

JOCINE VELASCO

Gathering Tree Collective Gardens - New Orleans, Louisiana

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Interviewer: Anne Gessler

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Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler. This is the Cooperative Oral History Project. Today is June 24, 2012. And we're at the Gathering Tree Collective Gardens at Telemachus Street. And I'm speaking with--

Jocine Velasco: Jocine Velasco. I am one of the members of our Gathering Tree Collective Garden.

AG: And I'm so glad that you could come talk to me today. I'm really thrilled. And we're--it's a beautiful but really hot day. Last week it was really rainy, but it's beautiful here. So, just to get started, maybe you could tell me where you grew up, and what made you decide to move to New Orleans.

JV: Yeah. I was born in the Philippines. And I moved to the States when I was 9. And have been living in Florida. So I have stayed in the Southeast region. It's the most comfortable, the most like the tropical climate of the Philippines. So I've kind of stayed here. And I went to college in Tallahassee, Florida. And then, for a short stint of a year, I lived in Montana to do trail work. And it made me decide that I wanted to work outside for as long as I can. And I came back to New Orleans--or I came back to the Southeast and decided that I wanted to move to New Orleans. And find a job doing, working outside, preferably doing urban farming and sustainable agriculture. So I came here.

AG: And what is appealing about urban farming? Why is that important to you?

JV: Urban farming to me is the best use of all the abandoned lots that have, you know, have since been here, even before Katrina. And that's just everywhere, you know, in, mostly in urban cities. You know, there's plenty of those places, if we just amend the soil properly, you know, make sure there's not, like, any toxins in the soil. There are perfectly good places to grow food, like as community gardens, for personal use, or as to--for--to sell to markets. And it's self-sustaining, so you're feeding, you're feeding yourself, and you're feeding a lot of people with it in a very small space. I think people forget that.

AG: And how would you define sustainable agriculture?

JV: Sustainable agriculture to me, is definitely a lot of reusing materials. A lot of, you know, making your own potting mix, say, and reusing that potting mix. A lot of, like, seed saving. Using as little, you know, of our precious resources as possible. Making it really local. Community gardens are really special because it can, it's really close by, so you don't have to drive back and--you don't have to use up a lot of gas. And sustainable agriculture is also about permaculture, which is, you know, making sure your garden is using, like, say, rain. You plant things where--You plant, you know--Low-lying areas where it easily floods, you'll plant things that need a lot of water. It's a good use of permaculture.

AG: And so why don't you describe Gathering Tree? What does it look like?

JV: Oh, so Gathering Tree is this small plot of land. I'd say it's about, I don't know, 150 feet by, I'd say, 50 feet. And so there's about four different gardeners here. And right now it's the summer, so we're doing a lot of our summer gardening. And we're doing sweet potatoes up front, close to the fence, close to the Telemachus Street. All along the fence line we have some kind of poorly tended [laughs] blackberry bushes. And we have, we have summer squash growing, and that we're harvesting. And also winter squashes that we're waiting to harvest in a little bit. There's some basil rows in the back that smells really good whenever somebody walks by it. There's some trellis beds that have Christmas lima beans. We're testing out some heirloom seeds that we've been getting from Baker Creek. They're a really good Southern company that does a lot of seed saving and doing a lot of heirloom varieties. So, yeah.

AG: And how do you see permaculture and sustainable agriculture being implemented here?"

JV: So we--Macon Fry, the Garden Guy, he works with a lot of our really good urban farming resources like Parkway Partners and the New Orleans Food and Farm Network. And these organizations are kind of like middlemen. They help urban gardeners find local resources such as, you know, the police department for the horse manure. Because they use a lot of horses, you know. So we get some of that from them. Which is a really vital resource because we don't--it's waste to them, so we don't have to--they actually haul it and give it to us. And we don't have to pay for any of that because we're technically getting that--you know, we're just taking their garbage.

And it's implemented here also because we haven't really, besides our water bill that we're paying off with selling some of our excess produce from here, we don't--and besides seeds--we haven't bought anything. Our compost we've gotten from Macon's Hollygrove [Market and Farm] area. And basically, like, that's it, you know? Yeah, seriously, the only thing that we've really--we've bought seeds. I've bought seeds. It's just a matter of growing and the labor, and that's it. Yeah.

