, and I am the Founder and Principal of Crafted for All, and the Founder and Executive Director of Craft x EDU, and have a few more titles in there that I'll hold onto for now.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure, for sure. First, could you tell us your birthdate, for the record?

J Jackson Beckham: Sure. I was born on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1977, in Manassas, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice! Did you grow up in Manassas, or did you move around?

J Jackson Beckham: I spent much of my early childhood there. I was there, oh gosh, until I was about ten or eleven, and then moved around a bit, but stayed really close in that Northern Virginia area until I finished high school and went away to college.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Who did you grow up with in your house? Parents, siblings?

J Jackson Beckham: I grew up in a family of five—my mother and father, and I have two older brothers. I am very much the oops baby, so my brothers are about ten and twelve years older than I am. So my very early childhood, my brothers were around, but by the time I was getting toward the end of elementary school, my brothers had left. One went to college, and the other went into the Army. Then shortly thereafter, my parents separated, and that's kind of what started my move around Northern Virginia.

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My father stayed in Manassas for a while, but my mother and I moved closer to D.C. She was working—she was doing some government subcontracting. We moved closer to her jobs. So I largely did my middle school—for me it was seven, eight—and high school years closer to the D.C. area.

Sarah Rodriguez: You said your mother was a contractor for the government. What did your father do?

J Jackson Beckham: He was an engineer, an electrical engineer. He worked for IBM for more or less his whole career.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. What was food like in your family growing up, through some of those changes, or—what are your food memories?

J Jackson Beckham: I was the only member of my family who was born in the D.C. suburbs of Virginia. Everybody else is from Alabama, and specifically from Clarke County, which is southwest Alabama.

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I always say it's kind of damn [sp] near Mississippi. My parents were born on a 40-acre plot, not insignificantly, in southern Alabama, educated in a one-room schoolhouse for most of their educations. They also did a lot of agricultural labor during what we would have seen as regular school hours. So they picked some cotton. My dad's mother was a laundress, and, as he kind of puts it, washed laundry for the white folks down the road. He often tagged along. My mother's parents—my mother is one of thirteen, so it was certainly a full-time job raising all the children.

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My maternal grandfather passed before I was even born, but I did get to meet my grandmother's second husband. He was also pretty old by the time I was a child. In both my parents' families, it sounded as if the kind of male heads of household were often migrant workers, so they were often away. My father's father died fairly early, so I never met him either. But my family brought lots of that kind of tradition and way of life with them, so even though we lived in the D.C. suburbs, we always had gardens. Always. Like large ones. [laughs] So, *many* of my food memories are tied to our gardens, our backyard gardens.

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As a child, my resentment of like the garden labor, agricultural labor, that I did like as chores—which is—the ridiculous irony, because I have huge gardens now. [laughs] I just remember lots of stuff that we ate from the garden, often with minimal processing. Sugar snap peas and green beans, I remember just eating. We had this melon and berry patch that wasn't really kept; it just was perennial, and you would just go to it. I remember just kind of walking around and eating berries, because they were there. I remember washing a lot of collard greens. And so I remember like the smell of greens as just a kind of household smell, always. We were busy, often, as a family unit. I was involved in sports. My brothers did sports and music and other things. Both my parents worked out of the house.

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So we often—we had this kind of informal rule that if you made food, you sort of just made enough so that if somebody who wasn't home but was going to be home later could like come

behind you, and reheat, or ladle some out, or whatever it was. So I just kind of remember this like persistent food, in our kitchen. Like we were kind of grazers, but I think it's because we were all just coming and going at different times.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Are there any specific dishes from your childhood that stand out?

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah. Certain things, we just had constantly, so they always stand out. I have this particular taste in cornbread, because we had it so often, and it was just *the* cornbread. So sweeter cornbreads are always odd to me, because I'm like, what? We did a savory cornbread. I remember that, for certain.

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I remember a very hearty, simple spaghetti dish that my mom often made, that almost was like—it kind of weirdly is reminiscent of like a Cincinnati chili that's like served on spaghetti noodles. I don't think she consciously had those kind of influences, but I just remember we had a lot of like really hearty foods, that were simple, but stretched a long way. As I got older, and my mom and I were kind of now this like micro-family, just me and her, when I was older, we often had ups and downs in kind of where we were financially. And my mom was just sort of a genius at stretching things and making food that I only kind of later realized was probably really, really inexpensive not seem like it was basic or inexpensive.

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We ate like tons of just dried beans, like 10-bean soup, different variations on a dried bean. And now, I kind of put together that that's like really inexpensive, high-quality protein. But at the time, I just was like, "Oh, we're going to eat those beans again. It's gonna be awesome."

Definitely those kind of dishes, those kind of hearty comfort foods, definitely stick out in my mind.

Sarah Rodriguez: That’s awesome. What was your exposure to beer? Was that something your parents drank? When did you first come across it?

J Jackson Beckham: It’s funny; in my like early life, I remember beer [laughs]—this is probably terrible to put into the record, but I remember my mom had this tiny little Japanese car called a Sapporo. I don’t even know if they make them anymore. This was the eighties. And she was like a Coors Light drinker, and my job was often to like sit in the passenger seat and hold her beer.

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And now that I’m thinking about it, I’m like, “Wait, what the hell!” But, you know, I definitely remember that, because I was just like, “What?” Like, “Why do I have to hold your purse? Why do I have to hold this beer? What the hell?” Like, just frustrated. But by the time I was kind of a middle school person, my mom’s kind of recommitment to her personal faith—she had stopped consuming alcohol. I kind of remember my household being more or less dry, after that time. So there was definitely no exposure to beer again until like a high school kid. Often for people who are under the legal age to drink in the U.S., beer is definitely like that first easy-to-get beverage. So I feel like I didn’t really get back to it until high school. And then it was not terribly enjoyable. I was just like, “This tastes gross.”

