

Interview with Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III
Conducted by Jordan Scott
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Jordan Scott: I just wanted to state the purpose of this interview. I'm a student and I'll be conducting today's oral history interview. I have two advisors with me from CCBC who received a grant to conduct research and we're working to develop a digital exhibition to engage the community and encourage them to understand more about the historical significance of Black heritage as it relates to agriculture and faith and all those things and the work that we've done with like churches in the area and all those kinds of things.

Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III: OK

JS: I'm gonna go ahead and get started with the questions. What is your full name?

HB: Full name is, Reverend Heber HEBER M Brown, the third

JS: Where did you grow up?

HB: Born and raised in Baltimore City and later on went to Harford County and continued my schooling there and then after graduating from high school there, attended Morgan State University in Baltimore.

JS: What kind of stuff did you do for fun growing up?

HB: I was heavy into sports so I played a lot of sports but mostly basketball and football and also I was heavy into music so I played the drums at church and then at my school band I played The flute, flugelhorn, three valve trombone and baritone

JS: That takes me into my next question so what are some of your earliest memories surrounding church?

HB: Some of my earliest memories...I have many of them. My dad is a pastor. I'm a preacher's kid and so going to church, different churches around the Baltimore area and beyond, seeing my dad preach and lead religious gatherings is a very early memory. Singing on the choir; my brother and I sang on the choir when we were very young that continued as we got older and we got more siblings. Going to youth programs at the church: Sunday school, Vacation Bible School and summer camps. There was a lot of church in my upbringing so all those kind of interactions, fellowships, and meals are part of my earliest memories.

JS: How would you say your background influenced you to establish something like the Black Church Food Security Network?

HB: I looked at the ways that the churches of my upbringing work together at various times whether it was for religious services like revivals or in response to calamities or tragedy. I saw churches work together to put money together to help those in need and so I guess that I've always seen the example of churches working together to solve common and shared problems and so when I started pastoring myself, and I saw people who are being repeatedly hospitalized for diet related issues, one of my early impulses was to see what organized churches could do to swim upstream and solve the cause of those kinds of problems.

JS: That's very noble. That's very powerful. I'm wondering what challenges you faced starting the Black church food security network?

HB: Some early challenges were related to some people not seeing the vision of what this network could be and I was challenged because I wanted everybody to understand and get the ID and get the vision from the beginning and help me to build it and grow it. That wasn't happening and so that was a challenge. But I eventually overcame that challenge by recognizing that everybody was not gonna go with me or just in general, everybody's not gonna follow behind you know every idea that anybody has, but you can't let that stop you. You gotta keep moving forward and pay attention to those who are supportive and so that's how I got over that particular challenge

JS: Absolutely. It's almost like you can see my question because I wanted to ask what's different about how people saw the Black Church Food Security Network initially in its early stages versus now?

HB: For some people it was just a cute little garden idea in the beginning, and it was very different for others. It was very different to see an African American congregation growing food on their land in the front yard and incorporating that garden and food into the fabric of the ministry of that faith community. That was a very different thing when I first started doing this 15 years ago, there were not many churches in Baltimore if any that had gardens on their land, but now we've grown to more than 230 member congregations across the country in both urban and rural communities Now we are seen as a resource in the clearing house for everybody who's interested in or curious about how churches, Black churches in particular, can get involved. So, a lot has changed and the 15 years that I've been doing this personally in 10 years of this organization has been around.

JS: I'm wondering, do you think more people should start their own gardens and where should somebody like me start?

HB: Yeah, I think everybody should grow something. Everybody's not gonna be a farmer with hundreds of acres but I think that it's a good emotional, spiritual and health practice to grow something even if it's just something in the windowsill. And for those who wouldn't be interested in learning how to start, a few things I would say. One I would say, explore your families, explore your own families, farming or food or health history. It was a very powerful source of inspiration for me when I learned about my family's deep roots and connection with farming.

And learning about my family farming in North Carolina and then learning about my mother side of the family growing their food on their land, and also being active on the waterways of Maryland, crabbing in the like, it really gave me a sense that I was returning to an important part of who my family is always been as opposed to starting something entirely new. That was a source of inspiration for me and so that was that was a good thing before planting any seed, I would say to people do a little bit of homework on where you come from and what your family's connection to farming, the food or health even to what that is.

And then in terms of the practical starting, I would say start small like I said I believe in whether it's growing on the windowsill, or in your backyard, or on your porch start by growing something. I would say stop by growing something that is moderate to low maintenance, maybe something that's not as demanding just so that you give yourself time to adjust to the rhythm of caring for another living thing. And that's what plants are. The same thing, the same considerations that many people have with pets and thinking through how they're gonna care for a pet before they get one, I would offer up as some of the thing when it comes to plants because they will require a similar level of care and consistency. But yeah I would say start small, learn the ropes, build your confidence and then grow bigger if you desire.