AG: And how did you first hear about Gathering Tree?

JV: Well, of course Macon. I wanted to start volunteering and gathering more knowledge of urban farming. And so, I had found out--it was really easy to find out about the farmers markets around town. And one of the most popular ones was Hollygrove Farm and Market. And Hollygrove Farm and Market, it's almost like a semi-CSA, where they have these \$25 box--boxes of produce that you get with all seasonal produce. But outside of it are these plots of land that have master gardeners that grow their produce there, and then they sell it back to Hollygrove. And Macon Fry was one of those. And he was kind of, like, he just needed help for just for the summer, last summer. He just needed help, kind of like weeding. There's a bunch of really invasive species that are a big problem here. So yeah, I started volunteering over there. And that's where I started helping him out for a while, harvesting his arugula. Because that's the crop that he sells over there. [pauses, cell phone rings]

And, so, he came up to me and had asked me with two other volunteers and said, “Hey you know, you guys have been so consistent with volunteering, you guys should check out my other garden. It’s called Gathering Tree, by Xavier University. That’s where I do my--it’s my own personal plot in this community garden. That’s were like--” I think he was growing his last chard. He had a bunch of chard there, and he was, that was where he was basically feeding himself. It wasn’t for profit. He said, “You should check it out, and see if you’d like to come help me out there, and then just harvest all the produce that you need.” So I started doing that. So I eventually, we gathered enough, maybe five people and Macon, who were consistently, [meeting] you know, like every week, maybe three or four times just trying to get rid of all the weeds and slowly planting for the fall. The fall is one of the nicest times of the year to plant here in New Orleans because all of these things that you don’t normally see, like brassicas, like brussel sprouts and broccoli, kale--tons of kale, so beautiful, you know. They start growing here. And so, yeah, we were preparing for that. And so yeah, we decided to do that.

And then, that was kind of when we became, like, part of his plot in this community garden here at Gathering Tree is when we got to start that season with him. And once we started that season, he said, “You know, well, now that you guys have been becoming regulars, like, we should maybe turn this place into a co-op, into a kind of collective garden.” Where, because since most of us were just beginning, beginner farmers, it could be used not only as a place to feed ourselves but also as a way to learn how to farm here in Southeastern, you know, the Southeast United States, more specifically, coastal Southern Louisiana. So yeah.

AG: So can you talk a little bit more about how the organization is structured and how people kind of decide what, you know, what to do, and things like that?

JV: It’s really loosely structured, I would say, because there’s only--when we first started there were only about seven of us, you know, at most. We just had a set of rules, saying things like, how we’re going to deal with excess. And how we would do that is if we can’t feed ourselves and if we’re making too much food, that we should give it to other people. Especially give it to the neighbors around here who would eat it. And then, and to have fun. Have a lot of fun learning how to do this work. And we kind of--the only kind of thing that we need to assign specific duties to is usually irrigation, just watering. Especially in the summertime because most of our plants--if it’s not pouring down rain, it needs a lot of water. And it’s usually like, it would need maybe two to three times a day, our plot needs to be watered. So we just decide. We make a calendar, and see what everybody’s availability are. And we just decide from there. Mostly everybody has kind of like irregular hours. And, like, restaurant jobs or something where they have only a certain amount of their day that they could work--or that they are free to water. So, yeah, we have that.

But it’s pretty much--most of our gardening, like, say, our gardening or our mending or our weed removal or something, we do that always pretty much collectively. Usually on Sundays. Ever since we’ve gotten more people to join us. Because now I think we’re about like 13 people strong. And we have--it’s probably the easiest day for everybody to get together and tackle a lot

of really big garden issues. Especially if moving your fall farming to summer, it's really helped that we've had a lot of people come here on Sundays. It makes it feel more like a collective, I guess. But individually also we do our jobs like of watering or doing menial, like, harvesting or whatever during the week, just independently from one another.

AG: Can you compare it to a community garden that isn't structured collectively?

JV: Yeah, so how Gathering Tree is working is that it's a collective within a community garden. Macon had enough space in the community garden that he was able to have people share it with him. But it's different from a community garden in that all the responsibilities are pretty much shared within the group of people. Macon likes to think that I'm the leader of our summer farming, but it was all decided upon everybody. I think it's really important that we ask every single person if--it's a collective, so you know, whoever--we decide what we want to grow, and when we're going to help out. [Another collective member approaches Jocine Velasco with a cantaloupe. She says, "It's a really small melon." The member laughs.]

