

Group Interview with Viris Neufville, May Nicholas-Holmes, Roman Leter, and Linda Whelihan
Conducted by Jordan Scott at Liberty Grace Church, Baltimore
February 28, 2025

Jordan Scott: Let me start by saying, CCBC is doing some work to help engage the community and help them understand the Black Church Food Security network, and how churches are helping black farms sustain themselves and how this relationship could be replicated. You know what we're just documenting that kind of process. And that's kind of the purpose of this. I am a CCBC student, and I feel very grateful to be here today.

So, I just wanted to comment, start by asking what was the process of how did you all become familiar with the Black Church Food Security network?

Viris Neufville: There was a crisis in the community. There was police confrontation. I don't remember the name of the individual that was killed and because of that now there were uprising in the community. Food was short in the community. People from North and South Carolina had to bring food in to help the people in the community and so it was decided by Dr. Heber Brown, I think, that we should begin to think of feeding ourselves because anybody who holds the food, they have control of you. And I think what I read is that if you have a pick and some vegetables you can feed yourself. And if we start by teaching the Church how to plant because at the moment a lot of people dislike farming because it reminds them of slavery. So we have to begin to teach them that you know farming is good and profitable to us because we need to learn to feed ourselves.

Jordan Scott: What changes have you noticed since the uprising? And since the introduction of the garden?

Viris Neufville: One of the changes that I realized that I noticed is that more people of my color wants to be involved or is getting involved in the garden. When I first retired, I decided to do a master gardener class. From then I noticed that more of the younger Blacks are getting interested in the soil in the garden. One thing, too, about that. It gives you the opportunity to make friends.

Roman Leter: Yes

Viris Neufville: And to know people.

Roman Leter: Yes. That's true.

Viris Neufville: I was in a garden one day. My hands were in the soil. My head and tools was in the soil and I heard somebody say 'hello.' And I looked up, and there was this woman. She introduced herself to me and I to her. And we begun a relationship.

Roman Leter: That's nice!

Viris Neufville: Her parents was living in Frederick. She at the time, she resides in Vermont, so her parents were aged, and she had to visit them regularly. When she heard my accent and we begin to talk. You know she said. 'I want to go to Jamaica.' So I thought, 'okay.'

So when I decided to go to Jamaica, I told her. No before that, she took me to Vermont and I spent a few days with Linda there. Her and her family there and she introduced me to the community before I came down.

Linda Whelihan: You went to a white church, very boring!

Viris Neufville: After a while I said, 'I'm going to Jamaica.' She said, 'I'm coming.' So okay. When I was in Jamaica now she texted me and showing me all the different things that the Embassy and government said about Jamaica. And I had a good laugh. Anyway, she came. We had a good time and she came home safe and sound. She went to quite a few parishes in Jamaica which, if she had gone as a tourist, she could not have gone.

Linda Whelihan: We saw the beach for maybe ten seconds.

Viris Neufville: So this is what a garden does to you. It makes you meet other people. I was in the garden and there was this man, he hails from Ukraine. He came in he introduced himself and then, a few days after, he brought his wife and now and then they would come in. They're ardent gardeners too. We will discuss plants and florals, vegetables, from time to time. So if you want to meet nice people, good people, come to the garden.

Linda Whelihan: You learn so much about everybody else's culture and their food that they eat. And it's, I mean, this has been a wonderful community. We meet up on Saturdays throughout the year. But the Black Church Food Security network has expanded our community. So beyond just this church, you know, we've helped at other churches. And I remember going to that one garden and digging up all the sweet potatoes. And how fun that was! So it's just a really supportive, beautiful thing.

Jordan Scott: And I'm wondering like say, there is another church, and they do want to be a part of the Black Church Food Security network. What would you say to them?

Linda Whelihan: Yeah, I mean they're doing great things and always looking for new partners. Yes,

Jordan Scott: Is there any sort of advice that you would give?

Viris Neufville: I would say, stick with the program. Farming is hard. It's not easy, but it's rewarding.