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So, it just kind of became this beverage of like youthful indiscretion, and like excessive consumption. And I feel like a lot of people's first introduction to beer is like that, as well.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it, I think. Take me up to high school. You go ahead and move. What comes after?

J Jackson Beckham: I'm sorry, can you repeat that last part?

Sarah Rodriguez: What comes after high school? Take me to that.

J Jackson Beckham: I was kind of a musical kid, and so in middle school, I was involved in orchestra. Other than sports, that was kind of my big committed extracurricular.

Sarah Rodriguez: What did you play?

J Jackson Beckham: I'm sorry?

Sarah Rodriguez: What did you play? Just curious.

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J Jackson Beckham: Cello and viola.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh! Okay! Very nice.

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah! And so, I guess at the time, I was in like a mentorship program for at-risk kids, and my eighth-grade algebra teacher happened to be my mentor. Her son played in the orchestra at a high school called Thomas Jefferson that was in my area. At the time, I didn't really understand kind of like magnet, charter, blah blah blah. I knew it was like this special school, but I didn't really know what was going on. She took me to an orchestra concert, one of her son's orchestra concerts one night, and the orchestra was just like breathtaking. They were so

good. The school itself I remember just had all these—I don't know, just made this physical, very visceral, physical impression, like, "Whoa, this place is very cool."

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Like I remember it having lots of glass, and like my school was like painted cinderblock. I don't know, it just seemed like this place. I'm sure at the time—again, people who were working and you don't realize they're working—as an educator who was involved in mentorship, I'm sure she was trying to introduce me to this like opportunity, or this possibility that I didn't even think about, or wasn't on my radar. But because of that, I decided I wanted to apply to the school, again like not even knowing that it was challenging to get into, or that it was a thing. So I ended up going to TJ, which this Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. And that was a *really* formative moment, I think, for two reasons. One, it sort of put me in a social space with other—with peers for whom going to college was like taking a step.

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It wasn't—it was just what everybody did. There was no consideration that you weren't going to go to college, among my peers. And I'm certain that's not something that would have happened for me had I attended high school somewhere else. Then secondarily, that school, because of its entrance criteria and just who hears about it, who gets prepared for it, et cetera, has just always had issues with a lack of representative diversity. And so, I was one of I believe four Black students in a class of 400. So, that's not a lot. [laughs] I think that was the first time I had ever really been, like on a daily basis, in a predominantly white space.

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So I think kind of both pieces of education were like really, really formative, in their own ways, for me. I developed a kind of assumption that I was going into college, not necessarily because my parents were pushing it really hard, but because it just was in the water where I went to school. I was still competing in athletics, thank goodness. Track and field was my strongest sport, but I competed in four other varsity sports in high school. So, definitely kind of had this jock identity. And it was super fortunate for me, because my final year of high school, I was outed, to my mother—I'm queer—and we would be estranged for lots and lots of years after that.

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So, I did a lot of couch surfing. I did a lot of staying with friends. And we were pretty much entirely estranged by the time I left to go to school. And the only reason I was really able to go is because I was on an athletic scholarship, because my parents weren't supporting—I was kind of estranged from my father as well. He had remarried and moved to New Jersey. So, college was not just like, "Oh, I think I'm going to do it because I want to better myself," or whatever. I think at that time, it was like—I graduated high school at seventeen, and I was like a seventeen-year-old trying to figure out how to live, kind of without the support of parents. Luckily I had lots of other folks in my life who were amazing and awesome and helped take care of me. But yeah, like a friend of a friend of a friend dropped me off in Blacksburg—because I went to Virginia Tech—with all my stuff, and like, that was it. It was like, "Welcome to life, kid." And I didn't go back home for lots of years after that.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That sounds challenging. What was college like? What did you major in? What was that experience like?

J Jackson Beckham: [laughs] That’s so funny. I’m just laughing, because I’m like—“the major situation.” I started off wanting to be an electrical engineer like my dad, so kind of applied into that track. And *very*—I don’t even think I had gotten there—kind of realized, “I don’t think that’s what I want to do.” Very quickly I turned towards geology. I loved the science, I loved the connection with outdoors.

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I just thought that’s what I wanted to do, and where I wanted to be. So, full-scale launched into that kind of science track when I got to school. Being a student athlete was probably the best thing that could have happened when I first got there, because life was so structured. Like, “Here’s when you wake up. Here’s when you work out. Here’s what you eat. Here’s when you go to class.” Someone’s going to call you and be like, “Did you go to class? Where’s your syllabus? Oh, it’s here? Do you have a test? Did you study? No? Get your butt to study hall. Okay, you got practice.” Like it was so structured, but for where I was in my life, I may have just fallen apart without that structure. It was always weird, because breaks would come around and people would be like, “Oh, are you going home?” And I’m like, “No.” A lot of times they would—hold on a second—a lot of times they would close the dorms during breaks, so I would have to like find a place to go, or find someone to stay with, and that was—that was a little bit odd, and a little bit awkward.

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But either way, I think that life being like that for my first year just really, really put me I think in the right place. Maybe my second year was taking some creative writing electives, and at the same time, starting to get exposed to what were the professional prospects for people who were

working in geology. What I kind of hadn't realized was that a lot of people who go through programs like that actually don't spend their lives looking at rocks in a museum setting, or becoming park rangers, and things like that. Lots of folks go into like fossil fuel extraction or working for like petroleum companies.

