Cath Conolon

Blackwood Educational Land Institute - Houston, TX

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Evan Stern: Today is Monday, April 28th, 2025, it's 4:14 p.m., and we are recording at the residence of Cath Conlon, in The Heights in Houston, Texas. Now, for the record, could you tell us your name and occupation?

Cath Conlon: My name is Cath Conlon, and I run a nonprofit called Blackwood Educational Land Institute. It is a teaching farm.

Evan Stern: No matter whom I'm speaking with, I always like to begin by asking if you could describe for us your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up.

Cath Conlon: Well, that's a great question for me because the name of the organization and the farm is Blackwood, and Blackwood was-- and I call it Blackwood because that was my grandmother. She has been the most important person in my whole life, and still is today, even today, and she's been gone for years. So, I grew up-- that's a hard question.

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I was born in Pecos, Texas, and then I went to go live for two years in Denver with my aunt and uncle. Then my parents took me back, and then I moved down to the Valley, and then was raised there with my Grandmother Blackwood.

Evan Stern: I love the Valley. Where in the Valley did you grow up?

Cath Conlon: Raymondville, which is about 40 miles west of Brownsville.

Evan Stern: Yes, I try to-- we've gotten into the habit of going down to McAllen every year for *cabrito*. So, we enjoy the Valley quite a bit. But reaching back into your family history, can you tell us about where your people were from and how they came to settle in Texas?

Cath Conlon: My grandmother, my great grandmother was full-blood Shawnee Indian. My grandparents lived in Arkansas, and they had thousands and thousands of acres of land.

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Then World War II came, and so they lost a lot of the land during the war because my grandmother couldn't take care of all the produce and the farming, I mean, the growing of foods and grains and cottons and things like that, she couldn't do all that by herself. She didn't listen to my grandfather, I mean, my grandfather didn't listen to her. She said, "Lee, you need to sell, no, stop growing produce and textile materials, and raise cattle and pigs and chickens. I can manage all of that by myself. I cannot do the other by myself." He did just the opposite, and he got rid of all the animals, and she couldn't do all the land on her own, so that's when they lost a lot of land. So, they moved from Arkansas down to the Valley, and kept farming but had a much smaller place.

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Evan Stern: You just described your grandmother as the most important-- well, look, actually, before I get there, I should ask, I mean, as I understand, the land that now houses the Blackwood Land Institute had also been in your family for generations before you took it over. Where is it and what can you tell us about its history? What was farmed there and who farmed it?

Cath Conlon: The land where we are now?

Evan Stern: Yes.

Cath Conlon: So, it was leased out to people grazing cattle for years and years and years. That means that they were putting out fertilizers because, at one time, you couldn't get a loan from the

bank unless you were putting fertilizer on your soil, because that would guarantee that the bank would get their money back if they knew that the crops would grow. So, they were leasing it out to people growing cattle, I mean, raising cattle, so they were raising hay only.

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Evan Stern: How did that land come into your-- do you know-- that was different than your grandmother who owned that land, correct?

Cath Conlon: That was land that was in-- other family members owned the land. I mean, it was not hers; it was other family members that were not farmers. But, yes, my grandmother was the most important person in my life, still today, and I get to tell people about her. But this other piece was other family members that just had land. Then when I realized I was gonna have a son or a baby-- I didn't know if it was gonna be a boy or a girl-- the most important thing in my mind was for this child to be ecologically literate.

Evan Stern: Speaking of your grandmother, can you tell us a little bit more about her and how she introduced you to the natural world?

Cath Conlon: Well, I used to-- I'm the oldest of five children.

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So, that means that I was never-- I never got to be a child unless I was with my grandmother. I thought that I always spent all summer with her, until my mother heard me say that once, and she said, "You never spent the whole summer with your grandmother. Maybe you spent a week." But that was very inspiring to me to hear that because I thought we have a great chance because we get a lot of kids for one week at a time. So, I thought, well, if we only have them for one week,

then we can make great headway, and give them great memories, and hopefully infiltrate their brain and their soul and their heart. But the way that my grandmother did it, I mean, I helped her. There were lots of people that would swim across the Gulf of Mexico, and come in, looking for farms that they could work on. They would come and work on my grandparents' farm. My grandfather would go downtown, pick them up, bring them out to the farm. They had a place to live.

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My grandmother and I would cook all day long because we fed them breakfast, lunch, and dinner, every day. There was a big Coke machine, and I would pull the Cokes out and getting out and giving it to them. They were picking cotton, and they all had big, huge, giant cotton bags that they were picking. Then he used grains, I mean, combines to harvest the grains. But then those all had to go inside a big truck, which was done with a big, like, vacuum arm, and they would fill up the truck. So, I helped her castrate pigs. We collected eggs. I did all of that with them.

Evan Stern: If you can name it, what's the most important lesson she taught you?

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Cath Conlon: I think living in the moment. I had a pig, I mean, I had two pigs, Toast and Dosterina, and I would go out to feed them. It was just about being really there in the moment, standing on top of the feeder and trying to be very quiet while I put their feed out because as soon as they heard that I was putting feed out, they would all come running, and they'd put their little snouts up on my legs, and I didn't like that. So, I think that that was mostly about being in the moment.

Evan Stern: I think you've probably already answered this question, but how did that early exposure to the land shape and inform your worldview?

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Cath Conlon: I certainly didn't know it then, I only know it now because I know being, living in the present is what has taught me, allowed me to care about what's going on around me, what's growing, what I'm able to eat, what I'm able to digest or not. In one of my earlier childhood memories, I remember hearing wooden blinds clattering. I was in bed, taking a nap in the afternoon, and the windows were open, and I would hear these blinds clattering. Then I would hear this [mimics planes flying overhead], these airplanes coming in. That was peaceful to me because I knew that I was on the farm. It meant my grandparents weren't too far away. I was taking a nap. Somebody cared enough about putting me to bed so that I could take a nap, or sending me to my room so I could take a nap.

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But later on, I now know that all of those [mimics planes flying overhead] sounds that I was hearing, they were all crop dusters, and they were coming in and they were spraying all the fields. So, I don't know that, I mean, she did not teach me that that was good, but I heard and experienced all of that through being with her on the farm, and then, as adult, learning more and more and more about what those planes were really doing, what Agent Orange really brought into our family, into our health system. So, what she did was really inspire me to learn more, because as soon as I learned that it was dangerous and it almost killed my father, I wanted to know more about why are we doing this?

