

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

REGENERATIVE FARMING: TACKLING RACISM WITH RICE

LAURA FLANDERS: How do we nurture the soil, feed our bodies and heal hurt people and places in these stressed out times? Today "The Laura Flanders Show" is coming from central Louisiana where Black farmers are leading an experiment in rice growing, regeneration and repair. What does the work of healing look like? Well, as Konda Mason who heads up the project, puts it, transformation happens at the intersection of land, race, money and spirit. It's about Jubilee Justice and it's a collaborative undertaking happening on fertile soil. Konda Mason, a social entrepreneur, mindfulness teacher and justice advocate is the founder and president of Jubilee Justice. Driven to address rural racism and environmental decay, Konda has focused her work here in the South in the very place where ancestral harm was caused.

KONDA MASON: We are right now sitting in Alexandria, Louisiana, on a former plantation that is now the largest organic farm in the state. It's called Inglewood and Inglewood is in central Louisiana. And my project, the Jubilee Justice Project, is based here and it's based here from the invitation of Elisabeth Keller who has become my dearest sister friend. She knew that this project was happening. We were talking about the project and I said, "I need land." She said, "Well, I got a lot of that." She has this 3,600 acres she has here. And so she invited Jubilee Justice to set ourselves here and make this home and it's home.

LAURA FLANDERS: Myles Gaines is farm manager at the Jubilee Justice Black Farmers' Rice Project near Alexandria, Louisiana.

MYLES GAINES: We're on an experimental farm here working with a cohort of farmers throughout the South so Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and the Carolinas to grow rice together organically and regeneratively as best as we can.

LAURA FLANDERS: The ancestral lands of the Natchez and Avoyel people. This part of central Louisiana in the Red River Valley produced untold wealth for white America under slavery. That wealth fueled the growth of the nation and created the model for industrial agriculture as we know it today. But the wealth never accrued to the people who cleared and cultivated this soil. The Jubilee Justice Black Farmer's Rice Project aims to repair some of these historical wrongs by working with Black farmers to grow high value crops in new ways.

MYLES GAINES: There's so many relics throughout this land. Old home shacks, there's a cemetery across the bayou. So when I'm out here and I'm sweating and it's hot, or even when I'm not when I have the luxury, being on the computer and do something because I have the choice to do that I'm constantly thinking of those folks, the Black land stewards who were here before

me. I feel like I'm still getting acquainted with the Black agrarian ecosystem particularly in the South. I know of there are a lot of us out there but I also know with Black farmers, farmers in general, the average age of farmers I believe is 60 plus. So there's this thing of almost like a dying breed. Not just Black farmers, but farmers in general but particularly Black farmers. And then there's so much Black land loss and even in my family and others there's not necessarily a want to come tend the land because there's the history of slavery, the history of sharecropping.

LAURA FLANDERS: Shirley Sherrod is a longtime organizer and advocate for Black farmers who has worked since the 1960s to establish New Communities Inc, the country's first community land trust in Southwest Georgia. She's working with the Jubilee Justice Project.

SHIRLEY SHERROD: This land and the land we have over in Georgia, it had a bad beginning, but we try to take that bad beginning and turn that into what we need for today. Our folks suffered and they suffered so that life could be better for us. So we try to take that and help make that better happen for our people.

LAURA FLANDERS: Under the Obama administration Sherrod was appointed the US Department of Agriculture's Georgia Director of Rural Development and then forced to resign after a right wing smear campaign. She knows the challenges Black farmers face inside and out.

SHIRLEY SHERROD: We tried to build our own community in Georgia, New Communities. We created the first community land trust. They shot at buildings, they worked against us politically. They did everything they could to take the land away from us and they were eventually successful. So to say...they love to say Black people are lazy and well you've heard how we've been described but we are constantly having to work against a system that has been designed to keep us down even today.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's made it so hard for African-American farmers especially to thrive and to keep their land?

SHIRLEY SHERROD: People don't understand when you can't get the loans that the government has, Farmer's Home Administration was supposed to be the lender of last resort. You were supposed to be able to go there and qualify for a loan, but then you had people working in those offices who would work with some other white person because they want your land. And then they would do things like string it out so that you couldn't get the money when you needed it, not give what the plan called for in terms of a loan. And then, and all of this was designed to get you to the point where you were in trouble financially and then they could move on into foreclose. We've lost so much land that way.