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And I just remember being like, "That's not what I want to do." Or, "I don't want to find the best place to put a new building." I know that stuff has to happen, but I just realized it wasn't what I wanted to do. It wasn't why I was in it. At the same time, I was taking some of these creative writing electives, and having a lot of success. Having a lot of people who were telling me, "Wow, you're good at this," or "You seem to really love this." So, yet another switch of majors. [laughs] I ended up switching up to English, with a concentration in creative writing. I think that's when college just really sunk in for me. I met people who were doing social justice work and activism. Nikki Giovanni was one of my professors.

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There was a wonderful speaking series that was put together through lots of folks in the arts and humanities, so I happened to see—Jane Goodall, bell hooks, Gloria Steinem all came and spoke. And so I definitely had this kind of like—awakening, right? Like to social justice work, and the implications of that work, and who we were. And I think everything I had understood about that kind of struggle or that kind of consciousness in the world was really personalized for me, prior to that. It was about *my* experience of being a queer person with my mother, or my experience of being one of very few Black kids in a predominantly white institution. Like it was all just—it

was for me, my personal experience, until then. Then I realized, oh, I'm just part of a pattern, part of these patterns of injustice or bias or bigotry or any of those things.

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And so, that was an important time. I ended up leaving the sports team, and I think a lot of it was—a lot of it was cultural issues, with me being like an openly queer young person, with some of my teammates. I think I was still just struggling to figure things out and understand where I was. Although sports still is like one of the most important parts of my life, and still is—at that time, I had to leave the team, because it was kind of where I was in life. So, I took a year off. Again, it was a young person tries to get head right. Went back to the D.C. area and worked in bars and restaurants for a year, before finally being like, “Nope, I think I was right with the college part.” And so I went back.

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Lucky for me, the school just lets you take a leave of absence without unenrolling and reenrolling. You just don't register for classes and you're good. When I went back, I was really focused. I kind of was like, “Okay. Now I know I want to be here. I want to be here intentionally. I'm not just trying to survive. I really want to be here.” And so, finished in 2000, with a degree in English, with a specialization in creative writing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Then what was your steps like after that? You said you had some time working in bars and restaurants. What was that like, or did you pivot, once you had gone back to school?

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah—um—no. [laughs]

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When I was in the D.C. area, I was working in bars and restaurants, mostly in Dupont Circle, so I was working in like gay bars. And that just helped. I had never really had much of a queer community. I started to form one at school, but I was just—it was too much. I couldn't find my tribe. Being kind of fully immersed in the D.C. gayborhood at the time was just really important for me. Like, yeah, I did a lot of partying, but I also just kind of found—just—my people, and that was super important. So when I went back, I had some experience working in bars and stuff, so that's actually what I did when I went back to school. Restaurants, bars, food service. But I was kind of cobbling it all together. I used to model for the Art Department. I worked at Burger King for a semester.

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I was just trying to make it work. And luckily, did, until it was time to go. So, that was great. I moved around a bit after school. I moved to New York, first. I was going to do an MFA in poetry, and actually started graduate school at CCNY, and lived in Fort Greene. Just kind of did the like, take the train, all that stuff. But very quickly I realized New York was not for me. Like, very, very quickly. So, I left New York after maybe eight months, max, and moved back to D.C., and really started to get reestablished back at home. I lived in the city, in Columbia Heights. At the time, it was not what it is now [laughs]. A lot of people didn't want to live in Columbia Heights, then. But it worked out for me.

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Got a job working in the affordable housing industry, which was great for a twenty-something-year-old. Again, I think I had the kind of mind for it at that time, because I was super interested in social justice work. But also the job allowed me to travel, a lot, and that was really helpful. As far as kind of where does the beer story pick up, when I was in my last year at Virginia Tech, I started working at this place called the Rivermill Map Company. I walked by there Sunday and took a little selfie, because I was just like, “Oh, this is sort of where it all started.” At the time it was the new place in town, which is hilarious, because now it just looks like it has been there for an eon. But it was just like a tap room with like burgers and fries.

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But they served a ton of taps of craft beer. Until that moment, I really didn’t know that kind of establishment existed. I was like, “Oh, this place just has like a ton of *fancy* beer.” Like I just thought that was bats [sp], and I didn’t know that that happened. At the end of the night, you could get a shift beer, or a shifty [sp], as a lot of industry people call them. As long as it was draft, you could pick what you wanted. So, everybody would say, “J, what do you want for your shifty?” And always, I would say, “What’s the most expensive thing we have on tap?” And so that’s how I started tasting beer that was not the Coors Light I held in my mom’s car, or the like Red Dog that we drank because we could get somebody’s older brother to get it for us, in high school.

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Or, even like what people were drinking—like Zima was really popular in the gay bars when I was working there, right? So this was my first like, “Oh!” Like, “This is like beer, but like, for grownups” was kind of my idea of what was happening. But super-fast, I was just like, “Why—

why am I drinking that other stuff? That stuff's terrible!" And so I very quickly kind of became the beer geek among my friends. When I graduated college, somebody gave me a subscription to the Michael Jackson Beer of the Month Club. Michael Jackson—not *that* Michael Jackson—the late Michael Jackson was a very respected and famous whiskey and beer writer, and so he had this curated case that you could get mailed to your house. That was kind of another big lightbulb moment, because it was like, "Oh. There's *beer* in *other* places that I can't get here."

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Just, again, mass produced beer had so shaped my opinion of like what it is, I didn't recognize that beer was like regional, and seasonal, and that it had—it was more like produce than it was like a packaged good, because you made certain things in certain seasons, or you can't get this beer here, because it's only there. And so, once I started traveling for the job I got when I was back in D.C., I just saw it immediately as an opportunity to taste beer in other places. I was in my young twenties, and traveling alone, and so beer bars, beer spots, like the one I had worked in in college, were kind of familiar territory. I just found that I had this thing with—this rapport automatically with other beer folks, and that it was not as awkward to strike up a conversation with a stranger, especially about beer, in those places.