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Evan Stern: You said earlier that it was really important for you to raise your son to be ecologically conscious. Why was that important-- ecologically sensitive and--

Cath Conlon: Literate.

Evan Stern: --literate.

Cath Conlon: Right.

Evan Stern: Why was that important to you?

Cath Conlon: Because if he was ecologically literate, that means that he knows about the natural world. He knows about the bugs and the insects and Agent Orange and the trees, and how deep the roots go, and how they communicate with each other. Eventually, he would reach a point of knowing that food is your best medicine.

Evan Stern: So, then you do-- how and when did you gain possession of the land? I know you said that it belonged to--

Cath Conlon: He was born in '83.

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Evan Stern: Well, I know, but I'm talking about the land of Blackwood.

Cath Conlon: Right.

Evan Stern: How did you get possession of it and begin working it?

Cath Conlon: I just asked the family to please not continue grazing cattle on it anymore, and let me see what I could do. So, I started going out before he was born, and then I continued going out even after he was born. Then he was in a little preschool, St. Stephen's Episcopal Montessori

School in Houston. I would hear the mothers and the teachers all talking about what they really wanted their kids to be able to do. Cade was only this tall at that moment, you know, he was not old enough to be in a preschool age. I was just there, introducing them to what I was doing through Blackwood. So, even though he was very young, like 3 or 4 years old, I would hear the middle school teachers, the middle school mothers, the middle school families talk about what they wanted to do with their kids.

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So, I invited them to come out to Blackwood, because the school said, "Anytime you go anywhere, you take a trip, take Cade with you, if it's appropriate." So, I started generating opportunities to go there to the land with schools, with other kids, and I would always take Cade with me.

Evan Stern: Do you remember the very-- you do eventually come up with the idea of having kids out there on Fridays.

Cath Conlon: Right.

Evan Stern: How did that work?

Cath Conlon: It worked because it was teacher-driven and it was parent-driven. I invited them out once as just a fun day, and they came. In the next day or the next week, the parents said, "This is where we want our kids to be. This is what we want them to learn." So, the teacher said, "Can we come back?" Eventually-- and I was a builder. I was a building contractor. Early on in my life, I was a psychotherapist, and I was not good at it at all.

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So, when I reali…I had a bad day, and I used the next five working days to farm everybody out. Then, what in the world am I gonna do? So, I started working on the house I was living in, in the Montrose area, and I became very interested in building. So, I renovated that, and I renovated another house, and turned it into office space. That was the beginning of a building career for 24 years. So, I was still building, and so I would go there every other Friday or so. Then, eventually, it became every Friday. Then another school called and said, "Can we please join in?" I said, "Well, if you can find a benefactor, sure, we'll work it out." So, that's how the whole thing began.

Evan Stern: Did you have, I mean, so you were working as a builder. What knowledge or experience did you actually have with gardening at this point in your life?

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Cath Conlon: Well, I didn't know how much I had, I mean, I had a little bit, but it was mostly just being outside; it was not with farming. So, I registered for every permaculture class that I could find, I registered for about seven, but none of 'em made because it just was not important enough to people in Texas at that time. So, I got this little tiny postcard in the mail, and it was from New Mexico, and they were offering a permaculture class, where you could commute back and forth over the course of a whole year. So, that's what I did, and I'm so glad that I did because it was a different form of permaculture. I mean, the thoughts and everything were the same, the elements as a permaculture class were all the same, but the people were different. So, I really enjoyed that a lot. So, I thought I knew a lot, and what I did, the parents would come out, and it's like, "Okay. So, we're gonna build a raised bed."

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So, we built a raised bed. I thought we'd come out the next Saturday, and we would plant seeds; and the next Saturday, we would water it; and the next Saturday, we'd probably weed it. Well, we built the bed, and we weeded the next Friday, and we weeded the next Friday, and we weeded the next Friday. That's when it became clear to me that farming is a 24-hour a day job. At that moment, we were not a nonprofit, but that's when I realized that this is so big that I cannot do it by myself. Nobody can do it by themselves. You need lots of families, lots of kids, lots of little feet pitter-pattering around. You need the wisdom from your elders. You need ancestral knowledge. So, I draw on my grandmother's ancestral knowledge all the time, but it's mostly about caretaking for family members and cooking for them.

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It's not so much about the farming, because the farming that they did, you know, that was right around the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl is when we wanted to pull all the roots, I mean, we wanted to pull-- we wanted to weed all the time. Now we know better than that. We don't ever wanna weed. We wanna leave every plant that's in the ground in the ground, because their roots will hold the soil in place. It's sort of like, if you have a person, a human that's not very healthy, lots of things can grow inside their body, like cancers and fungus and things like that. But the healthier the body gets, the fewer of those things can grow in the body. It's exactly the same thing with the land. So, if we leave the land alone, and let it begin to heal itself, and we bring, I mean, but there's also this give-and-take relationship with the land.

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If we help take care of it, it will also help take care of us. I'm sorry if I'm talking in circles.

Evan Stern: Oh no, not at all. You're not talking in circles at all, believe me. But you talked about building those raised beds on the-- was that the first day?

Cath Conlon: Yeah, the very first day.

Evan Stern: So, what memories or stories do you have at all of that first day of bringing other kids out there to the farm and the land?

Cath Conlon: Oh, I can tell you a great story. There was one young man that did not wanna be there, and he really did not want to be there at all. So, he came over and he said, "So, what do you want me to do out here?" I said, "I want you to take this shovel, and I want you to go way out there to the north part of the property, and I want you to dig a hole, and I want you to dig a hole that's so deep that when you stand in it, I cannot see you." So, he did. But he went out there, and he threw the shovel as far as he could throw it, and ran to go pick up the shovel.

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Then he threw it again, and then he picked it up, and then he'd do it again. Finally, he started digging, and he dug and he dug and he dug. Then he was standing in the middle of the hole, and then he would dig some more. When he finished, he was so excited, he had a big smile on his face, and he came running over, and said, "I did it. I did it. I did it." I said, "What did you do?" He said, "I dug a hole so deep that when I stand in it, you cannot see my head." So, we all went out there. He stood in the hole. His head was even with the top of the ground. He was so thrilled and so happy with himself. He was a child that wasn't really liked a lot and all of a sudden-- but he was not happy. But, all of a sudden, he became a different human being after that day, because he did something that he was successful at. So, that was one of the first days. But then we built

the beds. We were successful in doing that. Parents were coming. They were bringing in their kids.