So, yeah it's just different in that way, is that, you know, ownership is within, like, everybody. Every member has a complete stake in that, what we do, we have to take ownership of the problems, like, you know, like forgetting to--or not forgetting, but kind of leaving for about two weeks, especially in the summertime when everybody is kind of going on long trips because it's so hot here in New Orleans. You know, it's kind of hard to, like--or even when it rains or something--it's just hard to remember that you have to keep coming back. Because weeds are going to--they're not going to stop growing. They're going to actually keep growing and get bigger. And so we kind of have to tackle this. But if we don't, we kind of have to own that problem and try to alleviate it together. And that's what we're kind of doing today, this Sunday. So.

AG: And you were saying that the garden kind of functions as a model. So do you have tours, or do you have any community outreach, or how does that work?

JV: What do you mean as a model? Did I say that?

AG: Yeah, I thought you were saying that it was kind of, well why don't you describe--

JV: Oh yeah--

AG: Let me rephrase that. How do you see the Gathering Tree function in the community?

JV: Oh, ok, I see. We, it's kind of, it has just educational purposes for the people that, that garden here. The more people that find out about the place it's through curiosity. And we've kind of just made it that, as a tool for whoever's interested to come and see how personal or even how a collective garden, how it works. And yeah, I mean, we just teach through practicing. That's pretty much all we can do as gardeners who have separate lives outside of this. Is just to

invite people and to tell people, "This is what can grow here." Teach us all the the things that Macon has taught us. It's really important to follow certain rules, and like everything, everything that you have to do. Since farming is so regionally specific, you have to have this kind of particular way of farming. And gardening is really specific to New Orleans. And whoever is willing and free or to have the free time to grow food with us, there's plenty of harvesting to go around for everybody. And that's it. But we've never really advertised, it's pretty much kept as like--it's low-key and it's never been like--we're not a non-profit--we're not really like--I don't know, it's just for the sake of either pleasure or just really like education for whoever really wants to come and help out and be a member. So that's pretty much it.

AG: And you were saying that you give the surplus away to the neighborhood sometimes. So how does that work?

JV: We just, so--There are three other people here. There's Miss Eola, Leola, and Leo. And Eola lives just catty-corner, just catty-corner from here. She lives over there. And for a while we had a bunch of mustard greens. People who--because before this was Gathering Tree it was a garden owned by, I think, Xavier University. So people have always known, people in this neighborhood have always known that this was a garden. And then when Macon came, even more so. He's such a character, Macon is, that you can't just help to be--like, he's a friendly guy to a lot of people. A lot of the people here, a lot of the neighbors here, like Mike--Mike's one of the neighbors who has picked cumquats off this tree for as long as it's been around here. They know it's a place where they can get food if they needed it. But and so, like, any excess we--usually by word of mouth or them just walking by and being pretty curious. They're free to take--we, usually on Sundays we have really big harvest days, we would have our big wheelbarrows just filled with, like, greens or carrots or whatever. And if they happen to come by, walk by--which they do, especially Mike--we'll give them whatever we--yeah, they can take as much as they want. And we usually, like, if there's a need, because there's always a need to get rid of the produce, if we have too much, we kind of just knock on their doors, especially Miss Eola.

AG: And could you describe the neighborhood a little bit?

JV: Yeah, so we're in Mid-City, close to Hollygrove. Right in front of us, it's just a typical really kind of, really old houses that were pretty badly damaged during Katrina. The house on the left if you're facing the street if you're in garden, they've tried to rent it out for a while. It's a typical New Orleans street in that it's not completely wealthy. People come and go, but there are also a bunch of really old families that have stayed here for a really long time that came back or never left after the storm. But yeah, it's just small, it's kind of small. And it's just, it's not quaint either, it's just scrappy. I feel like it's scrappy. It's a scrappy neighborhood.

AG: And then Xavier University is right there?

JV: Yeah. Xavier University is just like a block or two away, and I think are slowly kind of trying to buy these houses around and trying to build, I guess, dorms. Maybe, I don't, I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure that they're trying to buy a lot of property around their campus. So, I don't know. Maybe pushing out even more people of these neighborhoods. But Miss Eola is here, she's still here, Miss Eola. She's been here for a while.

