



**Teresa O'Donnell**

**Houston, TX**

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Evan Stern: Today is Monday, March 31st, it's 2:18 p.m. and we are recording in Houston, Texas. Now, to begin, for the record, could you please tell us your name and occupation?

Teresa O'Donnell: Teresa O'Donnell, and retired.

Evan Stern: Teresa, no matter whom I'm speaking with, I always like to start off by asking if you could describe for us your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up?

Teresa O'Donnell: I grew up not very far from where I live right now, in a little town called Bellaire, Texas, that's surrounded by Houston, Texas. A three-bedroom house, five kids, one bathroom, across the street from the elementary school I went to. Very much a family neighborhood in the '50s and '60s.

Evan Stern: I guess, reaching back into your family history, could you tell us about how your family came to settle in Texas and ended up in Houston?

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Teresa O'Donnell: Well, my father is from Houston, and my mother's family was from Oklahoma, and it was job-related. A lot of my grandfather's siblings moved down here, and kind of beckoned them, and they ended up following. So, my grandfather worked in the printing industry, and my grandma stayed home.

Evan Stern: I think that's the story of Houston, you know, people don't move to Houston in the way that people move to Los Angeles, New York, or even Austin, for that matter. But was gardening a thing at all in your household, growing up?

Teresa O'Donnell: No.

Evan Stern: If you describe Houston to someone who's never been here before, what would you say?

Teresa O'Donnell: A big, sprawling, multicultural melting pot of lots of good restaurants, lots of fun people, and really hot in the summer.

Evan Stern: Yes, to all of that.

Teresa O'Donnell: [Laughter]

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Evan Stern: But, as I understand, you began your career as a pediatric nurse, and then you shifted into business. Can you tell us a little bit about that journey?

Teresa O'Donnell: Sure. So, I started out as a pediatric ICU nurse. It's kind of a young person's job. It's pretty intense. So, I lasted about five years, and decided to go back to school and do something else. My choices were a lawyer or go into business, so get a legal degree or get a business, master's in business.

[Unrelated conversation]

Teresa O'Donnell: So, just the entrance exam for the MBA was easier than the one for law school. So, I chose the [laughter] business route, went back and got an MBA, and ended up being a manager for a visiting nurse association, so kind of took the managerial route. Do you want me to go on with my career?

Teresa O'Donnell: Okay.

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Then about three years later, my brother came to me and wanted to know if I wanted to help him start a software company. I really was not going anywhere in the current job that I was in. I was just kind of a placeholder. So, I said, "Sure." So, he kept his job 'cause he had three kids at the time, and he kept his main job, and I helped-- pretty much started the company with his wife. So, it was kind of a [laughter] a code in the attic kind of business to begin with, and kind of fly by the seat of our pants, but we made it work.

Evan Stern: My father was in the software industry for years, ended up at BMC and everything.

Teresa O'Donnell: Yeah.

Evan Stern: But what made your brother's company unique, and how did the experience of working there shape you?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, it was unique because we were offering a product that wasn't available.

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We were catering to corporate legal departments, their general counsel, and their corporate secretary. There was hardly anything that automated those departments. So, my brother had had some experience in the company he was working for, which was Pennzoil, and they had developed something they thought could be marketed. So, we rewrote that product, came to some sort of agreement with Pennzoil, and started selling it. We already had a few customers kind of when we started 'cause there's some big oil companies in Houston that wanted it. It was a family company, so me and my brother and my sister-in-law to begin with, so that dynamic was interesting. All kinds of family drama came up in it. But, also, it bonded us, and probably our

trust in each other helped us get it founded. Then, as we started adding on people, our relationship became diluted more because there were more people between us. But it was an interesting dynamic, and we ran it for 27 years.

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So, even though it was sometimes a struggle, most of the time it was great, and it was successful.

Evan Stern: At some point, you're working at the company and, while you're there, you discovered a book called *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*. What can you tell us about that book, its impact on the company and you?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well that book arose because my brother, who was the president and CEO, wanted to create-- he's a Christian, and he wanted-- so am I. He wanted to create an environment for his employees that was the best environment he could think of. So, he did a lot of research, and this book popped up. What's it called, *The Five Something of Wellbeing*?

Evan Stern: *The Five Essential Elements*.

Teresa O'Donnell: *Five Essential Elements of Wellbeing*. So, we kind of got into committees in the company, so it was financial, and I can't remember everything, but one of 'em was community outreach.

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So, these were-- if you had these five elements in your life in good balance, you would have a sense of well-being, so that's what we were out for, was to create well-being in all our employees. We hired a chef, so we prepared lunches every day, brought a yoga teacher in.

Evan Stern: What were the five essential elements?