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We're still doing that today. We have farm school. When we first started talking about farm school, I thought, well, we have to do it on a Saturday. The staff said, "No. We're gonna do it in the middle of the week." I said, "But who's gonna come?" They said, "The homeschool parents, homeschool families." So, we filled up in a heartbeat, in an absolute heartbeat. So, we have 30 kids out there. We demand that or we ask that every child have one parent with them, at least. So, that means you've got 30 children, 30 parents, at least, 'cause sometimes parents come with 'em, I mean, two parents come with 'em. Also, we have parents that come and bring their work with them, so they stay in the gathering hall. They're working on their computers or doing whatever, but they're not far.

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The other parents, I mean, there've been some parents that said, "I will enroll my child, and I want to come, but only if I can see my child the whole entire time that they're there." "It's like, if you will follow around with us as a group, because we're not stationary, we are moving from here to there, to there, to there." They do, they follow us along, all the while. We make snacks. A couple of weeks ago, well, we have partnered as civic scientists with the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, and they have created Kernza, which is a perennial grain. Grains are all annuals. What do we get from grains? We get pastas and cereals and breads and lots and lots and lots of things. But they're annuals, so that means that you're gonna pull everything out of the soil, and you're gonna turn it, and you're gonna prepare it, and you're gonna start all over again.

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What I was saying earlier about the Dust Bowl, they pulled everything out of the ground, they tilled it, they planted seeds, and then there was no rain and no rain and no rain. So, then all the winds came, so that's when we started losing all of our topsoil. So, I think that pulling all the weeds out and doing all that is a huge detriment, but I didn't know that for the longest time. So, now we leave 'em all in the ground. As the ground heals, those weeds go away because they can't exist in healthier soil. So, we partnered with the Land Institute, growing Kernza. We have Kernza flower. It has a little bit different form of gluten in it. But you prepare your soil, you plant the Kernza, and you harvest it. You take care and harvest, take care and harvest, take care and harvest, and you never have to turn the soil again. That's what we need to focus on for all of our farming.

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So, a couple of weeks ago, they made biscuits with Kernza grain, I mean Kernza flower, and then they harvested mulberries and blackberries, and they made jam, and that was their snack. So, so much of, I mean, we provide all the snacks, and we follow along with all of their collective dietary issues. So, we have some kids that have peanut allergies or they're gluten-free or they're whatever. So, we make it with all of that in mind so everybody gets to eat the same thing, and it's so fun.

Evan Stern: It sounds delicious. I could go for some of that right now, I really could. I will just ask, though, going back to that first day and the first experience, how did that change you? I

mean, it clearly changed the kid who was digging that hole, but how did that experience change you?

Cath Conlon: Oh, how did it change me? Oh, it changed me in the biggest way because I'm a loner and I'm like a solitary thinker.

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But that experience, those very first experience told me that this is not something you can do by yourself at all. I need people. I need community. I need family. I need whatever. So, I need lots of people. So, that was probably one of the biggest things because I truly thought that I was gonna lock the gate or tree, lock the tree when I was finished, and if you wanted to visit with me, you'd have to come out there. But nobody c…I mean, there are lots of people there, but nobody came to see me; they came there for the knowledge, and so, there was-- what for me was missing was that interpersonal, more intimate exchange.

Evan Stern: But, you know, Cade grows and, I mean, but I think what you're saying is that it all grew organically because--

Cath Conlon: It all grew–.

Evan Stern: –'cause Cade grows, he moves to other schools--

Cath Conlon: Yes.

Evan Stern: –but then the other schools, not only do the new schools follow him and you out there, but the old schools stick around.

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I'd love if you could tell us about how, you know, just if you could take us through those early stages of that growth a little bit.

Cath Conlon: Well, so, the age stays-- their age stays the same; my age does not, at all. So, that's one thing that happened. Just as I was learning, I mean, I ask everybody to stay on their paths 'cause there's 33 acres, but probably more than half of it is wooded, and I want it to stay wooded. I think that's one of the reasons why we are successful is because there's a place for the wild animals to live. There's a place for the insects to live. There's a place for all of that to be. So, it's a really natural exchange.

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So, I would say, "Please stay on the tracks. Please stay on the paths." What's the largest organ in your body?

Evan Stern: The heart? No, the brain? Ah, you're putting me on--

Cath Conlon: Skin.

Evan Stern: The skin, yes--

Cath Conlon: The skin.

Evan Stern: --the skin.

Cath Conlon: Yes. That's your largest, largest organ in your body, and it replaces itself every seven days. So, in the permaculture world, they talk about the importance of edges. So, if you see yourself driving down the freeway, anywhere, don't care where it is, and the edges of the freeway are green and lush, and I would always think, gosh, I wanna take a walk through there. I wanna

hike through there. But you get outta your car, and you start your hike, and it's green and lush for 30, 40 feet. Then, all of a sudden, it's not, because the edge becomes the canopy that's at the top.

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So, down below, because the sun can't hit it, the sun hits the edge and it hits the top, but it doesn't hit the center of anything. As soon as I realized the importance of edges, 'cause everything was short when we first started going out there, and then as everything grew up, the trees and everything grew up, the edge became up here. In my mind, I would say, please stay on the path, please stay on the path, because things were beginning to get sparse. It's like, the kids must be walking off the beaten path. They weren't walking off the beaten path at all, they were staying on the path, but the edge was at the top and no longer down close to the ground. So, then I had a big apology to make to everybody. It's like, I've been accusing people of doing things that they weren't doing.

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It's almost like having, you know, going to a piece of land and getting to know it really well is a very intimate thing. As it changes, you have to change with it in order to accept it. That's really just like a partner. So, there's a book called *Farmacology*, F-A-R-M-A-L-O-G-Y [sic], and it's written by Daphne Miller, and she's an MD. Her whole story is telling the story about how the Earth and the human, and the human and the Earth are the same, I mean, in terms of their nervous systems, in terms of the heartbeat, in terms of their pH, in terms of everything, I mean, it matches so closely.