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Whereas if I went to the Applebee's down the road, I'd be sitting by myself, like, you know, feeling awkward. So, craft beer became this kind of companion while I was traveling, during the years that I did that work. In the early 2000s, there was a kind of string of things that made me question whether I wanted to live in D.C. anymore. We had 9/11. And then for two weeks, the city was terrorized by snipers. And then we had anthrax at the Post Office.

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I kind of thought I was going to be in D.C. for a really long time, but I just—after that, I was like, “You know what? Maybe it’s time to go check somewhere else out.” So I ended up moving to the West Coast. I lived in L.A. for a little while, and then eventually settled in San Diego. That was around 2004. San Diego was beautiful, and happened to also be a really big hub of craft beer in the mid 2000s. You have Stone, and AleSmith, and some of the really formative breweries out there. I also decided to go back to school at that time, so I started a master’s degree program at San Diego State. So, things that happened while I was out there—I learned to homebrew, and that’s something I still do.

Sarah Rodriguez:      How did you get into that?

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J Jackson Beckham:    It’s weird; I always tell people that when you get into beer, it’s more like falling than deciding. So it’s like that thing where you just find yourself on the floor because you fell; it’s a little bit [laughs] like that. I just remember I was just kind of doing everything, because I was hungry to learn. So I started doing like beer dinners, and festivals. And there was this woman named Mary [sp] who had a little cheese shop that was connected to this really good craft beer bar, so they always did these cheese and beer pairings, and they were delightful. I think it just came along with being into beer. For me, I love learning, I love picking up new knowledge, I love crafts, like I love working with my hands, and so it just automatically was like, “Wait? You can make it? Oh yeah, we’re doin’ this.” Like I very much remember being excited about that possibility.



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I think those years when I was out there in San Diego, it just like—it was so fast, and it was so much. I really was just throwing myself entirely into the kind of beer culture, and what it could be. My master's degree was in Communication Studies. I think in my mind, I think what I was doing was like—it was dumb to try to be a poet because you're never going to make money, but what can you do to still work with language, and writing, and ideas, and visual imagery, but still make money. [laughs] So I went into Communication Studies. It was like dot-com boom time. That was kind of my idea, when I went. My [laughs]—but I had started—to help pay for grad school, I was a graduate teaching assistant. And man, within the first couple of times I taught classes, I was like, “Oh, I don't want to do any of that other crap. I am gonna teach.”

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Like the second I did it, I was like, “This is it. I am teaching.” It was very quickly after I started my master's degree program that I realized I was going to go for a PhD and enter the professoriate. I was just absolutely hooked when I was there. So those two parallel tracks take me back to the East Coast. San Diego was *beautiful*, it was wonderful, and I just knew it was not me. I was like, “This is not me. I'm an East Coaster.” And for the variety of it that I am, I'm a Southerner, and I just was kind of like, “This—this is not me.” I remember I asked for grits one time, and they gave me cream of wheat. And I was like, “Nope. This is not grits.”

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I was like, “I don't know—why you think this is grits, but this is not grits.” [laughs] So, I applied to and was accepted to the doctoral program in Communication Studies at UNC Chapel Hill, so

moved to Chapel Hill in 2017. I was actually living in Carrboro, which is the next town, next to it. Man, that was such a fun time. I was on a Reynolds Fellowship there, so that was wonderful, although I remember feeling like, “Oh, is that a tobacco family paying for my education? That’s weird.” But, you know, this is the South. [laughs] That was really cool. I was graduate teaching. Then for a little bit of side money, I had gotten a job at this place called Fifth Season Gardening Company, which was like—they kind of bill yourself [sp] as like a DIY garden store.

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So it was like organic gardening supplies, hydroponic equipment for everybody who’s growing tomatoes, at home, and then homebrew supply part. So I kind of call them brew and grows [sp]. But I got a job in the homebrew supply part, to sell homebrew supplies, teach classes, do things along those lines. It was super fun, and I think back now—I sold homebrew kits to some of the people who have breweries in North Carolina now, like way back in the day, and that’s kind of fun. Fifth Season was run by a couple, Ashley and Richard, who were both academics, but who had both more or less left academia to start up what they were doing.

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Again, you never really realize the significances until you look back, but seeing two really smart academic people not in academia but still influencing the world in the way they want to influence the world was super formative as well. They were super cool. They had a really young staff, lots of college kids, lots of college-aged folks who were not in college, who they trusted and like let do things. Like they let them be talented. And so, even though I was working there part-time, Richard and Ashley let me learn a lot. They let me do a lot. We were part of organizing this festival called Homebrew for Hunger, and it was basically like a homebrew festival—although, it

was probably more of a Pro-Am, because some of the pro breweries nearby would donate some beer for it as well.

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You paid twenty bucks, you tasted all the homebrew, and all the money went to the Food Bank. I think being part of organizing that, that was the first time I really kind of put my toe in the beer-for-social-good waters, and was like, “Hey, these beer people are into like helping out.” And that was pretty rad. Fifth Season has multiple stores. At the time, there were five in North Carolina and Virginia. And so, pretty quickly I started not just buying homebrew equipment for our store, but helping coordinate the buying for all the stores. Which meant talking to ingredient suppliers and getting things delivered to our warehouse, breaking it up, distributing it, getting on some of the back end.

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That allowed me to have some of my first industry conversations. Because the people who were providing raw ingredients for us as a chain of homebrew stores were also providing raw ingredients for breweries. I always laugh because I’m like, I guess my first kind of professional step into the industry was actually towards the allied trade side, like the people who serve the industry. So they always kind of have a soft spot in my heart, and I’m like, yeah, those suppliers are important. And they are part of what is a really complicated supply chain, as we've come to learn. So, I got to the point in my PhD program where I was getting through coursework, and it was like time to propose the dissertation project, and do those things, and I kind of had this moment where I was like, “I have been riding two sometimes parallel vehicles for a long time”—this really passionate love for beer spaces, and what beer can do; and like an academic trajectory

that has always been really informed by questions of power, and with a hard kind of lean-in to social justice.