Teresa O'Donnell: You would ask me that. I can't remember.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

Teresa O'Donnell: I'm sure it's physical health. I don't remember if spiritual health was one of 'em. Financial well-being was one. Community involvement was one. I'd have to get the book out, I'm sorry [laughter].

Evan Stern: That's all right.

Teresa O'Donnell: I'm not sure where it is [laughter]. But, anyways, I was looking at what we could do in the community, so that was kind of my role. I didn't know, but I was looking around, and so my eyes were open to possibilities. Do you want me to go into that now?

Evan Stern: Sure, yeah.

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But the concept of community well-being is what you were tasked with? I mean--

Teresa O'Donnell: Well--

Evan Stern: Can you say anything about what community well-being is?

Teresa O'Donnell: It's more the sense that when you are giving back to the community, you get a sense of purpose, so that increases the well-being of an individual, to be giving back, not always taking, or worrying about what's going on with you, but actually focus on other people, maybe people that need help. So, that's where that well-being component comes in is essential for a well-rounded person, to be giving back.

Evan Stern: So, you're thinking about ways in which you can help the community. Around 2010, if I'm not mistaken, you read an article in the *Chronicle* about Iraqi refugees resettling in Houston. Could you tell us about that article and how it got you thinking?

Teresa O'Donnell: Yes. So, I'm kind of an empath. I'm always concerned about people, especially if I hear about 'em.

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I had known that there were people in Iraq that had helped us in the war, as translators or drivers or whatever, that had not been allowed to leave Iraq. So, I felt their pain that they were in danger. So, I was happy to hear that we had finally opened up our doors to let them come in. So, the article in the paper was about the Iraqi refugees that were resettling here, having trouble finding work. There were doctors and lawyers and engineers, so they were highly educated. I thought, well, I work for a software company. We're all highly educated. It could be we just need to do mock interviews with them. Maybe they didn't get to bring appropriate work attire when they came. We could help 'em with that. Boost their résumés. I just thought, well, we'll just do some professional development, and we'll get 'em a job. We probably know lawyers and engineers and doctors, and we could [laughter] find some ways in for them.

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So, I called up Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Program, and I ask them, well, actually, I told them my idea [laughter]. They said, "Yes, Iraqi refugees are having trouble resettling, but who's really having trouble resettling are refugees that are arriving here without a command of the English language and no marketable job skills." I was like, "Oh [laughter], that sounds daunting." Within the same breath, she asked me to accompany her on an airport pickup. So,

within a few days, I found myself at Hobby Airport in Houston at midnight, picking up a family. I think there were nine of 'em from Somalia.

Evan Stern: Before you picked them up, too, you started, I think you started doing some research and reading about everything that refugees had to go through before making it to the airport.

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Teresa O'Donnell: Well, I'm not sure what the what the sequence was. To tell you the truth, I didn't even know refugees were in Houston. This was just mind-opening to me. I mean, I thought maybe a scattering, surely, but I wasn't aware of the refugee situation, and how many people were fleeing their countries. I can't remember the exact amount, but we were settling, I think, thousands of refugees a year in Houston. So, the whole process was an education process for me [laughter], every step of the way. So, the picking 'em up from the airport was more, instead of reading about it, I was seeing the situation. To see something and to see the look on people's faces and to start hearing a little bit of the story-- you know, you're a storyteller, right? It just opened my heart up. Their story was-- I don't know all of it.

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But I do know they got off that plane, they had big badges on 'em that identified 'em as UN refugees. So, they'd been traveling from wherever they came from, through [laughter] all these plane flights with this big badge on them, and carrying a UN refugee-issued bag that had everything that they owned in this small duffel bag. Then the family, it was like a mother and father, and then there were, like, two unaccompanied minors, which I don't know if they were part of the family. They were teenagers. So, they went to one place, and then this family settled

into an apartment complex. So, I got to go with them, see them settle into an apartment complex.

[Laughter] It was just very interesting to see the kind of things that they were unaware of, I mean, just even how to turn the hot water on, how to use the stove, the microwave.

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Their house was filled with food, which was lovely, so they were very excited, they had all this food in the house. They just became animated. I know they hadn't slept probably [laughter] in two or three days, or not very well anyway. But, anyway, I never really followed up with that family.

Evan Stern: This was a family from Somalia. Correct?

Teresa O'Donnell: Yes, I believe they were from Somalia. So, anyway, I just helped settle 'em in, and then went home. So, my heart was touched, and I was learning all this information about unsettled people that were having to leave their countries. Then I think the next thing that happened was I saw a PBS special about the actress Tippi Hedren, and how she had befriended Vietnamese refugees in the '70s outside Sacramento.