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So, one of the things that I started thinking about-- so, this was all new to me, I mean, I really didn't know what I was doing. I just went and I started learning. For all practical purposes, the land at Blackwood looks flat. But on the east end, it's high, I mean, on the west end, it's high, and on the east end, it's low. We put in all these rows, and they were running east and west. It rained, and it washed everything away. I mean, these are the things that I learned. So, the rows needed to be north and south, but then every row harvested too much water. So, then I had to put everything on true contour, so all the ro…none of the rows were straight, they were like this, so that they would all harvest even, equal amounts of water.

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Then they still harvested too much water because the clay pan is so thick that it doesn't percolate down, like you would like it to, like it's supposed to, according to Bill Mollison. But Bill Mollison is working with virgin land, and we're not; we're working with raped land. So, it's been raped and pillaged and farmed and poisoned with chemical pesticides or drugs. So, as soon as we got all the beds in the right direction and straight enough so that the water would-- the rain would land and drain off, I planted a garden. I had the soil tested. Then I planted a garden. The tester said, "If you're planning on moving from traditional pesticides and whatever else you might put on, and you're gonna go to organic, you're gonna go through a detox phase, and it's not gonna be pretty."

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He said, "The very first crop you have will be luscious, but it's also full of all those toxins because that's what's making the plant grow." So, we planted the crops, they were beautiful, and I instantly forgot what the testers said, the soil testers. I was also told that if you release ladybugs

and praying mantis and lacewings, and all sorts of other beneficial insects, that they will come back to that space because that's where-- even if they-- if they're born there and they die, I mean, all their relatives will come back. So, I planted the vegetables. I didn't see any aphids because I wasn't looking at 'em, for them because I didn't even know about 'em. But then between that crop and the next crop that I planted, I learned about the ladybugs and I learned about the aphids, and aphids will not come if there's no food, so-- and the aphids are their food.

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So, I also learned that ladybugs will come back year after year after year. So, one day, when the second or third crop was in, the barn wall was black but it was really white, but it was black because it was so covered with ladybugs.

Evan Stern: Wow.

Cath Conlon: I thought, yes, the ladybugs are back. Then I thought, oh my gosh, the ladybugs are back. So, I ran out and I looked under every leaf, and they were chocked full of aphids. So, I got my tractor out; I turned the whole thing under. For the next three years, I planted cover crops, and I planted crotalaria, I planted Elbon rye, and hairy vetch, radishes, I mean, I planted every kind of cover crop I could imagine, and turned them under.

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To me, that is part of a similar healing that a human being goes through when they've either been raped or trafficked or whatever, or they're drug addicts. They have to be fed good food. They have to have great conversations. They need to have somebody care for them, brush their hair, you know, hug them, I mean, all of that. The soil, the land needs the same thing. To me, again, when all those little kids are out there running around, that's their music, that's their loving, that's

the land's loving, the land's music, the land feeling loved and hugged and all that. When you-- and many plants, many cover crops are dynamic accumulators, so they would pull up those toxins, and then when we would pull the plant out, we're pulling the toxins out.

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So, eventually, it balances out to where there's no longer toxins there. I used to think that I wanted us to be organically certified, but they were interested in us keeping records of what we bought when, and how much we paid for it, and when we used it. I was told that we would not be successful organic farmers as long as we worked with kids. Kids, I think, in my opinion, kids need this information before, I mean, when they're little, you know, early childhood development. Give it to 'em when they're developing so they don't have to grow up and then change their mind, and learn that they learned something that they didn't need to learn.

Evan Stern: But, speaking of kids, obviously, not every kid who sets foot on Blackwood is gonna want to become an organic farmer or is even gonna have a garden.

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If they can take one lesson away from the experience of being on the farm, what would you like that lesson to be?

Cath Conlon: I love to tell stories. When graduation comes around, I get pictures and invitations to kids that have been coming to Blackwood for years, and they're graduating from high school. When I get those in the mail, they do not have on their cap and gown, or a formal, or a tux; they have on their Blackwood T-shirt. To me, that's a huge testament. A lot of those people that have been coming through Blackwood, whether it be through camp or school or whatever it is, we had-- when COVID started, we had a young man that was a camper for years. They'd be our

director. One night, he was sitting out at like 2 o'clock in the morning. These were all old Blackwood ambassadors.

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I mean, when I say they're old, they're 18. But they were all sitting together, and they all talked about that they are the human being that they are that day because of Blackwood. Did that have to do with farming? Did that have to do with nature? Did that have to do with community? Did it have to do with the games that they learned at camp? I have no idea. There's a culture there that I did not start. I didn't start any of this. They all started it themselves, and they recognize it. They recognize the specialness of it. They recognize, I mean, I asked one child, one parent, I said, "Would you please ask your son to tell all of his friends about Blackwood?"

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She said, "I would, but he won't, and he said, 'because Blackwood is where I get to be me. I don't have to be what those kids see me as in school.'" So, I don't know how to answer that.

Evan Stern: That's a perfectly good answer, though. In regard to the evolution of your programming, you talked about this a little bit, I think, about how you're making the snacks and everything together. But you initially made nature the primary focus of your initiatives, but now food is very much front and center. Tell us about that, and why it's been a game-changer.

Cath Conlon: Because you can talk about food all day long, and never talk about a farm, but you can't talk about a farm without talking about food. Food is something that people relate to. Nature is not something that people relate to.

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Their eyes glaze over. They don't even know what nature is. A lot of people think of nature as this kind, gentle, quiet place. It's far from that. It is not that at all. It is loud and it's rowdy and it's strong, I mean, it's not any of that. It has incredible sense to it. It's its own beast, I mean, it's a fabulous-- I don't know. Is it a beast? Yes, I think it's a beast, but it's an incredible beast. I call it a beast just because it's so-- you can't control it, and we don't want to control it, I mean, we are part of it. We're not separate from it at all.

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I guess, quite honestly, I guess, when I think of hurricanes and tornadoes and COVID and all these other things that happen, and AIDS, you know, I think that that's part of the Earth trying to balance itself out between people and the Earth, you know, how can-- 'cause the Earth is just so big, I mean, it's not gonna get bigger. At some point, it won't be able to manage all that. So, I think these natural disasters are one of the ways that Mother Nature is balancing out that piece right there that needs to be equalized.

Evan Stern: How and when did the Blackwood Land Institute officially become a nonprofit?