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It was finally at that point where I was like, “I cannot do both anymore. They have to be the same thing.” For me to kind of figure out how to do this. [laughs] And so, I decided to write my doctoral dissertation about the brewing industry, and specifically about some of the things that I was seeing in the industry that didn’t make sense to me, in a lot of ways. By then, it’s 2008. We’re in the middle of the financial crisis. But we have this industry that is like getting *more* diverse, so it’s adding more firms, and more firms of different sizes.

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People are buying more of the product and paying more for it. So like at a time of sharp economic downturn, I’m like, “Why is that thing exploding?” When like everything else is screeching to a halt. I found that super interesting. And then craft breweries are, at least were for me, this weird microcosm of the country, that isolated some of what I think are really problematic social structures and social behaviors, but in this almost like encapsulated way, so I could pick it up and look at it. So like just having been me, showing up at events and festivals for years and years, and being the only one that looked like me, at the festival, having people ask me, “Where do I find the bathroom?” or whatever, I’m like, “I’m a festival attendee. I don’t work here.”

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That was definitely part of my experience in craft beer. And *also*, I loved it. And also, I felt very at home. And so, there was this tension that like—just like my high school years, I just didn't know how to unravel it. I think a lot of that dissertation project was wanting to be like, "Why does this happen? How does power get used in this way? Why does it come in these types of spaces? What can we do to change it?" They always say that like the best dissertation is a done dissertation, and so [laughs] I definitely kept the scope of my dissertation very narrow, for me.

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So it was about like questions of value, and some of those were economic values and some of them were social values. But lots of the questions that I had about the sociality of beer, and specifically its lack of different kinds of cultural diversity, became a little bit shelved. And so, I called those questions like my shadow dissertation. And the shadow dissertation got written through blog posts, and lots of other things I was doing to like not write my dissertation. [laughs] Turns out that those things caught some traction. And so I was asked to be on some podcasts about the brewing industry, and also to speak at the North Carolina Craft Brewers Guild's conference. So I gave a presentation there about diversity in the industry.

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When I [laughs]—when I finished the dissertation, I had done pretty well to position myself as kind of like a communication generalist, because I was like, "No one's going to hire you into academia with this weird specialty in beer, so like, you're a generalist. You can teach anything. And you can do that." So, I actually took a full-time job in a community college before I defended my dissertation. At that time, I had a young family, so my wife and my stepson who was three, four at the time, and I was like, "I can't just be here making a grad school salary,"

because I had to feed my family. So I took a full-time job at Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville, and worked there while I was finishing the dissertation. And so, actually defended my dissertation two years into working full time at the community college.

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Whooh! Community college is the best thing I could have done. Absolutely. The best thing I could have done. ‘Cause one, I just was like, I thought I knew how to teach; I absolutely had no idea what I was doing. Until you have to teach the same topic to a room that has homeschool kids who are fifteen and they're just ahead so they're taking college credit, and someone who has worked for ten years at Applebee's and they want to—I keep picking on Applebee's—at Outback Steakhouse—and they want to come back and do something, to a 72-year-old who is just bored and is just taking it for interest—I just realized, I was like, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know how to teach. And so I had to learn how to teach for real, which meant meeting lots of different people where they are, like not just meeting college kids where they're *supposed* to be. I also got to run a service learning program there, which was, again, for me an evolution of continuing to understand, how can we build service and advocacy and activism into like our everyday activities, whether it's having a beer or finishing a class.

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And so, I loved being there. PVCC is a wonderful place. I still have friends from that time. It was super fun, to do that. Ultimately I ended up leaving because I wanted to have more continuity with the students I interacted with. In the community college space, there's a lot of coming and going. At best, you have them for two years, and then you send them somewhere else. So, I took

a position at a small liberal arts college called Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Tiny, tiny school, and really, really invested in the kind of personal trajectory of every student.

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So, started there, on the tenure track, after I had the PhD in hand. Same thing—I was teaching—I was a department of two. Like our Communication Studies Department was me and my colleague, Jennifer [sp]. And—it was wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful. I did teach mostly kind of communication and media studies classes, but worked in some questions about food. While I was at PVCC, I taught a class or two every semester in the Fluvanna Correctional Facility for Women. So I still had a relationship with the prison, and was teaching over the summer at the prison, still. Did a project about prison food systems with some undergraduate students, like a summer research project.

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I think that was one of the wonderful parts about being at that college, is that I had the freedom to pursue my food- and beer-centered research interests, even though I was teaching in a kind of generalist communication and media studies program, and that was really exciting. In the middle of while I was working at Randolph, I had spoken at the North Carolina Brewers Guild Conference, and a woman named Julia Herz, who is now a very good friend of mine, was in attendance. She was at the time working for the Brewers Association, which is the nonprofit trade association for craft brewers in the U.S. She had seen my presentation about diversity in the industry and why it would be a boon to what we're trying to do in craft beer. And [laughs] Julia walks up to me that evening, and was like, “What are you going to do with that?”

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And I was like, “What is this lady talking about?” [laughs] I remember being like slightly intimidated. I just was like, “What’s your thing?” It stuck with me. And I don’t remember, but a couple months later, I get a call from someone who’s like, “Hey, the Brewers Association is looking to hire a diversity ambassador.” Which would be like somebody who’s going to work contract, part time, do speaking, do some research and data analysis and like write some best practice educational materials for their membership. So I talked with my dean and my faculty, and they were like, “Yeah, this is faculty consulting work. It’s consistent with your research interests. It supports—” So, I started doing that as a faculty consultant, at the time.