Roman Leter: And for me, like, you know, personally, farming brought me back to my childhood. Honestly, yeah, as in I was born in like Suriname, it's like a previous Dutch colony in South America and I lived there until I was 7 years old. My mother was farming in the back of the house. My grandparents were basically sending us seeds from Europe and then we had carrots, we had potatoes, and the chickens were in the back. I remember the story that my mother told me one day. We faced some hardship, too, but she told me one day we had no food and for some reason in the cabinet, I know because the water was dripping, an eggplant grow there. For some reason. And we ate that. I don't know how the eggplant got there, but we basically ate it. But like we were always farmed. The only thing is when I was seven I moved to like Amsterdam and we lived in an apartment and we couldn't. That was the only thing. But now, with modern technology, you can do the vertical stuff in the house. So that is, I think everybody should give it a try. Like you can go to Dollar Tree, get a couple of seeds start and what I've been like learning a lot from, like everybody is like, you just got to start like you can't be just keeping it in your head. Oh, no, just give it a try.

May Nicholas-Holmes: One experience that I had was very interesting. I had friends from the west coast. They're vegans. I talked about the garden, and she said, 'okay, let me go out to this garden with you.' I said, 'I have to go out to the garden.' I was going to water. You want to wait? And she said, 'I want to go with you.' And I said, 'okay,' I said, 'but we're only staying for an hour.' and when we got there, because she has a small garden, as I said, she's vegan, her daughter has a restaurant, and they've done very well expanding it over in the Seattle area.

She came, and I was showing her everything, we were picking vegetables and herbs, showing her everything that we had, and finally, after two hours I said, 'we got to go.' She said, 'do we really have to?' Because we were having so much fun, and then when we came back and she was showing me, we had bags. We bagged up the different herbs. She bagged up herbs and took them back with her to the west coast and it was in October. She said, well, we have everything for Thanksgiving dinner here with the sage and the thyme and everything, and she said it was interesting. When we got back to my house, she said, when I first got there I looked, and I said .. but then, 'when I looked at all of the stuff you had in the garden, I was just overwhelmed and that's why I didn't want to leave.' So it just shows you how when people get there and you start doing things, you really just don't even want to leave. And you talked about is it therapeutic. Yes, in many ways, in many ways.

Jordan Scott: When it comes to engaging like the children, like the youth like. How early should we start getting them in the garden?

Viris Neufville: As early as possible.

Jordan Scott: And how come as early as possible?

Viris Neufville: Okay when I was a young mother at times I take my baby to the garden. I introduced my baby to the sunflower and other plants in the garden. Yeah, that's where it starts from the babies in in your hand.

Roman Leter: Yes, exactly, because, like I've been bringing my two girls. They're like 6 and 8 and they ask me, and sometimes they make me tired 'when are we going to the garden?' I'm like 'okay, we're gonna go.' 'So you always say that. But we never go.' So indeed, like introducing them like at a young age is good. So sometimes they just like water the plants. They get like different tasks. So it's definitely good to like, introduce them.

Linda Whelihan: It's magical things like it's a scavenger hunt and things you can find tasty morsels and respect for one another and for the natural world. It's a great thing.

Jordan Scott: And I'm wondering if you all have found any importance or significance of knowing where your food comes from, knowing exactly who grew it, where it was grown. What's that been like?

Viris Neufville: It's a good feeling to know where your food coming from how it is grown. And in growing our food now we compost all our kitchen waste. We put back in the soil. The eggshell, the banana peel, and others. We try to put it back in the soil, and we know all those things that we put in the soil we will get back in the food just like all the they are using the fertilizers to fertilize the food and some of the things that we shouldn't be eating. We are ingesting. When we grow our food, you know exactly what's in it. It's like cooking, you know what is in the meal. You know the things that you are not, you don't want in the meal. It's not there. Just what you want. And it gives you a feeling of satisfaction.

Linda Whelihan: Hi! My name's Linda Whelihan. I'm an art educator, and I live in Vermont and Baltimore, and I met Mother Neufville at one of the other gardens in Baltimore City, and we hit it off, and we've been besties since Covid, and love getting our hands dirty in gardens all over the city, but especially at Liberty Grace Church. My goal is to connect students with the garden and connect students who are working on farms here and growing things with students at other places like Vermont, and I also have connections in Kenya.

Roman Leter: We're now at Liberty Grace Church in Baltimore City. I'm involved in the garden through helping out with anything like cleaning up, planting, organizing, harvesting. It's been a wonderful learning experience. I've been basically like gardening since I was about 5 years old in South America. My trade is finance, and I love to teach kids in Baltimore City about becoming financially literate, and I volunteer with Junior Achievement in Maryland, in partnership with the CFE Institute of Baltimore since 2022. And I really feel that everybody should just give gardening a shot.