AG: And have you seen, has working with Macon and the Gathering Tree opened up opportunities for you within the local farming movement?

JV: Definitely, definitely. I thank him, oh man, I thank him a lot for not only teaching me how to do the basics not only with farming here in New Orleans, but also connecting me. Since he's so, he's so good about that. His networking, his reach within the farming community here in New Orleans is really immense. Because he's kind of a rock'n'roll star, really funny in that way. But he's connected me with my current job right now, which is the Vintage Garden Farms. I work with a friend of Macon's, Casey Mitchell. Just a friend through farming. He's also, Casey Mitchell was a farmer in the Hollygrove Farm and Market. And so they've known each other there. I was looking for work. I was in a job that I was unhappy with. So I decided to pursue that thing that I was, I was volunteering most at gardens. And I was thinking maybe I should--I could learn enough that I could work hard and find a job doing that.

And so I pursued Macon, and I asked him, "Oh, you know, do you know anybody, or do you know any other thing that would accept or would have a position available for someone who's kind of just starting to farm?" And he said, "Well, there's not many places that would take a farming assistant job that's paid." There's Grow Dat Youth Farm and there's, what else was there? There was that and then there was the Vintage Garden Farms. And luckily--I waited for a while--but luckily they had this position available for a farming supervisor because they just had gotten a new farm, a new urban space out in Chalmette. And so they were extending--they were trying to expand and they needed somebody to go and work at one of their smaller gardens. And that's the spot that I would have needed to fill.

So I applied for that job having volunteering with Casey at the Vintage Garden Farms. I had volunteered with them for a little bit. So applied for that and I actually was--Casey had--since I didn't have that much training, Casey was kind of unsure of me and actually didn't hire me. They had gotten somebody else who was much more experienced for the job. And he told me as I was volunteering. And I was pretty bummed. I was gracefully bummed--I was pretty graceful about it, but I was bummed. But that same day I guess they were trying to get a hold of this person that they hired. And she ended up telling them that she had found another job. Within that span, maybe three hours or something: they had told me that they weren't going to hire me, and then they told me that that person that they hired could't fill that position. And if I wanted to go and have that job for them. And I said, "Uh, yeah, I think I would. Yeah, definitely." I was really secretly stoked that that person turned down--didn't get the job. So that's how I got the job. [laughs] That's how I got the job as a farming supervisor.

AG: And could you describe some of your fellow collective members?

JV: Well, we have really, really colorful members. Some of the original members are Joyce. She is a small, petite woman [laughs]. Yeah, she's from Hong Kong. She moved here after she lived in Atlanta. And she was working at an architecture firm. And she moved here and was so, just like, really kind of misfits in a way--All of us are kind of misfits in that we, like, the social norms that we're supposed to fit in, we totally don't, somehow. She's, so, Joyce was working in this successful architecture firm. And she was, but she decided to move here and become a restaurant manager. And just decided to pursue what she wanted to do, which was hobbies that she felt really strongly about. One of them was urban farming. So she started volunteering with Macon as well.

Chavonne, that's another one. She's a set designer from California. And she's also really drawn to urban farming. And she moved here for the movie industry. But she came here to the Gathering Tree because she felt really at home, she said.

There's James, a childhood friend of mine who moved here a while back. And he was just feeling that he needed to do something that was way different than what he was doing in Florida. He was working at a pretty big corporation. He decided to try non-profit work. You know, just a change in his life. Also didn't fit in that environment. And kind of wanted this, just to work outside. Work outside and have that kind of sense of, I don't know, just feeling like you're doing something good. Even if it's just sweating a lot outside.

And there's Annie. She works with the government doing all sorts of stuff. Water grants, I think. She came from Chicago and New York, and she also just enjoys farming. I don't know, everybody is just like a myriad of just really funny people coming together really just for the sake of being curious and wanting to learn how to urban farm. Which is a really, really small niche right now. But it's, like, growing all the time. And so, yeah, that's it. It's really fun getting to meet people I wouldn't otherwise get to meet before. I've made a lot of really good friends from this. So, yeah, just really good people.