Sarah Rodriguez:      When was this?

J Jackson Beckham:    The first gig I did for them was 2018, May. It was at the Craft Brewers Conference in Nashville in 2018.

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J Jackson Beckham:    And [laughs] it was a wild ride. It was an absolutely wild ride. *I* had been having conversations about lack of diversity in craft beer for years, as an academic and sort of into the industry. But I think the *industry* at the time was really just first having its first sustained conversations about it. And, I was a busy human. [laughs] I was a really, really busy human. So, things started to come to a head around end of 2019, even back into the summer of 2019. And as much as I loved being at Randolph, I loved teaching there, I loved my kids, I realized there was a lot about higher education that I was not loving.

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I think it put me in a space of like ethical crisis. The ways that we use adjunct labor in higher ed was really hard for me. And in a department of two [laughs], your turn to be department chair has to happen. And so, talking to somebody else who worked just as hard as I did to get the requisite education to teach at the college level, and knowing that I have a tenure track role and a great salary, benefits package, and that other person worked just as hard, and I'm going to be like, "I'm going to give you \$3,000 to teach this class"—that was—just hard. Seeing how stratified and how wacky the power dynamics are in higher ed. And on the other side seeing a kid who maybe is just like—college wasn't their thing.

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Or, maybe it is, but it wasn't yet. Not prepared. But their family has more or less been pressured to take on a huge amount of debt for a path that they *think* is the only one, and maybe it's not. It was just really hard. It was hard to kind of be in it every day. And you know, college enrollment is going down; that's a nationwide trend. But always having to think about that, and that being the subtext to every decision about education, it just—it became a harder and harder place to be. And then I was in Lynchburg. Lynchburg, Virginia, is a hotbed of—not just evangelical kind of Christianity—which it is, because Liberty University is there—but that's also when it became kind of wedded to this populist right politics.

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So, Trump came to speak in Lynchburg twice when I was there. And being a [laughs] Black queer woman with my white wife and our biracial son in Lynchburg was—not pleasant. So, the Summer of 2019, I knew I was going to leave the academy. So I told them I was leaving, and then I was like, "But I'm working this year. I'll work this year contract." The idea was, I will

give you enough time to run a search and hire my replacement, while still working, so that my colleague didn't have to like try to run the department on her own. So that was a weird year, being like, "I'm leaving." If you know anything about higher ed, it's not like you can just change your mind [laughs] and be like, "Oh, I'll just get another tenure track job."

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It was a hard choice. So [laughs] that was the Summer of 2019. I worked the first semester. That second semester is basically me trying to kind of ramp down higher ed and ramp up what would become Crafted for All, so my own consultancy. Also leaving Lynchburg, buying a house in Richmond, whatever. And then [laughs] it was Spring 2020. [laughs] So, I left—I actually was overseas, came home sick. I don't know if I had COVID; I didn't know that COVID was a thing. I do remember when I left Manchester they asked me if I had been to mainland China, and I was like, "Why?" So, got home, I was sick, didn't teach for a week. Came back, taught my class for a week, spring break happened—and I never walked back in my building.

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Like that was—it was the most anticlimactic goodbye, because I was just like, "Oh. Well. Bye?" Right? So, it was—scary, for a year. Not for a year—for more—but very scary for a couple of months. I had launched a business on the kind of prospect of public speaking and onsite consulting. And, everything stopped. All the work I had scheduled for that whole year—was canceled. I honestly had no idea what I was going to do. Like we had just signed the mortgage on our new house, and I was just like, "This is bad." And then, June 2020 happened, and George Floyd—

Sarah Rodriguez: You were in Richmond by that point?

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah, I was in Richmond then.

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Yeah. George Floyd was murdered, and—the whole world—but, you know, my world, the craft brewing industry, everybody was like, “Whoa.” Right? It was a big, “Whoa.” I think a lot of people asked for the first time, like, “What are *we* doing? Are we complicit? Are we taking care of people? Why are people angry? There are people who work for me who are hurting.” The industry just had a moment where they were like, “Oh my gosh, we have to get it together.” So I went from like, “I don’t know what we’re going to do to eat,” to everyone is calling me for training, education about racial justice like in the space of weeks. And so I went from like, “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” to “I’ve never been this busy, and I’m not sure what I’m going to do,” but like on the other side.

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So it was a really bizarre piece of timing, because I had to like invent a business model as I did it.

Sarah Rodriguez: But just you, doing the work?

J Jackson Beckham: Just me, yeah, in the craft beer space. And to be honest, thinking back, I almost feel like I have hazy memories of the time. I wasn’t doing a lot of sleeping. And, yeah, it was a wild, wild time. Very soon after that, our industry had a massive reckoning with a culture of sexual assault, like industry wide. And so it was almost like we had these stacked crises in the

industry. And then, here at home, the debate about the Lee Monument on Monument Road, which is like literally a block over there, was in the national spotlight.

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There were Proud Boys kind of walking our streets, at times. Richmond had nights of rioting. It was just—gosh, it was such a time, right? Like it was just—it was such a time, to be here, but also to, at the same time, have an eye on the rest of the country. So I think now, where I am, I sort of [laughs]—the like settling, from this like massive time of crisis, and we're trying to kind of figure out, like, what does it mean to do this work and just sustain it, rather than always be responding to something that's happening?

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Unfortunately, I think we're at a time and place where we are always going to be responding to something that's happening. But nonetheless, it's a world where we have to kind of figure out how we organize around these things, and sustain that organization.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. I want to make sure that I'm being respectful of your time. I did want to ask—I'm trying to think of the best way to word this, but—you have this connection to of course the national brewing industry, and you've traveled around, you've seen a lot of different regional brewery cultures. What is it about Richmond? Is there a Southern brewing culture, a Southern brewing industry?