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So, I guess she was living nearby. She'd go out once a week to visit them, the women, and she'd made friends with them. One day, when she was out there, they were admiring her nails. So, she went back and asked her manicurist if she would come out and teach the ladies how to do their own nails. And so she did, and then it ended up being kind of a training ground, and all these women were learning how to do nails. It started this nail revolution [laughter], this business that still exists, and it's a billion-dollar industry that is-- I don't think it's completely run by Vietnamese, but a good proportion of 'em are still run by Vietnamese, and what started with

Tippi Hedren and her manicurist. So, I was very inspired by that story, and I was just thinking, you know, what kind of industry--? Because, remember, at first, I was just gonna help the well-educated [laughter] get a job, and then move 'em on their way.

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But now it was more like, well, what can we do now to develop an industry similar to what Tippi Hedren did? So, I assembled my brother, and I-- he was helping-- assembled a bunch of people that we thought might be able to figure this out, and really nobody could come [laughter]-- I mean, we were like, well, dry cleaning pickup, I think that's done already [laughter]. So, it was just kind of like we're just kind of really not coming up with much. So, then I read another article in the *Chronicle* by one of the founders of Urban Harvest, Bob Randall. He mentioned a term that I'd never heard of, called market gardening, and seemed to imply you could make a living at it. So, I called him, and I got him on the phone right away, and I said, "What are you talking about here [laughter]?"

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He explained to me that he thought a person in Houston could generate a living wage for a family on small acreage because there's a huge demand for local produce, and we have a 12-month growing cycle. Yeah, it gets hot, very hot here, but you can still grow. You can still grow produce. So, I said, "Well, how much acreage?" He said, "I don't know, somewhere like a half an acre to an acre." So, I thought, well, that's interesting. So, I called back Catholic Charities, and I ask, "Are these refugees that you're talking about farmers?" She said, "Yes, they're all farmers." [Laughter] I was like, "Oh, okay." So, I am not a farmer, I'm barely a grower of anything, but I didn't need to be. I'm a businesswoman and former nurse. So, my brother then,

he had a friend that was a deacon at a church that he knew they had some land. So, he contacted them.

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They were interested because they had some land that they were gonna put a parking lot on but decided not to, so they were open to the idea.

[Unrelated conversation]

Evan Stern: So, you discover the concept of market gardening. You're armed with this, and you get to work. So, you start speaking with Urban Harvest, and I think you get to know a few market gardeners themselves.

Teresa O'Donnell: Yes.

Evan Stern: Can you take us maybe through who they were, and how you got to know them, and what you did together at the very beginning?

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Teresa O'Donnell: Sure. So, I think that was one of the first things we did is contact Urban Harvest. Their president at the time-- and I'm forgetting his name-- gave us the names of two people that acted as contact trainers for Urban Harvest. They were actually market gardening in their backyard, and selling at an Urban Harvest market. So, I contacted them and met with them, and they have, much to my surprise, have always wanted to promote local growing in Houston. So, they were super excited that this actually might be the key to getting more farming going in Houston on small scales. So, they agreed to train, to be our trainers.

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At the same time that this is going on, we're working with the church, who had the three acres, and they are introducing us to kind of an informal pastor that's at their church, leading services for refugees. I think they were all speaking French, so he was probably a French speaker from the Congo. So, they introduced us to 14 refugees. I can still remember being in the church room, when my brother and I are in there with the 14 people, and they're bringing their family and their kids, and lots of pictures to show us that they can grow things. They're super excited and they definitely want to try it. We're telling them [laughter], because we don't know what we're doing, we're telling them that they're gonna be pioneers. We do not have a roadmap for this program. We cannot guarantee it's gonna be successful. Are they sure they wanna try it? I mean, we just kept saying the word "pioneers." [Laughter] I don't know what it translated into French, but they were all like, "Yes, yes, we wanna try it."

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So, there were some issues with getting the land in the beginning because the church had to go through a vote, I guess, and they had just had whatever congregational meeting that would've voted on it, and we had to wait six more months until the next congregational meeting. So, we kind of had some momentum going, and then it just stopped, which was pretty good 'cause we were having a really bad drought in Houston. The sidewalks were cracking, the streets were cracking, so it would've been very difficult to start the project then anyway. So, anyway, there were some starts and stops in the program. But when we finally got permission, we decided we would build out one acre. It was a three-acre piece of property. We'd build out one acre as part of the training program, and train everybody on Saturdays for a year, and then sell the product, sell the produce, and see-- you know.

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He thought we could generate a living wage. Well, let's sell produce for a year, and see if we can.