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Cath Conlon: Well, probably, we ca…I mean, my son was born in '83, so that's when the idea started. Then it was in 2001, and that's when I, I mean, I'd already been saying, I can't do this by myself. I need help.

Evan Stern: But, importantly, at this point too, I should ask, what is the Blackwood Land Institute?

Cath Conlon: We are a teaching farm, and I like to say that we are soil farmers before we're any kind of food farmer, because if we're doing right by the soil, any food that we grow will make us better, make us better human beings, make us healthier. So, we are a teaching farm. We do all sorts of events. We are at the farmers market at Urban Harvest. We're at our own farmers market at the Skyfarm, the first and third Sunday afternoon. We have a one-acre farm on the roof of the POST Houston.

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So, we only have a foot of soil there. In other places, we have six inches of soil. So, what can really be done? I mean, we've learned a lot, you know, that you don't have to have the depths of the Earth in order to grow good food. You can still have six inches or a foot of soil, and do great things. So, we are role model for people to mimic. There's a straw bale house on site at the land farm. What about your housing choices? What about your community choices and your food choices? We harvest water. I mean, it's a lot about conservation. It's about wanting to pass on to people how they can be their best human self ever.

Evan Stern: You still host summer camps and schools but, in 2014, you began to expand and shift more focus to resilient agriculture.

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What is that?

Cath Conlon: What is that?

Evan Stern: What is resilient agriculture?

Cath Conlon: Well, we were on our way to who we are today. Before, we did not use any pesticides or herbicides or fungicides or anything at all like that. But in my ignorant brain, when I first started, I just thought, well, I'm just supposed to plant, and let 'em do what they're supposed to do, and keep them clean and keep it watered, not realizing that they were still hungry. So, I had to learn about that. So, at some point, we started making compost tea. So, I guess, "resilient" was probably a buzzword that people wanted to use. But we're still organic. We're still not, I mean, I didn't-- I wanted to be organically certified but never did that because it was always so much work and just could never get to it.

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So, we were just on our way to becoming who we are. "Resilient" means food that helps encourage people, again, to be better. But we keep still finding better and better ways for people to be better. Once we kinda knocked off our radar of wanting to be organically certified, we discovered that we wanted to be Regenified-certified. That's about the soil regenerating itself. That means not pulling weeds, leaving them in the ground. A good new word-- so if a weed grows up, instead of pulling it out, bend it over, crimp it, bend it over, and fill it with wood chips. A new, another new word is an armor. What kind of armor are you gonna put on the soil so that the sun can't get to it and zap all the moisture out or zap all of its nutrients out?

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So, we wanna protect that soil with this huge, thick layer of leaves and wood chips and weeds that we just bent over that they're gonna die anyway if they don't get the sun and the moisture and everything else. So, resilient, I mean, I think those were buzzwords to us, just wanting to find a way for people to listen to us in a different way. I heard a man actually that I think is

probably deaf, but he has those-- what are those called?-- those little things that they put on their head that allows them to begin hearing, even at a late age. Anyway, he came out last weekend, and he said, "You guys are so smart." He said, "I am so thrilled to be here." He said, "Most farmers just go farm because it's a job.

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"But you guys are farming because you really want the human being experience to be an exemplary experience." They want it to be a fascinating and inspiring experience. They want them to realize that they're eating this food, and it's making them healthier, which is gonna cause them to test better, run better, do all this. About I don't know how long ago, 10 years ago, I was invited to come to the MD Anderson Alternative Medicine Center to work along a scientist-- not work but speak along a scientist and a doctor. They said, "Bring every strawberry you can possibly bring," and I did. I felt kind of bad, I mean, I felt-- not for them. I felt like they were making me look a little bad because they wanted me to bring all these strawberries.

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What the scientists and the doctor was talking about is the benefit of a cancer patient eating fresh strawberries, and it helped them tolerate their chemotherapy easier. That was the point that they wanted the patients to realize that get as many fresh strawberries as you could. But the doctor's point was, here are all these strawberries. Can we really grow enough fresh strawberries for every cancer patient in the world to have fresh strawberries? That's why we need the chemical that matches the strawberry's elements. So, to me, I guess, it presses the point of every family, I don't care if they have a pot that just sits out their front door or their back window or somewhere,

and they live in an apartment, they need to grow some food of their own. Then if you grew a different food next door and next door, you food swap.

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That same man that came, they want-- they have one backyard. I guess it's where they live. They want to turn that backyard into a community garden. But their hope is that every other person that lives on that block will do the same thing with their yards so that then they have one big farm. The real push is for everybody to grow their own food, something of their own food.

Evan Stern: Speaking of growing food, what food are you growing at the farm now? Tell us all about that.

Cath Conlon: We have squash. We have nasturtiums. We have cucumbers. We have lots of peppers. We have sweet potatoes, although the sweet potatoes we're digging up are the sweet potatoes from last year that just got left. We have lots of strawberries, lots of blackberries, lots of mulberries, lots of figs coming in.

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We grow lots of eggs, I mean, we raise chickens, so there's lots of eggs. We raise honey. There's lots and lots of bees. We raise worms, and worms make, I mean, they make liquid gold, and we use that to feed all of our plants. We also have one garden space that we call culinary medicinal, because everything that's in there, not everything is a perennial, but we're moving towards as many things as possible being perennials. But wherever we have perennials planted, we use all the space around it to plant annuals because, right now, most of our vegetables are annuals. So, we found that there are some annuals that if you treat them like perennials-- do you know the difference between a perennial and an annual?

Cath Conlon: So, a perennial, you are a perennial.

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You're here next year, and the next year, and the next year. You just keep getting better and better and better. An annual, you have to start all over every year, and that's when you're tilling the soil. When you're tilling, you're breaking all the soil. The soil blocks up into little tiny granules. The microbes that feed you, that feed us, feed us and make us healthy, they live in soil blocks. So, when you're tilling, you're breaking up all those soil blocks into little tiny granules. It's not as small as sand, but it is small. But the microbes can't live there. They need big spaces to live in. So, we make compost tea almost daily, and the compost tea has blackstrap molasses, seaweed, and a handful of mature compost that works as a starter. Then we put an air pump in it, and it aerates the whole thing.

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That grows more microbes that we're using to water the soil with. So, we're growing microbes, we're growing worms, we're growing everything that we can possibly do to help it be better and better and better.

Evan Stern: Just briefly too, though, Houston, speaking of all of this, what is unique about Houston is that it does have a year-round growing season.