LAURA FLANDERS: Black farmers have lost millions of acres of land in the last hundred years in the US, much of it because of lack of capital, discrimination by loan agencies, decades of white violence and ongoing harassment.

SHIRLEY SHERROD: That's why when once I met Konda and learned what she was doing is like, hey, I need to be a part of this. We need to be a part of this. We working together, putting this network of farmers together from state to state is important. Showing our people what's possible when we work together. And then having some others who, with knowledge, who are willing to be a part of helping to right some of the wrongs of the past.

KONDA MASON: In the 1920s, we went from 20 million acres to right now down to two. And there's a reason for that, right? It's systemic, it's intentional and what we want to do is to be able to stop that by creating a crop, because that's what they do, they grow food, is to introduce a crop that has high value that is also good for the environment that they can actually take that same acreage and make a lot more money from. And so that's what Jubilee Justice is doing. So if they can get that economic base strong then they don't have to lose their land. What I want to do here in Louisiana and particularly for young Black people and for Black people in general, there has been no investment. No investment. Not only that, there's been disinvestment in Black communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: A rice mill owned and operated cooperatively by the Black farmers in Jubilee Justice's regional network could make a difference. Why is the ownership of that mill so important to this project?

KONDA MASON: We, as Black farmers particularly, we rarely own the land. We are often leasing, we absolutely own no manufacturing and we are completely dependent upon the third party to say yes to my crop. And if you grow your crop and they say no, you've just lost an entire, an entire season and there can go your entire business, right? We have to own the means of production. And what that mill represents is that it will be run by a cooperative of Black farmers. Cutting out the middle person from here out, bringing their own rice is a vertical integration of their crop from growing it to milling it to distributing it, and making their own decisions. And so that piece of that cut is a huge part that now goes into their pockets.

LAURA FLANDERS: On May 12th community gathered to celebrate the grand opening of the Black Farmers' Rice Mill at Jubilee Justice Specialty Foods. Bernard Winn, born and raised in Alexandria heads up the operations. Who's on your mind right now as we begin this conversation, Bernard?

BERNARD WINN: I think about my family when I start this conversation, my grandfather who was a great man, he's a mason. He's from Alexandria as well and he's the one that got me

involved in learning about growing food for yourself, being self-sustainable in that aspect and in many other ways in teaching us how to work hard, focus on what you want and get the job done.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tell us a little bit about how the Alexandria of your grandfather compares to the one that you grew up in.

BERNARD WINN: I've heard the stories from him and my father as well. And when he was a child of the, just the hatred that they did experience, unfortunately. They would be walking home from school, people would pass by throwing bottles at them, saying, "Get out the road," things like that. But my grandfather always said, "You don't have to let those people bring you down to their level. You can try to ignore it the best you can, of course defend yourself but do not let them bring you to their level.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yesterday was a huge day in this space.

BERNARD WINN: It was amazing for me to see all of y'all and everybody here experience what I've experienced my first few weeks of milling this rice and seeing one product turn into something that's edible. The most intriguing thing about Jubilee Justice to me is this mill and the fact that we as a cohort have the deeds to this building. It's going to be ours. This building here is a stronghold for me in my heart. And I want it to, I want to see it just expand and become the most successful rice mill in the South or in the country.

NWAMAKA AGBO: My name's Nwamaka Agbo. I am the CEO of the Kataly Foundation. I'm also the managing director of our Restorative Economies Fund.

LAURA FLANDERS: Kataly was an early supporter of the Jubilee Justice Black Farmer's Rice Project along with a fund called Potlikker Capital. Kataly made a very early loan to the Jubilee Justice Project here. Why? Why did you think it was a, a good bet?