Evan Stern: But before we get to that, though, what all were you training them in on those Saturdays?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, we were building raised beds, which was very unfamiliar to them, and we were buying organic soil and filling all the beds with organic soil. We were teaching them how to grow without pesticides, so how to organically take care of pests. We were also teaching them about the produce that could be raised here and what the market wanted. So, we spent time at the markets, showing the farmers. When we started actually producing, we just took them to market. So, they would be growing and selling, and they would rotate through the market.

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So, you could just have two or three farmers at the market at a time. So, most of 'em would be in a training class on the farm, but then some of 'em would be rotating Saturday mornings through the market, because it became very important that they knew what would sell, and then how to interact with customers. So, that was a lot of the training there.

Evan Stern: Do you remember, were there maybe any crops that they wanted to grow that maybe they couldn't grow in Houston, or were there any crops that they already knew how to grow? Do you remember anything like that?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, they always grew what they wanted to grow. We never told 'em what they had to grow. We just helped 'em see what would sell. Some products that, I mean, roselle's a big one. They love to grow Roselle. I'm not sure there was a big market for it, at first, but they've

shown that there can be a market for it, which is pretty much true on several products they sell. I think cassava is one. I'm not even really familiar with all of 'em.

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But we didn't ever tell 'em not to grow something, because they came with some seeds, and I don't know where they got 'em from [laughter]. But we would say, "This is gonna be all tomatoes. This is gonna be all green beans. This is, you know, but there's some extra spots that you can grow what you want." I mean, we always felt like they might wanna grow something to take home. So, I was never too strict.

Evan Stern: Is there maybe a story behind those seeds? I mean, you said they brought them with them.

Teresa O'Donnell: I don't know where they brought them from. I don't know.

Evan Stern: But they traveled as refugees holding onto those seeds with them?

Teresa O'Donnell: I guess, I guess, I guess, unless they were able to go to like a Congolese market and buy them. I don't know. I mean, it's possible. I don't know. It's possible they brought 'em from their home country.

Evan Stern: But, again, what do you remember or what can you tell us about that inaugural harvest? I mean, it took a while to get going.

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But are there any stories that you can sell about what happened with that first crop that they produced and took to market?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, yes, it's the story I always cry over [laughter]. I could cry now. So, we go to market, and it's probably-- I don't know if it's our first market or our second market. Ray and Gary are there because they know how to sell at Urban Harvest Market. But people didn't know who we were. So, we were selling some stuff. But we had a lot of produce, a lot of produce, and so, at the end of market, we hadn't sold that much. A local chef, whose name is Chris Shepherd, he's quite famous here, came up and said, "I'll buy everything you have left." That's what makes me cry 'cause I don't know if he knew how important it was that we were successful at market or not, but it doesn't matter. He came and bought everything.

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I think he's that kind of chef that he'll figure out what to do with it once he gets back to his restaurant. So, that's the best story for one of the first markets that we went to.

Evan Stern: Are there maybe any other stories that stick out in your mind about relationships that the farmers have forged with local chefs?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, we were selling a lot of-- so Ray and Gary were very good at packaging arugulas and lettuces. So, they taught us very well how to wash 'em, dry 'em, package 'em. So, we were selling a lot of salad ingredients, to begin with. I can't remember all the chefs that we were selling to, but I know that I would go into restaurants, and I'd be, you know, 'cause I'm just eating out with my friends [laughter], like, there'd be Plant it Forward produce listed in the menu at the bottom.

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The other thing that was going on then is customers started realizing who these people were, and people who could speak French were coming up and having conversations with them. People

just, you know, they just started wanting to know their stories. So, we started doing pamphlets, just little flyers that would explain who the farmer was and where they were from and what they were growing. They became like rock stars. [Laughter] The *Chronicle* was calling, magazines were calling, local news stations were calling. They were coming out and interviewing 'em. It was so interesting that this population that even I-- they were invisible to me, like, I had no idea they existed before I met 'em [laughter]. All of a sudden caught the eye of the city. I'm sure you know that Anthony Bourdain came out, and it was pretty spectacular.

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Evan Stern: I know Anthony Bourdain was famous for always having an impact on the people and places that he spotlighted. Was there anything interesting that came out of that attention, that you remember?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, unfortunately, I was not here when he came, I was landing in France, and they wouldn't change the date for me. [Laughter] So, that was too bad on me. But it got a lot of local press. Then more TV stations wanted to come out. "How did Anthony Bourdain know about you guys?" things like that. So, I don't know how Anthony Bourdain heard about us. I took the call from his whatever group that schedules his programming. [Laughter] I was flabbergasted in a good way, in a good way.