Cath Conlon: You would think that it does.

Evan Stern: Well, what are you harvesting and, likewise, planting right now?

Cath Conlon: Right now?

Evan Stern: Yeah.

Cath Conlon: Harvesting right now, well, I just told you, we're harvesting squash and berries and figs and, yeah, all of that. But during the summer, when it gets so incredibly hot, now, my hope-- I don't know this from personal experience, but I know what I've read, and I know the stories that people have told me, that when they have adopted this Regenified-Certified armor, crimping, all that, that you've got a layer of this, of humus on top of the Earth.

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So, when you pull that back, the Earth is nice and moist, and it has earthworms in it, and it has all sorts of microbes because it's moist. So, I'm hoping that that's what we find this summer. But, before this, we would water and water and water and water and water, and it's like everything was so thirsty that it just sucked it up so fast.

Evan Stern: Speaking of the agriculture, the ecology of this region, I mean, what do you think grows particularly well here, and do you have a favorite crop that you look forward to each year?

Cath Conlon: Yeah, I love figs, and I love okra, and I like eggs, I mean, yeah, all of that. I like all of it. I don't know that I have a favorite crop.

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I guess my favorite crop would be arugula because arugula is the fastest germinating seed that I'm aware of, yes, so all those greens.

Evan Stern: You just mentioned the chickens and eggs. Beyond producing eggs, what purposes do your chickens serve?

Cath Conlon: Oh my gosh. So, go through this with me. Tell me seven things that chickens do. Do you know?

Evan Stern: Oh no [laughter].

Cath Conlon: No? Okay. So, chickens, they scratch, so they aerate the soil, so it allows the rain, it allows the compost tea, it allows their manure to go down into the soil. So, they scratch. Their feathers provide down. They provide chicken meat, and they provide eggs. They are great alarm clocks. They are great stories-- they're great subjects for stories.

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They're great connectors for families because children love chickens, and they wanna go out and be with them, and their parents wanna go out and be with them. So, chickens are an important part of what we do.

Evan Stern: How many chickens do you have?

Cath Conlon: Right now?

Evan Stern: What kind of chickens do you have? Yeah.

Cath Conlon: We have 100, about 160 chickens, and they're mostly all heritage birds, which means they come from a stock that's way old, which makes them-- it makes life easier for them to live through diseases and droughts and things like that. It's just a stronger stock. The Orpington is one.

Evan Stern: What would make an egg that's growing on your land different than what I might go and buy at the supermarket?

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Cath Conlon: I don't wanna tell you that, I mean, it's not a pretty picture. The chickens, I mean, they're not outside. I guess the first clue is that chickens do not lay unless it's light. So, these

chicken farms, they have lights on inside the barns all night long. You can drive by at night, and you can just see the lights glowing out. That encourages, I mean, they're doing it naturally. They can't make the chickens lay, I mean, other than leaving light on. But that doesn't give them time to rest. But our chickens are out running around and eating bugs and getting lots and lots and lots of exercise. So, I can tell you who our chickens are.

Evan Stern: But how does that impact the flavor and experience?

Cath Conlon: Oh, huge. The yolks are bright gold, golden yellow, and creamy.

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That's the biggest thing, yeah, they're just tastier. Once you've had a farm-rai…a true farm-raised egg, chicken that has been outside-- you know. I listened to a chef once, and he was talking to-- the chef was talking to the-- the chef made butter out of the cow's milk. A food critic came in, and he was tasting the butter. The chef was so excited to hear what the expert might say about his butter, because he just got the milk that morning. The chef expert came in, tasted the butter. He never made a comment about the butter. Then, a couple of days later, the chef came back, I mean, the food expert came back in. He tasted the butter. Still never made any comment.

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Then, several days later, the chef ran into the food expert somewhere else, and said, "Tell me what you thought about the butter." He said, "Well, it wasn't quite what I was expecting." He thought, well, how can that be? Because the cows were just outside the barn. So, he ran back to the farm, he found the farmer and said, "Where had these cows been the past week?" He said, "Well, it rained, so I moved 'em out to the further away pasture." So, when it rains, everything gets washed out a little bit. So, that food critic could tell-- I don't know that he knew. He couldn't

say that they'd been in a field of rain. But he knew that that was not the most intense-tasting butter that he could find.

Evan Stern: Also, just kind of speaking of the other, you also mentioned your bees as well. When and why did you start the beekeeping program, and what can you tell us about that?

Cath Conlon: Oh, bees are their own special animal.

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Bees recognize your face, and so I have a little bee that's right here in front of my house. Every morning when I walk out, he's hovering around the steps, and I know he's looking at me, wondering what I'm gonna do. So, bees, I mean, if we did not have bees, we would not have food. They pollinate. We wouldn't have honey, either. But they do so much for our food system, there's no way that we could pay a bee or a person to do what the bees do, because they couldn't do it. They are invaluable.

Evan Stern: How has harvesting the bees benefited the farm?

Cath Conlon: Harvesting the bees?

Evan Stern: Well, I mean, beekeeping, how has beekeeping benefited the farm?

Cath Conlon: Well, because they're flying around everywhere. If you could stand back and look at a bee, just hovering and flying here, you would see these little pockets on their legs where they pull in pollen, and they take it home, and they give it-- they leave it there for the queen bee.

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But they're mixing up the pollen from all the different flowers. Without that cross-pollination, we wouldn't have food.

Evan Stern: On a different note, can you tell us about how and when your relationship with the Urban Harvest market started?

Cath Conlon: Well, I've known Tyler for a number of years. I can't tell you how I met him. But he's a dear, dear man. I probably met him just from going to Urban Harvest, and it was during COVID. We had always wanted-- we do camp during the summer, and so I knew that we couldn't go to-- we couldn't be a vendor during the summer because we had camp going on, and it was too hot. I mean, there's too much going on, it would just stress us out way too much.

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We had camp going on, and I remember talking to Tyler once, and I said, "I wish we could come," and I said, "but we can't because we can't be there during the summer. I thought in my head, you have to be there all week, all year long." He said, "No." He said, "We have special circumstances that we could allow something like that." It's like, oh my gosh, we'll figure it out. So, we were thinking about how to figure it out. Then COVID hit, and all the schools quit coming, and all the dinners quit happening, I mean, everybody quit coming. So, it's like, so what are we gonna do? I did not want to let any of the staff go, so we didn't let any of the staff go. So, we started harvesting and making value-added products. So, our two chefs went to Urban Harvest for probably the first six months, because they were the only ones brave enough to put on a mask and go to Urban Harvest to sell product.