NWAMAKA AGBO: When Konda started to talk about the story of this land of the people of this place and what the farmers needed, it felt like a really great opportunity to think about how do we help to redistribute some of our resources to support those farmers in need? And how do we do it in a way that helps them to shift out of a model, an economic model that has been harmful and extractive and towards something that is restorative, regenerative and that centers their expertise and their experience as farmers of color on the land in the South. Restorative economics calls on us to first acknowledge the hurt and structural harm caused by economic systems of extraction, exploitation. It then requires us to engage in a conversation about repair. What does repair actually look like? And yes, some of that is financial but a lot of it is relational. Can we come to be in relationship with one another, see the dignity in each other and then treat each other accordingly? And then moving forward with reconciliation and restitution recognizing

that we need to commit ourselves to not recreating the hurt and harms that got us here. And so in order to do that, we have to be in an intentional practice going forward. We have to commit ourselves to new economic models that don't take us back into capitalism, but help to launch us forward into something that's rooted in shared prosperity. And so this project is looking at not just Jubilee Justice as the one rice mill, but is connected to an ecosystem of farmers, of other business owners, of funds, of banks.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's not just the farmers the Jubilee Justice seeks to restore, it's also the land and consumers too. The water from flooded paddy fields emits enormous amounts of methane gas contributing to climate change. But rice doesn't have to be grown this way. The farmers involved in the Jubilee Justice Project are experimenting with a different way of cultivating rice called the System of Rice Intensification or SRI that doesn't flood the rice fields.

KEN LEE: So rice is actually not an aquatic plant. It doesn't need all that water to survive. What happens is when rice is underwater like that, it creates this microbial action where it creates methane gas. And so, but also underwater, the plant is under stress and so that's why it doesn't yield as much. And so there's other steps involved but SRI uses younger seedlings so it has more they call phyllochron moments where more of these tillers of the plant shoot off. So there's more tillers, more panicles and therefore more rice.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ken Lee and Caryl Levine are the co-founders of Lotus Foods, a specialty rice company based in California that's worked with small holder farmers all around the world who are using the SRI system. Jubilee Justice is connecting Lotus Foods with farmers like Donna Isaac who are the first to do this in the United States. And Lotus Foods is working with them to bring their high value grain to US markets and consumers.

CARYL LEVINE: Rice learned to survive in water. It doesn't thrive in water.

KEN LEE: Yeah.

CARYL LEVINE: So with the System of Rice Intensification which Jubilee Justice is promoting because we shared it with them because it's such an incredible agroecological way to grow rice that uses less seed, less water, no agro chemicals and farmers like yourself, Donna, can get double and triple their yields while sequestering carbon while cutting down methane gas emissions.

DONNA ISAAC: This year will be our first year of trying direct seeded rice, so that's going to be new and it's experimental, but the idea is to cut down the man hour, labor hours of planting the rice. But we have been building soil, we have had cover crops in, we've terminated those cover crops, getting them back down to the ground, we do not till. So we are a no-till market

garden. And so our goal is getting that fertility in the soil to help give us a really good high yielding rice crop.

LAURA FLANDERS: What difference does Jubilee Justice Farm Project make to you?

DONNA ISAAC: It's unbelievable. I wouldn't be standing here today without the support of Jubilee Justice. First of all, I didn't know how to grow rice, so that was the starting point. But them working with me, providing the technical support, providing the assistance, opening up their network to me, opening up markets, opening up funding through Potlikker Capital so that we can actually mechanize and actually think about scaling production, everything, it means everything.

LAURA FLANDERS: Farming is hard, physical labor, even with modern technology and the best will in the world. And growing specialty rice in a restorative way isn't easy. Again, farm manager, Myles Gaines

MYLES GAINES: We have a very interesting weed situation here, given our climate and weeds just love, I mean, plants just love to thrive here. So I'm thinking how can we balance all of the farming principles that we want to hold onto, how can we build soil health? How can we have a productive mill? How can we create something that's also doing all these things that's also sustainable and economically viable for ourselves and our farmers? Yeah, that's the mission and-

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a lot.

MYLES GAINES: Yeah, it is a lot. But when you're doing it with folks who are at least committed to experiment and are committed to some of the things I just listed off, that's what keeps us going.

LAURA FLANDERS: Veteran activist, Shirley Sherrod has confidence. With Konda Mason, she co-directs the New Communities, Jubilee Justice and Liberated Capital Food and Land Justice Fund which provides grants to Black farmers across the Southeast who are working toward food justice. Could the future be different from the history Sherrod's known? But you're saying it's different today. You feel like this place has a better chance?