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What are your thoughts maybe on like regional identity of beer and brewery culture, or the industry?

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah, super interesting question. There are certainly regional brewing cultures. *And*, in some ways, they're all like variations of a broader American craft brewing culture. So you see these kind of like hybrid, or like kind of blended cultural identities, as it comes to brewing spaces. I think Richmond had in some ways like the perfect storm for its boom that was on some hand really great, and on another hand, a little bit problematic.

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Nationally—this is no secret to anybody who has looked at the craft beer scene at all—but nationally, craft brewing is an industry that has specifically and significantly benefited from gentrification. Like, absolutely no doubt. And some of that has to do with zoning practice, so like where can you find large, light manufacturing property and structure. So there is something not just about like—like it's the type of property that it has to go into. And so a lot of times, these old downtown areas that were often cut off by parkways, the old Black Wall Streets and districts like that, were full of this property that was often times empty, or being underutilized.

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Communities suffering from blight often times are like, “Yes! Put something in the building. Because right now it's a social and environmental hazard.” On the other hand, it pushed a lot of displacement, right? And a lot of people who worked in the breweries were not the people who lived down the street. So, Richmond has some neighborhoods, and if you look at where our neighborhoods are clustered, and communities like Scott's Addition, now in Fulton, those are areas that are some of the most rapidly and aggressively gentrifying, gentrified, in this area. Manchester, Southwest City, you're seeing it now. The availability of that property and its locations in Richmond was certainly part of the boon.

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I think second, though, Richmond I think has this very specific way of doing its culinary culture. And that's like we do want to do elevated things from a kind of sensory and aesthetic perspective. Like, we have a beautiful arts scene here. We have wonderful history. We have great culinary talent here. But I think we've never really gone for the like elite fine dining thing so much in Richmond. Like we have James Beard Award-winning bakeries, right? Or like people who make hand pies, so like we want it creative and wonderful and experiential, but I think Richmond also has a little bit of—it's like, "But yeah, this is still a kind of agro-industrial place, and we're not interested in being New York. We're not interested in being Chicago. Like, we kind of want to do it the way we do it."

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And craft beer really fits that identity really well. Beer is—in its way, it's an everyperson's beverage. It has always been the kind of agricultural blue collar like laborer beverage throughout history. So it kind of really fit with this like, yeah, we want it to be like really, really high quality, we want it to express both our creativity and the space that we're in, but we want it to be accessible as well. That ethos, I think, was just perfect for beer to become like a Richmond staple. I think our breweries, if you come to Richmond, reflect this.

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I love that our breweries here are a little bit more distinctive than those I think I see most other places. By that, I mean, there does tend to be [laughs] a kind of like craft brewery aesthetic, where it's like I maybe have some barrels, and that bar was made out of old pallets, and people come here and do yoga. You know. Which is great, if you love that. But I think Richmond has

some breweries that are doing different stuff, and I think our community supports that in really interesting ways. I also love that Virginia did a really, really smart thing when it allowed for brewery licensing under a farm brewery license. This gives you a slightly faster path to startup. And there are some requirements about how much agricultural product you have to sell, and hours you have to keep open, et cetera, but it has given the entire state and region a little bit more of a connection to an agricultural supply chain.

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Even if it's not for the central ingredients of brewing, it might just be like, "We're going to add this to things," or "We're going to produce this seasonal while we have pawpaws," or while we have whatever. It has allowed some folks around here to do that. And because we also have some really wonderful apple growing regions in Virginia, you also see a little bit more experimentation with cider, in our breweries, a little bit more experimentation with wine-making. I think again that has to do with Virginia's apple-growing regions and how close they are and how connected everybody is. Those things certainly give us a bit of regionality about what we're doing.

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I think the other thing is that Richmonders [laughs] are really proud to be Richmonders, in their way. And so, you do see a lot of our small breweries really leaning into being from Richmond and for Richmond. That, I think if you're into beer here, I don't know, creates a little bit of a sense of solidarity, a little bit of a communal feeling, where you're like, "Oh, I'm drinking this Richmond beer called Richbrau." You know. [laughs] And I don't know, it just like is *our* thing. So, yeah, there are certainly global and national trends, like gentrification, like things along those

lines. But ways that local communities are kind of transforming their industries in ways that are really kind of about a sense of place.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. Then maybe my last question would be—where do you see the industry going? What are some next steps? And particularly focusing on, like you mentioned, that the industry has really had to kind of face itself when it comes to problems within personnel or within the community. What do you see as coming down the pipeline for that?

J Jackson Beckham: Yeah, really good question. I'll kind of start top level and work down. We're approaching 10,000 breweries in the U.S. And I don't say that lightly. Like the first draft of my dissertation, I think the number was around two or three thousand. So this has happened very fast.

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In the past couple of years, even prior to COVID, what we've seen is a significant slowing of industry growth. For a while there, it was double digits every year; double digits in number of firms and production volume. Now, we're just seeing what I think is a maturing industry. We're not going to have double-digit percent breweries added every year anymore. It might actually go flat. We're at about 4% now, and it might go flat. And because of that, there's more competition than ever, and there is more pressure to distinguish yourself. Because, look, I go to bottle shops a lot, and sometimes I go in and I'm like, "Ugh." Like, too many choices. And so, one of the ways that I think brewers are going to have to understand they have to distinguish themselves is



through connections with their communities and by being excellent employers, and by having welcoming cultures that people want to be part of.

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Because lots of people can make very good beer [laughs], right? People are like, “Oh, I’ll just make the best liquid.” I’m like, “Everybody can make really good beer.” So, I think this question is really about like how do I exist, as a business, in this place, and this space, and with these people. In my consultancy, in Crafted for All, we do a lot of teaching about what we call culturally regenerative organizations, and we borrow from ideas about regenerative agriculture. In the same way, we think of a culturally regenerative organization as one that adds value, health, and wealth back to its community.