And I guess mostly, mostly all--what I've come to find, is that mostly everybody has come from different places. There aren't really New Orleanians. Except for Daniel. Daniel has been here for all his life. And he just started getting into urban farming. He said he had watched *Food Inc.* and decided that he wanted to pursue urban farming. Which is for some people, watching *Food Inc.* would make them, like, "Oh yeah, I agree," but just maybe buy at farmers markets. But Daniel is just the type of person who's just like a Renaissance Man, like, "No, I'll go do this myself." And decided to go and learn. So yeah.

AG: Well, I only have a couple more questions. But, one I wanted to ask, is are you aware of the cooperative or collective scene in New Orleans? Are there other cooperatives or collectives around that you know of?

JV: I know there are arts-based ones. There's the New Orleans Community Print Shop. A really good friend of mine is a member of that. And that's a, I feel that's one of the ones that are pretty successful in what they do, in that they have a space for the members to go and print their works, but also provides a space for anybody who just needs to do, like, wedding invitations or fliers for their shows or something. To, you know, pay a small fee to just, yeah, like, go and totally just use, use up the materials and, for a day, and get out however many that they need. And they also conduct free print shop days. Usually, maybe like, once, one month, one Sunday a month, I think where they get everybody to come. Whoever wants to go and learn or whoever needs, like, some prints done. And that's really awesome because it familiarizes the community to the print shop. And also it had, the print shop shares their knowledge to the community. So it's a really awesome, kind of symbiotic relationship. Because, since New Orleans, it's an artistic town, and a lot of people celebrate that in whatever way. So that's a good one.

The newcomer, actually, when I first moved here, was the New Orleans Food Co-op. And so they were needing a lot of volunteers, so people would--So I started volunteering with them, back when they first started. And they, yeah, I think they're growing all the time. And they have a good amount of shareholders now. I think they're doing pretty well in a neighborhood that kind of needs something like that. So. Yeah. Those are the ones that I think I mainly have, like, familiarized myself with.

AG: And you've been here a year, is that so?

JV: Ah, about a year, a year and a half.

AG: And how have you seen the city change, or have you, at all?

JV: I really have. Even without my talking to people, I think about it. People who've lived here longer, there's just been--Even with alternatives in restaurants, like food alternatives, like vegetarian or vegan foods, there's just been pop-ups and speakeasies and restaurants opening all the time that have those alternatives. Or a push to maybe like farm-to-table mentality about their food, more local, I guess, local sources of produce. Because I can even tell, just like in the past, I don't know, 6 or 7 months of just like, places that I've been, places like Maurepas Foods in the Bywater who've opened up. And who are--on their menu they have, they call them "purveyors." "Purveyors" meaning the places where they buy local produce, and they have them on their menu.

I don't know, I think it's just that, all of these things that really big cities have been doing for you know, a decade or more, has finally hit New Orleans in a really big way. And not just food, but like, food economy. Keeping it really local. There's the Locavore Challenge that happens this month. That's a really big deal. I've never even seen anything like that before, where so many people--and I work at a farmer's market, so I see like, during this month, so many more people have come regularly to buy their produce. And I think that's just really awesome. When I got here, I think that's when they started doing that too, so.

AG: And before, I guess last week we were talking about urban renewal and gentrification in New Orleans. Where have you seen that, or have you seen it?

JV: You can't help but see that all the time here, everywhere. Even in this garden, you know? There's not--there's Xavier University is a predominantly black college. Like, people get curious, but the members of our collective are A. not from here, and B. don't--kind of not in the same neighborhood. We kind of traveled to get here. So there's kind of a gentrification like that here. But, which is something that some of us kind of like talk about, and sometimes find it hard to, kind of, to accept sometimes. But, you know, no matter what, you're kind of a part of this thing that's happening. So, yeah, I don't know.

AG: Well, I think that's all my questions. But before we end, do you want to say something that you feel like we didn't address? Or do you have a story or an anecdote that you want to wrap up with?

JV: I'm not really sure. I think I'm good. [Addressing collective members standing nearby: "Do you have anything to add? Do you have anything, you guys have anything that you want to add?"]

Sorry, like, members of this place are here and I just feel kind of--[collective member James breaks in, "We're too tired to have opinions."]-awkward about wanting--I don't know, I feel like they should share something too. But I don't really have much.

AG: OK, well thank you so much for letting me talk with you. It was really great. And have a good rest of the farming day.