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Evan Stern: But you eventually name, I mean, obviously, I think before all of this, you did name the organization Plant it Forward. How was that name chosen and what does it symbolize?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, that's a very good question. I believe the name came from the marketing company that we were using, which happens to be my sister-in-law's brother. So, I

think he came up with the name and the original logo for Plant it Forward. It's a good name. It's kind of an interesting name 'cause, in Houston, there's a dealership called Planet Forward-- no, Planet Ford. So [laughter], when we were called to tell people about Plan It Forward, they were like, "Planet Ford?" [Laughter] We were like, "No, we're not the car dealership. We're a refugee agricultural project." But, anyway, I guess it's just the idea of planting it and then passing it forward.

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Evan Stern: But, within four years, you had nine farmers who were each managing their own land, and selling at farmers markets. Is there anything else that you can tell us about those farmers themselves? Are there any stories about them that stick out in your memory?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, they're super-hard workers. We knew all along that they were gonna have to be independent, that we could not go work the farms with them. So, a lot of their families-- one woman, Christine, is a single mom, and she had children that were, I think, they were like late teens, early 20s. So, they would go out and work with her on the farm. Sometimes Constant would bring his little kids out there.

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I can remember even the kids being at the markets, which was a nice draw for customers.

Evan Stern: Is there anything you could tell us about Christine and her story, where she's from? Do you know any of those details?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, Christine doesn't speak English very well, and she still doesn't, so I haven't gleaned a lot of her story. I can speculate, but I don't-- I know she came without a

husband. I have no idea what happened to her husband. She brought at least two kids with her. I think it was just two. But she was determined to make farming work. So, I'll tell you a little bit about the farmers. So, when refugees get here, and our farmers were no different, the resettlement agencies have to find them a job really quick, because they only have, I think, income for three months.

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Then they also, I think, have to pay back their airfare. So, it's not much of a freeloader, if it's a freeloader at all. So, they usually put 'em in factories, where they have to work night shifts. So, what was happening was, you know, they all had kids, so the issue of childcare, getting kids to school, trying to learn a new country [laughter], keep all the paperwork up, and work overnight shifts, and it was just very, very stressful. So, then they would--, oh, and also what I heard, I'm not sure if it's true, is that once they reached the point in the organization they were working for where they might have to give benefits, they would lay 'em off. So, it was just kind of a funneling through these different companies that would do overnight work.

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So, a lot of times, one of the parents was working overnight, and the woman was working during the day. So, there would just be this kind of rotation, and it was very stressful for them. So, I think that's why they wanted to get back to the land, 'cause they knew how to do the land. They knew they could set their own hours working on the land. They could go to their kids' school if they need to. If their kid was sick, they could get 'em to a doctor. So, I think that was a major benefit, and maybe the major driver for them working so hard is they got out of that rotation through low-paying overnight jobs.

Evan Stern: Is there anything else? I know we spoke a little bit about Urban Harvest. Can you tell us a little bit more about the partnership that you forged with them and their role in the beginning, continuing on today?

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Teresa O'Donnell: Well, Urban Harvest's main contribution to us in the beginning was introducing us to Ray and Gary.

Evan Stern: They were the training farmers. Is that correct?

Teresa O'Donnell: They were. They were the ones that set the training program, trained the farmers, helped us go to market. [Laughter] It wasn't always easy, because the farmers had their own ideas of how to farm, of course, because they did it a certain way, and Ray and Gary had their ideas of how to farm. So, a lot of time, there was tension between who was more correct. But I think compromises were made. You choose your battles. [Laughter] So, we would choose our battles.

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As long as the produce was coming out well, I mean, that was one of the things, too, is the produce had to be top quality. So, there was a lot of inspections going on at the beginning, and a lot of teaching of how to package the produce for market. So, Urban Harvest helped us also by putting us in markets and promoting us. But that was pretty much the main influence, was the first introduction to the trainers, and helping us get into markets. We have slightly different missions.

Evan Stern: What have you learned from these farmers?

Teresa O'Donnell: A resilience, definitely resilience. A sense of humor. They're very faithful, very-- I'm not sure they're all Christian, but they're all spiritual, and they all have a sense of God.

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Dedicated to their families. But just overcoming such trauma. They've all been traumatized. We have some stories, but mostly we didn't ask the stories, 'cause we were helping them to look forward instead of backwards.

Evan Stern: Have they maybe shared any stories with you about the impact of this project?

Teresa O'Donnell: Oh, they love it. [Laughter] Whenever anybody comes around to interview 'em and asks that kind of question, they're like, "Oh, we love it. We love it," because of just what I told you, they get to set their own hours. They get to go home if they need to. They can make a good living. Some farmers make a lot more than other farmers. Some farmers work a lot harder than other farmers. Some farmers-- most of 'em all work on relationships with their customers, 'cause they go to a market and, over the years, you just see the same people coming back and talking to 'em.