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Then when the mask and everything else started lifting off, then we just kept on going, and we go when we can. I mean, we're there most of the time during the year, but we stopped. Last year was different. We had a farmer that wanted to go to the farmers market, so he went all summer

long. But it's too stressful for our team and for the farm, so we're not gonna go during the summer. So, May, the last Saturday in May, this May, will be our last market until September.

Evan Stern: What has your presence at the market meant for you and done for Blackwood?

Cath Conlon: Well, we're 44 miles or so away, and so a lot of the people in the city had no idea who we were. So, it's a great way for us to market. It's a great way for us to get food in other restaurants, to get food in other families, to get to learn-- for kids and families to learn about camp.

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It's been a great way for us to test foods that we're just experimenting with. We make a great green goddess dressing that's made with the berries from the cilantro plant. So, cilantro and coriander are the same. So, once cilantro bolts and it flowers, then when the flowers go away, they turn into green berries before they turn into white coriander. So, we are harvesting the green berries, and we can't keep it on the shelves.

Evan Stern: So, you're selling dressing. What else can you tell me all about what you do sell?

Cath Conlon: Oh, well, so this is not right now. I mean, I will talk about what we're doing now, but one thing that we're planning on moving forward is figs grow really, really, really well. The stone fruits do not grow very well.

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So, we're taking out trees that are dying, or not big producers, and we're replacing them with figs. So, fig will become our signature fruit, and so we will make fig wine, fig preserves, fig leathers, fig everything, fig sauces, fig everything. So, one of the things that we grow, I mean, we make

barbecue sauce out of blackberries, and then we sell fresh blackberries. But people want fresh fruit, because it's hard to grow. So, blackberries are perennial, so we have fences and fences and fences of blackberries. We grow lots of elderberry, so we make-- elderberries are not that tasty, so we make a lot of stuff from the elderberry. So, we make elderberry cough syrup, and we make elderberry syrup that you would use-- I don't know. I'm not a big drinker, so I don't know.

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There's another drink. There's something that you would use to mix with alcohol. I don't know what it is.

Evan Stern: That's all right.

Cath Conlon: But, anyway, so we make two different kinds of elderberry sauces or syrups. We grow cactus, and we sell the cactus. We sell *nopalitos*, and then we also make product out of it. What else? We grow a lot of moringa trees. I mean, we do sell the leaves, fresh leaves, and people could put that in their salad or their eggs or their soup or whatever. But mostly we collect all the leaves, and we dehydrate them, either in a dehydrator or we let them hang from these big-- we call them clouds that are in our gathering hall for them to dry on.

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So, with the moringa, we make powder, we make cookies, we make killer cookies with chocolate chips, and we make moringa balls, which are these little round green balls with a lot of moringa powder in 'em. We can't keep those on the shelves in the different places that we sell them to. Then we also sell them ourselves at the market. We make a lot of teas.

Evan Stern: You're talking about these, you know, the dressing and the moringa powder that you can't keep on the shelves. Are there any stories about lengths that people have gone to, to get their hands on these, or any stories about what your products have meant for customers?

Cath Conlon: Well, yeah, they want us to leave it out on the step somewhere, where they just come home and get it, or they want to buy three or four big bottles of 'em so that they can save 'em. So, yeah, people, they'll drive all the way out. It's 44 miles out. So, they drive out or they make arrangements with somebody else to come and get it.

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There's another lady called JuiceUp, and she buys like all of our kale and our Malabar spinach. The Malabar spinach is another perennial that we have every year. She just buys it, and wants me to bring it by her house, I mean, just drop it at her porch and just leave it there. So, people have come into town, and they have me mail it to them with freeze-- what's it called? Dry ice, yeah, so that.

Evan Stern: We've spoken about a lot of evolutions that you've had over the past now over 30, 35 years. You mentioned this earlier, but you really did have a big evolution a few years ago, when you opened your Skyfarm in Downtown Houston. So, first of all, for someone like me, who's never been there, what is the Skyfarm?

Cath Conlon: Well, it's a one-acre-- it's just a little bit less than a one-acre farm.

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It's one of the largest rooftop farms in Texas, and one of the top 10 or maybe the top 5 rooftop farms in the country. So, it's huge. So, what is it? We are doing-- we're applying the same

methods and same practices that we apply at the land to the sky. One thing that was a huge surprise, there's a lot of drains under the farm, and so you've got a foot of soil, and then you've got three feet of Styrofoam, and then you've got the roofing membrane, and there's drains underneath that. There's like 17 drains. When the first hurricane came, I just imagined, I mean, you've got all these beautiful, beautiful, beautiful murals on all the buildings downtown, and I just imagine all this mud and plants just flying out and landing on those buildings. But that's not what happened at all. As soon as the water or whatever hits it, it drains down.

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So, it didn't look like anything ever even came through at all. That's when I was saying, wow, wow. So, I mean, it's like, go out there, and see what kind of damage, and it does not look like there was a storm ever passed through.

Evan Stern: Wow, that's miraculous.

Cath Conlon: It is miraculous.

Evan Stern: How did this idea come to you, and why was it important for you to build a farm in Downtown Houston, on top of a building?

Cath Conlon: Well, the idea didn't come to me to build a farm. The idea of us being in town has always been something that we wanted to do. A board member Jeff Kaplan is friends with the people that own-- the Liu family that own the POST. One of the family members was telling Jeff that they were looking for a farmer to farm the property there. Jeff said, "I know the perfect farmer." So, Jeff called, and he said, "Would you be interested in that?" I said, "I sure would." So, we met a couple times.

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I mean, it really took probably, I don't know, five or six or seven months for us to really reach a point where we wanna do this. I wanted and invited the whole team to come to dinner at Blackwood, because I wanted them to know who we are and what we look like. The reason I think what we look like is important is because farms during the Dust Bowl were not safe for children, and they were not beautiful at all. They were using pesticides. If the tractor died, they just left it there, and it was there 20 years later. To me, that's not beautiful. What family would ever encourage their little child to go play there or grow up to be a farmer?