SHIRLEY SHERROD: I think it has a better chance because of the knowledge and the fact that there are people with information, with some contacts. Now you still can't let your guard down and you've got to be on guard at all times for something you really were not looking for, but it surfaced. But because of so many people with so much knowledge and willing to have, whether they're white or Black I think it has a better chance of being able to make it.

LAURA FLANDERS: The spirits at the heart of the Jubilee Justice Project are Konda Mason's and Elisabeth Keller's. Keller's family bought this land in the 1920s when the former cotton plantation was going cheap. She's worked to heal it ever since.

KONDA MASON: She healed the land by getting rid of the chemicals, making it organic, how to heal what happened here with the people she had no clue until I came into her life. And this project Jubilee Justice, for her to have it based here, it is heaven sent to her. It is a way of supporting not only Jubilee Justice but Jubilee Justice supports all these other farmers. And so it's a way of her, she feels being able to do what she can to support what change needs to take place.

ELISABETH KELLER: She was looking for a place to grow rice and I was looking for healing on our land and our history and here we're today and I want to celebrate that in honor of you and all of us here.

KONDA MASON: I'm representing for her, my ancestors who were enslaved here, not in this particular land but enslaved here in this part of the world. And so us coming together, representing our ancestors and all that horrible history that has taken place and being able to come together in a whole new way, in a whole new way. My friend Paul Hawkin, he says, and I agree with him that regeneration is putting life at the center of every decision you make. If you put life at the center of that decision then you're going to be working in a regenerative manner. You're going to be regenerating life.

MYLES GAINES: I think there are a lot of intentional pieces that we could learn from and could have helped, I don't know, sustain us in some very necessary ways of whether or not we engage with one another, how we engage with the land. And this is still something, I'm still learning what all this means but I think there are gems in our journey so far that could be of use, can be seeds for, I don't know, whatever obstacles we come against in the future as it's out there.

LAURA FLANDERS: Whatever beauty we do.

MYLES GAINES: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, there we go.

DONNA ISAAC: My goal is to not just grow organically and to be regenerative and to put the resources back into the soil, but to do it in a way that's affordable so that everybody has access because everybody has a right to good nutritious food.

KEN LEE: We can have these conversations and we can grow food better on a small scale, but if we can get assistance from policy to bring in the big change that we all need because we want a different result, we need to do things differently.

DONNA ISAAC: Exactly.

CARYL LEVINE: But as we're doing that, people like Konda and Jubilee Justice actually makes up the difference in creating an opportunity for the Black farmers to have a livelihood and a livelihood that is vertically integrated that doesn't exist today is pretty awesome. So, land, race, money, spirit, it doesn't get better than that.

DONNA ISAAC: I couldn't agree more.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think we all do. I think we should let the farmers to their business, their work, they're doing very important work back there. And I want to thank you all, really, it's a pleasure talking to you.

CARYL LEVINE: Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you for your work

DONNA ISAAC: Thank you very much.

BERNARD WINN: I tell people that if it could happen here in Alexandria with all of the history, the negative history that we know, it can happen anywhere

LAURA FLANDERS: What do you think the story will be that the future tells what you're up to here? I saw your children.

BERNARD WINN: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: Your grandchildren, what do you think they will say about what happened here today, what you all were part of?

BERNARD WINN: Hopefully by then they'll be, it'll be one of the biggest rice name brands in the country and they'll be like, "That's my dad started that rice mill, that first, the first grain of rice that they produced, my dad was involved in doing that." So that's one of my visions and my dreams and that's one of my main motivations in doing the things that I do, is my children, grandchildren legacy that I leave behind the same way I look at my grandparents and what they left behind. I want to be able to do the same thing. So hopefully they look back and say, "Job well done, papa."

LAURA FLANDERS: This land has seen the rise and fall of complex Indigenous civilization. Successive waves of colonizers have come and gone. It's witnessed the brutal exploitation of Black people and good earth and water to produce generations of white wealth and the kind of uncomfortable, unequal global economy we have today. Could the next chapter of this land's story be different? It's not enough as Konda Mason puts it to stop pouring on poison. We must do the work of repair. Could wealth be produced more healthily, spread more widely, rooted more deeply? Jubilee Justice is showing that it could be possible but only if we have the spirit and only if we have the time. For "The Laura Flanders Show" from central Louisiana, I'm Laura. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining me.

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