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To do so, you really have to stop looking at the walls of your business as imporous. Like they have to be permeable boundaries. You have to see yourself as part of the physical and cultural ecosystem of the community where you're located, and think about ways, again, to not just leverage that health, and not just leverage the talents of the people as like talent pool, but like, how do we make this an exchange that is mutually beneficial for everyone here? And that’s thinking about your community as dependent neighbors, interdependent neighbors, not just potential consumers and not just potential employees. We are all kind of interdependent neighbors in this broader ecosystem. And thinking about the implications of your supply chain, right? What does it look like up and down?

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So I think personally I can say I feel like I'm already seeing this. I'm already seeing breweries who are differentiating themselves because of the cultures that they maintain. And it's not just internal cultures. The culture extends beyond the walls and the boundary of the brewery into the schools, sometimes even churches, to the neighbors. And understanding that you have to kind of be part of the broader ecosystem of what's happening. Because that closed-wall brewery is—I don't think it's going to survive in a competitive environment anymore. I think the other piece—and this is personally where a lot of my dogged commitment [laughs] to beer comes from—a brewery is an organization that regularly employs folks who may not have finished high school, and also people who have PhDs in microbiology and work in the yeast lab.

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So, I always tell people, “There is a career-oriented opportunity for you in craft beer, whether you got a GED or a PhD.” And 85% of Americans live within ten miles of a craft brewery. So, they are *everywhere*. They are not just packed into Silicon Valley, or in the Rust Belt. It isn't a regional industry. It is actually *truly* everywhere. And when I think about how much impact you can make with an industry that is that dispersed across our country and that interacts with people in so many different professional lines of work, in so many social circles, in so many different geographies—you have breweries near resorts, and breweries near farms, and breweries in the middle of the city, right?

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They're everywhere. I don't know a better way to reach that many people, or provide opportunities for that many people. Higher ed wasn't it. Like [laughs] I was reaching this tiny little slice of the States. And I think for me that's what's *so* compelling about this particular

industry. It allows us to be connected in ways that are really hard to rival. And I think that's not just beer; that's food, too, right? And I think that's one of the important pieces of why I think this belongs in our broader culinary traditions—because it does that kind of connecting and democratizing work that food does.

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It also holds its contradictions and its problematic power structures, but that comes with the potential. I think for me, that's definitely why beer ended up being kind of where I landed, and why everything else that I went through, whether it was degrees, or working in higher education, or the type of academic work I've done, the research that I've done, it seems like a weird and winding road to get you to beer, but it absolutely was the road, and I'm glad that this is where it ended up.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for this. This has been really great. Is there any last thoughts or anything you want to share before we go ahead and wrap up? We covered a lot.

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J Jackson Beckham: Yeah, I would just say the last thing I would wrap up is—there's just a lot of energy around this intersection of beer, adult beverage more broadly, and addressing disparities and inequity. I do a ton of board service, and I always think of those organizations as like maybe the frontier of this kind of like social edge of what we're doing there. I'm on the board of the Michael Jackson Foundation for Brewing and Distilling. So like, back to Michael Jackson, funny enough. We give full academic scholarships to BIPOC individuals who are

pursuing careers in brewing or distilling. I'm the president of the board of Safe Bars, and we do gender-based violence prevention in beverage alcohol serving spaces.

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There's a regional chapter of Safe Bars in Richmond that is super active, and they've done tons of training with breweries and bars all over the city. I think that's part of Richmond, too. Like I think that's part of our beverage alcohol culture, is that—I think it is really self-aware. I think the traction that Safe Bars has here says a lot about how our food service industry works. Then most recently I joined the board of the National Black Brewers Association, and we're really looking at some of the questions I feel like I've been looking at for years, and it's awesome to have now a group of other people to be like, "We can all do this together." One of the things that made craft beer such a darling is that it really had this kind of like anticorporate ethos, and it's just people who left their job at the bank, and now they're starting a brewery. You know?

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It has this kind of like "F the man," whatever, fun, vibe. But that was only ever really accessible to certain people, like practically. And so, unfortunately that narrative has created almost like an informal rulebook of how one starts a brewery, and that informal rulebook [laughs] really is dependent upon having access to capital, whether you have it in the form of generational wealth or the ability to walk in a bank and get a huge amount of credit. If you don't have generational wealth, or you happen to be somewhere where lending discrimination is common, the kind of standard how-to-brewery is not going to work for you.

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I think one of the things the National Black Brewers Association, we're poised to kind of take on, is like, let's retell that—reimagine that story, about what does it mean to be an entrepreneur in this business, and let's open up some doors in terms of, how do we produce more access to capital? How do we leverage relationships, not just with traditional banks, but with non-profit lenders, and with people who are doing microloans and things along those lines. And how do we think about having a stake and ownership in property, and places where so many of our folks have been displaced in cities like Richmond and Durham and some of the places that have become craft beer centers, especially in the South.

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So, all of those service projects I do, I think they also represent maybe this future edge of what's going forward. And the fact that it's now being supported by nonprofit infrastructure but also people who aren't being cute or vague about their ideas about the ways that beer can be part of a kind of social and economic reclamation project. It's not just like, "Oh, this would be good," because you just—you don't want your brewery to seem a little bit racist. It's like, no, let's do actually some restorative justice work in our industry. Or, let's take down a problem that's bigger than beer, *with* beer. Right? Like, let's be ambitious about that. And I think that's also in our future, and it's *really* exciting.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That *is* exciting. Awesome. Well, thank you so much again. I'm going to go ahead and stop recording on my end.

[End]