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So, I think that beauty and organization is a key factor, and so Blackwood Land is beautiful, Blackwood Skyfarm is beautiful, and I think that beauty is an important part of life. It gets your endorphins moving, makes you feel better about who you are, I mean, it's as important as the food is that you eat.

Evan Stern: But I think that's kind of an important, I think, building from there, you've spoken at length about the importance of building a 21st century farm.

Cath Conlon: Yes.

Evan Stern: What is a 21st century farm, and why do you think it's important for farming to have a new story and image?

Cath Conlon: Because I don't wanna tell the old story, because I don't want early childhood infants that we're talking about early childhood around them, I don't want that to be part of their life.

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I want the new farm technology, the new farm language, the new farm images to be what they see, and not what it has been. Does that make sense?

Evan Stern: Oh, absolutely. You've also said that being a farmer means you have to wear a lot of hats. What are those hats?

Cath Conlon: Oh my gosh, you have to be an economist. You have to be interested in medicine. You have to be a chef. You have to love to cook. You have to be a chemist. You have to love to be outside. You need to love being in a dark room when you're looking under a microscope. You have to love getting your hands dirty. You have to be able and be willing to go and stand in front of people and talk. You have to have good command of your terminology and your language in order to reach the people that can make farming be a common-- be a career that anybody wants to do.

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So, I used to go-- I talked about the Land Institute earlier, and going there to learn everything, because they're scientists, they're geeky scientists. I want to learn from geeky scientists so that we can be a better scient…I mean, a better farmer. So, they're the ones that created Kernza. So, they used to do a Prairie Fest, and I would take all of our staff there to learn from them. Then, about two years ago, they quit doing the Prairie Fest, and it's like, so where in the world are we gonna go learn from? So, I learned about the Danforth Plant Science Center, and I went there to go visit it. They have 350 geeky scientists under one roof, and every scientist there is assigned their own artist.

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So, when I think about farming, and I think about moving into the next centuries, I think about how hot it is. When it's hot, the icebergs are melting, which means the oceans are rising, and they're rising above sea level. All that salt water is washing in, and it's infiltrating into our farmland. How can we, as human beings, protect ourselves from all that salt? 'Cause we don't need that salt, I mean, it's not good for our bodies. It's not good for our hearts. So, I asked the question, that question of one of the scientists that I was interviewing, and he said, "I know exactly how to answer that question." So, all of the technology that they have for taking images of our bodies, like X-rays and MRIs and CAT scans and sonograms, they all exist for plants as well.

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So, he showed me this image that just had light and dark and gray and black and just all sorts of shades of gray striations going through it. I had no idea what I was looking at, because I have an untrained eye, like most people looking at an X-ray. So, the artist's responsibility is to give shape to all the body parts of the plants. So, if the quinoa plant is planted, and they're sucking up salt water, when they get to the top, there are all these salt bladders, and these salt bladders pull all the salt out. Then the freshwater goes up to the quinoa, which is what we eat. I just-- that's brilliant. So, this plant world, there's an intelligence in the plant world that we don't acknowledge that most people don't know about. We don't know what we don't know.

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So, we're starting a series of speakers at the Skyfarm on plant, I mean, scientists and people that know about plants, and stories just like that, that we need to know.

Evan Stern: Speaking of education like that, you've also said that you can take the farm out of nature education, but you cannot take the nature education out of the farm. What do you mean by that?

Cath Conlon: What I mean is what I said earlier, you can farm all day long, and never talk about food. But if you talk about the food that you're growing, you cannot help but talk about the farm, I mean, about farming, because that's how you get the food. Whoever made that quote about the education, I think it kind of got mixed up there.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

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Cath Conlon: Because I've always just said what I just said, you know, you can talk about nature all day, and never talk about food, but you can't talk about food without talking about nature, because that's where it comes from.

Evan Stern: Well, it's good and important to clarify that misquote, if you think it's good to get that quote right. But where would you like to see Blackwood in another 10 years?

Cath Conlon: In another 10 years, I would like to see us-- I used to think I wanted us to be big, but I don't really want us to be big. We could be bigger in the sense that we have different satellite sites. But, for the same reason I said that I don't-- the skin is our lar…the edges is our largest part of our body. It's also the largest of any organization, and farm, it's your edge. So, if you get bigger, then the farm is gonna be dead in the middle, and I don't want that. So, you want it to be just big enough that the whole thing is thriving and jumping. When you look at microbes through the microscope, you see them jumping and twisting and twirling and doing somersaults.

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Nobody will ever look at the soil in the same way again when they see that. So, we could have different satellite sites. But I want us-- I want farming to be seen as a valid career choice, an important career choice, that farming and food is our medicine, and they get that respect for that, and that any farmer can pay their farmers living wages, and that they can provide them with insurance and all of those benefits, and that they can come and live there and raise their family doing that.

Evan Stern: Ho would you like--?

Cath Conlon: That's not just for Blackwood, that's for all farms.

Evan Stern: Oh, of course.

Cath Conlon: Yes.

Evan Stern: How would you like to be remembered?

Cath Conlon: I love my grandmother and the ancestral knowledge that I glean from her every day. I adore my son and I adore my granddaughter, and I hope that I can pass on to both of them the same but different and new ancestral knowledge to them, and that those stories just get told time and time again, because that's how we pass on the ancestral knowledge, is through stories.

Evan Stern: Looking decades ahead, after you've left this Earth, say someone out there wants to go someplace where they can commune and feel the spirit of Cath Conlon, where should they look for you? Where should they go?

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Cath Conlon: Well, I spent a lot of time at Blackwood, and that is where my heart and soul has really been planted. But I don't feel like my heart was born until I was pregnant, and I was in North Carolina in the mountains there, 'cause my pregnancy was not easy. So, when I was pregnant, and I went there, all of a sudden, it was easy. So, I feel like that's really where my heart was born. So, it's in a couple of different places.

Evan Stern: Do you have anything else that you would like to share?

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Cath Conlon: I hope, moving forward, that people realize that food, laughter, family, beauty is their best medicine ever so that they can become, I mean, I've been saying the best human being possible, and that still is it, you know, that people have this idea about Olympians being strong and all that, you know, to be the best Olympian that they can be. But I think it comes from community, love, beauty, and food, and prayer.

Evan Stern: Well, Ms. Conlon, thank you so much for taking time to speak and share with us today.

Cath Conlon: My pleasure. Thank you.

[End]