Oh wait wait wait! I would also say if you're growing food. If you're growing vegetable, I would say grow something that you actually eat. Grow something that's a part of your regular diet or something that can enhance what you already eat. If you like spaghetti, grow parsley. If you like tea, if you like to drink a lot of tea, grow mint, those types of things. If you're not really into growing vegetables and you're more into decorative or ornamentals, I would say you grow something that can be a great addition to your bedroom or to your living room or to your living room table, the dining room table rather, beautiful flowers. So I would really think about how whatever you grow can incorporate into your life as opposed to something that has nothing to do with your life or something that you do not eat or don't like to eat.

JS: Absolutely. Could you speak a little bit about the way that the Black Church Food Security Network has kind of reinstated the connection between a group of people or a person and their rights to their land?

HB: Our organization, we don't have a specific program currently related to helping families with the protection and restoration of their land, but we are part of an ecosystem of other organizations and I know a ton of people do that kind of work. There are many lawyers to do that kind of work and I'm grateful to be in community with them. What our organization does in that direction though is stress and emphasize the significance of land and what land does to you know provide protection to one's family or to create avenues for your family care or even wealth building opportunities When people hear us talk about the importance of land and food often times they come to me after our presentations and say 'my family owns 10 acres here 25 acres what can we do with it?' and because of our work in the space we're able to give them some ideas as to how to better protect and activate their land, but also refer them to the lawyers and other resources that can help them to make sure that they are protecting that land in the best way possible for future generations as well.

JS: And I'm wondering what's the best way to support the Black Church Food Security Network? Is it labor of love, you know getting your hands in the dirt, is it with our dollars, is it financial, or is it outreach, educating others? What's the best way to support?

HB: I would say all of the above. I think everything you said: donations, volunteering in the gardens, envisioning yourself as a part of the work. I mean that's one of the things I love about this work. It is that it's so massive that there is no way that my organization or any of the organizations that we can community with can do everything. So, we have to open the door really wide to everybody who would have interest to get involved. And I would say another thing that helps it for people to, you know, to become an ambassador for Black food, security and Black land sovereignty, food sovereignty; spread the word about it raise it up.

There's a lot of talk always about food access but not so much about food security and food sovereignty and I want to see that change. I want to see the day come when people are talking as much about the significance of security and sovereignty as they talking about access. Because just giving people food when they're hungry while it is nice and especially important in emergency situations, it is no formula for a long-standing solution to the root causes of their poverty and or their hunger and so we gotta shake loose from the idea that charity alone is gonna transform the underlying conditions that have people suffering, and we gotta see the ways in which we can raise our voices and lend our energy and resources to actually getting to the root causes. And I believe some of those root causes have a lot to do with racism, white supremacy, have a lot to do with capitalism and the vicious violence of economic systems of exploitation, has a lot to do with the ways in which we treat the land, the way in which we mistreat the land, mistreat farm workers, and those in the food system and so we need people on all fronts from policy levels down to being on the land and in the field themselves to be a part of transforming some of the root causes of what affects the land and what affects the many people and families in our communities.

JS: I'm really glad that you brought that up because what I find, what I've learned is that equal access doesn't necessarily mean equal outcome so doing more work with food sovereignty is the direction that we need to be going in, absolutely.

HB: Yes, thank you. I agree.

JS: So my last question is, what should I know that I have not asked about already?

HB: That there is a long history of African American religious leaders, and their faith communities that have been engaged and involved in this kind of work. That one of the things that I'm very consistent and giving attention to is raising up that other people have done this work long before me. So I guess that what I'm doing is pushing back against like the temptation to make a celebrity out of me or the Black Church Food Security Network. We are not celebrities. We are not stars. We don't even wanna be a part of celebrity culture. And I say that because if that's the case, it becomes very easy to make people caricatures, or to make them put them so far in the distance of your mind that you can't see yourself being shoulder to shoulder engaged in to work alongside them.

So, you know, while people giving me standing ovation might do something for my ego, it doesn't do anything for the long marathon of justice that we're on. This can't be about just giving me applause or just giving the organization applause. It's gotta be about seeing us as a call to action. Hearing about our work and saying, 'let me find the way that my life intersects with this thing' and be very thoughtful about the ways in which I can be involved in the way that makes sense for my genius. So that's what I would say. I appreciate every opportunity to talk about the work in the life, but I do recognize how tempting it can be I guess for people to look at me and look at our organization and, you know, while giving us appreciation and applause place us too far in the distance of what they think is possible for themselves

JS: That was really powerful. I really do appreciate you taking time out of your day to have this interview today.