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They're very, like Roy, Roy loves his customers, and his customers love Roy, 'cause he can have a farm stand on his farm. He's in a location that has a farm stand. So, many, many people bring their children to his farm stand, and he will take them out and show them the produce, let them pick a carrot or whatever. So, he's quite popular. [Laughter] He's quite popular on his farm.

Evan Stern: But I know you've had to lease land. Are there any issues with that that you can maybe talk about the challenges that that has presented?

Teresa O'Donnell: You want me to be brutally honest?

Evan Stern: Please.

Teresa O'Donnell: [Laughter] So, when we lease land-- and the landowners have been extremely generous-- it's like we're leasing it for nothing.

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We carry insurance. We meet what we need to do to make sure the land is safe and that they're protected as landowners. But the main challenge has been-- let's see how to put this. The cleanliness of the farmers, their ability to get trash and stuff off their farms to make 'em look pristine, which is what I envisioned in the beginning, does not happen. So, sometimes landowners just want 'em to be cleaner. So, that would be the biggest challenge. It may even be more coming from me than the landowners, 'cause that's really something I want [laughter]. I want them clean, spick and span, straight rows, no trash, no weeds, and it's impossible [laughter].

Evan Stern: But are there any stories of losing leases to development after crops have been planted or anything to that effect?

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Teresa O'Donnell: Well, we have lost a few farms, but we always get plenty of notice. So, we get six months' notice if we need to vacate a piece of property. I can't think of any property that we've been on that we didn't already know that was a potential possibility. I think they've all been multi-year farms, so it's not like somebody we got on there and we're gone in two months. No. We've been there like two or three years before we were given six months' notice. The farm, Roy's farm, he's gonna have to leave it-- it's on the University of St. Thomas campus-- because

they're about to build a new building, and he's been there probably 12 years. So, he's established a good set of clientele. So, it's gonna be a hard one to leave.

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But we always knew that they had bought a piece of property for future development, and they were very generous in letting us use it. Let's see if there's been any others. Those are the two big ones.

Evan Stern: But I know leases are incredibly expensive, as are utilities, water. I know that you say that a number of the farmers have achieved success and found sustainability through this work, but do you believe that it would be possible without the assistance and the access to land that is provided?

Teresa O'Donnell: That's an excellent question. So, currently, they don't have to pay any rent on Plant it Forward land. But two farmers, no, maybe three, have actually been able to purchase some land a little bit outside Houston. So, that's always been our goal is that they will have enough money to buy a place and to farm it.

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Then we had two farmers move off early on that had done the same thing, that had found some land, and I think they're still farming it. So, while some farmers have been with us the whole-- well, actually a lot of 'em have still been with us-- they're branching out, and being able to now buy some property, some small acreage outside of Houston.

Evan Stern: I know you are always reading about how expensive Houston is now becoming in terms of, for years land was cheap, and now that's not exactly the story anymore. But I guess I'd ask, I mean, how sustainable do you believe the sustainable food movement is in Houston?

Teresa O'Donnell: That's an excellent question. So, in other words, do you have to come from a nonprofit to be able to make it in Houston as a farmer? I think that is probably true, unless you're a generational farmer and you have land outside of Houston. At Urban Harvest, there's several farmers that are from maybe Brenham or-- you know.

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I can't remember where one of 'em is from, but I think it's a little bit south of Houston. I don't know the story on how they got their land, but they've been farming it for a long time. But urban farming in the city would be extremely impossible without-- unless you're doing it in your backyard or you're under the umbrella of a nonprofit.

Evan Stern: But is there anything you can tell us about the land that is currently being farmed through Plant it Forward here in the city?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, one is still the church that we got originally. One is at University of St. Thomas, which we're gonna be moving out of in June. One's next to a school. They have a little bit of extra land. It's a day school for kids. One's at a property owned by the City of Houston that is also a community garden.

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That's the Westbury Farm. That is about to undergo a facelift, so there's gonna be a lot of construction going over there. So, I don't know how much of that land we'll lose in the meantime

while that's going on. Let's see if I can think. We used to have another property at a church out in Sharpstown, but that church sold their land, and so we moved off of that. When I first started, I would just drive around [laughter], and look for empty land, and then look up on the appraisal district, who owned it, and write 'em letters, and see if I could find some land. It wasn't really successful, but I made a lot of good relationships doing that [laughter].

Evan Stern: I guess, from your perspective, what do you think are the greatest barriers between farmers that keep farmers from profitability?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, early on there was an Office of Sustainability in Houston.

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I think it was Annise Parker, when she was mayor, had an Office of Sustainability. So, I thought that would be perfect. When I looked further into it, it was sustainability in transportation, in water supply. I forgot what else. But food was not a part of it. I thought-- we had some disaster here. I don't know what it was. It wasn't the pandemic. It was something before that. Some flood probably. Houston's notorious for their floods. Produce was not being able to get into Houston, but it didn't seem to be an issue 'cause in a few days it was okay. But the thought was, well, what if something disrupted the transportation system?

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Shouldn't a city be sustainable by how much produce it can gather up from its, you know, within a few miles of where it exists? So, I've always thought that if the city got behind the project, and developed resources to helping us create these little neighborhood farms, where they could actually serve the neighborhood, that would be really beneficial to everybody [laughter].

Evan Stern: I guess, in building from there, what are some of the benefits of, the value that urban farming provides that goes beyond simple dollars and economics?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, it creates community. It brings people out of their houses to talk to each other, to meet at the farm stand, to do projects on the farm, to bring kids out that never see where a tomato comes from or a carrot is grown.

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I've taken some kids out to the farms, and it's just eye-opening for 'em, and they're very excited about it. It's just super fun. So, I think a lot of what we're missing in our educational system is taking kids outdoors 'cause I think nature has just a tremendous amount to teach everybody about everything. [Laughter] I have a great story. I'll just put it in here, and you can take it or leave it. So, I do some tutoring in an elementary school. I was in the class one day, and it was second-graders, and they had a poster board on the wall that they'd used a magic marker to write out the four stages of the monarch butterfly. So, it was just in block letters, first stage, egg; second stage, caterpillar; third stage; fourth stage.

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So, I was like, "Oh, are y'all studying the monarch butterfly stages?" They were like, "Yeah." So, I said, "Well, come on out. We're gonna go out to your garden, and we're gonna find some eggs on the milkweed plant." So, we went out there and we found the eggs. We cut the milkweed down and created a terrarium. They actually watched the stages of the monarch butterfly, as opposed to looking at a poster board in block letters on the wall. The kids-- it was an inner city school, and you always feel like kids just need to be outside. They need to get instructions outside. So, they watched this thing go, I mean, the whole stage, everything, the butterflies live,

they hatch, we let 'em go. But, in the meantime, we had 'em write a story about the monarch butterfly, and what they had-- their experience with this process. There was a little boy in that class that was always in trouble, always getting yelled at, could not sit still in his seat.

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I'm sure-- I don't know what his-- I think he had a learning disability that made it impossible for him to comprehend what was being said, probably from a poster board on the wall [laughter]. But I saw him at the terrarium, and he got his nose up to the edge, and he was counting all the legs on the caterpillar. I was like, "What are you doing?" He went back. He didn't really talk to me. He went back, and he drew every leg in his diagram in his book on the caterpillar. Even though he couldn't get the letters out in the story, we had to really help him write his story, he was so determined to get that drawing right. We just praised him, and he beamed, and I realized that probably nobody had ever praised him in his three years in school, up to this point, or maybe he'd even been in school longer, and kept being pushed back.

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But how important it is to give kids a well-rounded ability to learn a subject. So, anyway, that's just my little take on getting kids out in nature. I've seen it happen when we take 'em to the farms too. Then, also [laughter], we have a private Catholic girls school that comes out. I'm not sure they knew anything about refugees or farming or any kind of life other than getting a college education and going to work for a big firm or something. So, it's been really good to bring kids that have a lot of advantages out, to see that there are people that struggle and and still have a good sense of humor and still [laughter] enjoy their lives. So, those are some of the benefits of having it in the city that involves community and brings people together and opens minds.

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So, that's what I'd say.

Evan Stern: Oh, absolutely. I think that speaks beautifully to it. Is there maybe anything you can tell us about the people? I know you mentioned some chefs and Chris Shepherd, but is there anything you can tell us about the people who buy the produce from these farmers? Who are they selling to?

Teresa O'Donnell: Oh, it's the rich people [laughter] buying produce from the poorer people but, hallelujah, they do. It's good, most people that can afford produce, because it's at a higher price, usually. But they're getting produce that's been packed within hours of being on their table, so it's not something you can get at the grocery store. We're comparable in price to like a Whole Foods. We're not over the top. But those same people end up volunteering out on the farms or working with the farmers in their Urban Harvest stall at the market.

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So, it's a good mix of socioeconomic statuses. A lot of the people who buy produce want their children to meet the farmers, too, so it's good all the way around.

Evan Stern: How has your involvement with this project reshaped your relationship with food?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, it showed me how little I know about produce. Yes, I've been a very, you know, lettuce, tomato, broccoli, green beans kind of gal my whole life. So, yeah, I've tried all kinds of things that I wouldn't normally try. It's opened me up to, like, dinners. I have dinners here at my house, and I bring in one of the farmers that's a chef.

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Actually, I've done that several times. We have several farmers that are chefs. So, I get to serve food to my friends that they aren't accustomed to either, so it's lovely.

Evan Stern: Just something of a different subject, I mean, stepping back, Houston, can you maybe tell us a little bit about how Houston is historically a center of refugee replacement, of settlement? Is there anything you can tell us maybe about the factors that made this happen?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, once again, I knew nothing about this until I became involved in this project. But what I learned is, refugees are sent where there's work. So, there's a lot of industry here in Houston that can use refugee work, like, cleaning hotels.

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One of our farmers was stuffing boxes of T shirts, like, I'm not sure what that-- I don't even know where that was. I know, in some places, it's like preparing chickens, plucking chickens. So, it's just, I guess, any big city-- I know California is another big hub, probably 'cause they have so much food industry. I think that's the key is where they can find work pretty quickly. That's what makes a good refugee resettlement city.

Evan Stern: But I know Houston's blessing and curse is that it's a new city that's largely unbound by tradition. From a cultural perspective, do you think this has helped make Houston a favorable city for refugees?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, we have so many different ethnicities here, it's probably very helpful, because you can find somebody from your country, no matter where you're from.

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So, I guess, for feeling comfortable when you first arrive, it's probably really nice to be able to find people that you can speak to, and that have been here a little bit longer than you have, and can show you the ropes.

Evan Stern: Can you maybe talk about the ways in which these people have benefited Houston?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, it's made us very diverse [laughter], very diverse, which I think is a wonderful thing, cuisine-wise, language-wise. I know that there's been issues, though, with the schools in having to have students with multiple languages in a classroom. That can be very challenging. But the great thing about that is the kids learn English so quickly that they're mostly translating for their parents.

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So, they settle in really quickly. The lovely thing about our farmers is the kids that I knew, when they had just first arrived, are now in college or in the Air Force. They have completely blended into the American life, and are marrying, having families. So, the first generation works really, really, really hard so the next generation can have all the benefits, which is very similar to all our stories, right? We're just a few generations removed from that.

Evan Stern: Absolutely. But I know, building from there a little bit, there's a lot of anti-immigrant and refugee rhetoric that's consumed our national discourse lately.

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Governor Abbott has also attempted to seal Texas off from refugee resettlement. What could Houston as a city, and Texas as a state, face to lose as a result of those actions?

Teresa O'Donnell: Our empathy, our humanity. I always, always think, what would it be like if I had to flee my country, and find myself in a strange environment that I don't speak the language? Would I want to be greeted or would I want to be shunned? I know the answer, because I'd want to be greeted, because I'd already be so afraid. So, for me, I just say everybody needs to open their hearts, and ask yourself, what if it was you?

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Evan Stern: On a different, you know, just a totally different thing, I think I failed to ask you if you could describe exactly what Plant it Forward is, in a succinct way. What is your definition of Plant it Forward?

Teresa O'Donnell: Let's see [laughter]. Well, at the base of it, it's a program that helps refugees that have resettled in Houston earn a living wage, farming and selling their produce in Houston. But it's also a training center for new farmers. It's a business training center for new farmers to help them know how to manage their money, and how to pay their taxes, how to navigate [laughter] the IRS, to understand credit and how a good credit history can help you then buy a car or buy a house.

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So, there's a lot of things that build on just helping somebody earn a living wage. You wanna also make 'em or help them be successful by knowing all the pitfalls that can happen along the way. I don't know if I'm describing what Plant it Forward is in a nutshell, but it's more than just the growing part; it's the infrastructure underneath it that helps them be successful in the US.

Evan Stern: What are your hopes for its future?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, my hope is, my vision-- maybe that's better. My vision is a large piece of land that houses an education center, a produce prep area, a cooking center, training center, where all the farmers work, and the community comes and learns everything they have to teach them and everything we can do with produce from a health standpoint, yeah, just a vibrant community center that's surrounded by a working farm.

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I want animals and chickens and eggs and, yeah, I want the whole thing. Maybe not cows [laughter].

Evan Stern: What are your hopes for Houston and our world at large?

Teresa O'Donnell: Well, since we're talking about refugees, for Houston, for the world at large, I wish world peace. [Laughter] That's what I wish. I wish there was no need for refugees. I wish everyone could stay where they were planted, if they want to, and thrive. But that doesn't seem to be the situation that we find ourselves in.

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So, I want, I guess I would want everyone to see the gift in every other human being, that we are all on this planet at the same time, and it's not a scary bad thing; it's a good thing.

Evan Stern: Do you have any final thoughts that you'd care to share?

Teresa O'Donnell: I don't think so. I think I've said everything I could say [laughter].

Evan Stern: Well, Teresa, thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Teresa O'Donnell: Oh, you're so welcome. Thank you for listening.

[End]