Food Sovereignty in Black Washington, DC: 1950 - 2017

Dennis Chestnut

Oral history conducted by Dominique Hazzard
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Interviewee: Dennis Chestnut

Interviewer: Dominique Hazzard

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Dorothy I. Heights/Benning Neighborhood Library

3935 Benning Rd. NE
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Summary: Far Northeast native, environmental activist, and entrepreneur Dennis Chestnut discusses memories of a more agricultural Northeast Washington, the impact of desegregation and the 1968 riots on the food landscape East of the River, and his experience opening the first health food store in Ward 7.

44:18 Memories of the 1968 riots, impact on college education and grocery store access

48:53 Connection between the riots and black suburbanization

54:27 Changes to corner stores post-1968 riots

1:00:32 Memories of opening and operating Roots Natural Foods Store

1:05:45 Thoughts on food sovereignty and hopes for achieving it in D.C.

1:10:51 Memories of trip to Cuba and insights from the Cuban food system

DH: First, can you tell me your name, where you're from, where you live now, and how old you are?

DC: Well my name is Dennis Chestnut. I live in Far Northeast, Ward 7. To be more specific I live in the Hillbrook neighborhood. You know there are a lot of neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. So I live in the Hillbrook neighborhood of Ward 7. And I grew up in Washington, D.C. and I'm a native Washingtonian. And I'm 68 years old.

DH: So did you grow up in Far Northeast?

DC: I grew up right here in Far Northeast. I grew up really back in my boyhood home. Moved back in that home in 1980, and have been there since.

DH: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Who is Dennis Chestnut?

DC: Sure. Well as I said I really pride myself on being a resident of Ward 7. And that's because I really see at this point how important that history is of this community, with all of the changes that are taking place. And I find myself talking to people, a lot of the new residents for example, who have no idea-- they have some preconceived notions, it's very interesting in some of the conversations-- so I'm really glad that I'm from this community. I see all they things they did, contributed to helping me be who I am.

I am a retired person right now. My 97 year old neighbor tells me that I'm not a senior. I said I was a senior citizen now that I qualify for Medicare. But that may be a thing of the past too. But she said nah you're not a senior, you're still a junior. So, I'm a junior citizen. [00:02:51]

And I'm the former Executive Director of a non-profit I founded here in the city called Groundwork. Groundwork Anacostia is now called Groundwork D.C. I recently retired as Executive Director and the reigns have been handed to a new executive director, a young lady, she's gonna do a very capable job. So it's in her hands. So I'm the retired Executive Director of Groundwork, which was an environmental focused nonprofit, focused on improving quality of life for the residents who live in the East of the River communities, especially Ward 7. And achieving that by improving the natural environment where within these communities. So they would be healthier, the people would be able to utilize these natural resources, and let it be a tool of improved health, recreation, safety. Things of that nature. And then one thing could contribute to the other. Like building community through engaging community around those resources. So that was basically the mission of Groundwork. I was really proud to be able to establish that, and then operate it for ten years and hand it over to a new generation of folks

who can take it to the next generation. Get out of their way and let them do their thing.
[00:04:46]

I've done a number of things as far as-- I'm actually a master carpenter. I was a journeyman, trained journeyman carpenter. And I utilized that in a lot of ways. I was in facility management. Construction management. I taught in the D.C. Public Schools and at the University of the District of Columbia. As far as teaching what people used to call Industrial Arts, but I taught carpentry and woodwork in the schools. So that's another big part. And one day I hope to maybe put a lot of me down on paper so that I can fill in all the gaps and tell the whole story. Such as all of the youth programming that I've been involved with and done for now I guess almost 50 years.
[00:06:13]

DH: I look forward to reading that Dennis.

DC: Absolutely.

DH: What led you into doing youth work?

DC: Well it all ties back into growing up, living in Far Northeast Ward 7, East of the River. Which a lot of people can relate with that-- east of the Anacostia River. And that is, you would really have to understand the areas East of the River in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s and not really totally focus on or looking at it as it is now. In a lot of ways. And I know we're here talking about food and that's one of the examples, one of the things that if you look at it as it is now, it was not that way, especially during those time periods. That transition to the way things are now includes a number of things.

I would say yes, growing up in Ward 7-- you can think of the fact that in the neighborhood where I lived, and where I still live now, practically every home in my block and subsequent blocks, within that area, had at least one, maybe two or three fruit trees in their yards. I mean think about that. We had an apple tree and a peach tree in my yard. Apple tree was in the back, peach tree was in the front. My next door neighbor had a cherry tree, grape vine, peach tree, as well. And pear trees. You know, you name it. All throughout-- not just in the homes, but in the area we referred to as-- some parks right now such as Fort Mahan which is a National Park Service Area, Fort Dupont. Fruit trees throughout those areas! So that's why I say the area contributed to why I really loved the outdoors and became such a part of the outdoors.
[00:09:07]

When the children spent most of their time outdoors. Very little in front of a TV set that number one was black and white, number two had small screens. I know ours in my house the screen was what I consider now, small. And there weren't very many stations. You had basically a few stations. There were maybe a few programs you may have been interested in. You catch those, the rest of your time, hey-- It's better to be outdoors! And this is the way it was, so this is how we grew up. In the streams. We considered-- what's now the parks-- we called it the woods. We spent plenty of time there. Became acquainted with everything from the wildlife to just understanding how to function in the outdoors. Which is very different from the way young people are growing up in these same areas right now. A lot of them don't even -- "I don't wanna be outdoors. Outdoors? Why? For that? Pshh. Make me sweat. Get my shoes dirty!" You know, that kind of thing. [00:10:42]

So that contributed to really my appreciation for the outdoors, which I came to appreciate more as an adult, especially when I started a family. And realized some of the change that had taken place from the time I was a child. And wanting to introduce my children to some of the same things and then- woah! What happened? Well, I was moving in some different arenas. And wasn't directly engaged as much, but that drew me out there when -- like me, my kids gravitated to the stream, to the creek, to the woods and the field.

But then it was other concerns. Like people didn't respect it as much. There was trash, debris. The same stream we looked at one way, folks were looking at as a place where they could dump. That's where, you got something to get rid of? Get rid of it there! That kind of attitudinal change. And then it changed the physical environment a lot as well. So it caused me to begin to get involved. And getting involved, one thing led me to another where I wound up kind of like they say, you start getting pulled in, reeled in, and then you find yourself -- ”Wow! I'm the Executive Director of a non-profit that does this work!” But when you can get paid to do something that you have a passion for and enjoy and love, I'm not complaining. But that's what led to, this environment. That's the importance of the environment that you -- they say you learn what you live. So that was a big factor.

DH: Tell us more about the Northeast you grew up in. You told us there were fruit trees, there were streams you could play in. When you think about places where people were getting food, where was your family getting your food from? [00:13:38]

DC: A number of sources. Number one, which is so amazing. This community-- and I refer to 'this community' that includes, I'll give some geographical, those who know know and those who

don't this can help them out this geography. So this is East of the Anacostia River. The communities of River Terrace, which is right along the banks of the Anacostia River in Northeast across from the Pepco power plant. That's River Terrace. Greenway, or I would say Benning Ridge which is the Ridge Road and East Capitol Street which is on the east side as well. Then there's the Hillbrook Community, Parkside, Mayfair, and Eastland Gardens and Kenilworth. And then Deanwood, which is one of the single largest neighborhood in the area, there's some reason for that. Then there's the others like Marshall Heights and Benning Heights. So those are just kind of like the geographical. [00:15:10]

Now every one of those communities that I named had multiple *major* grocery stores in them. We're right now in the Dorothy Height Library on Benning Road Northeast. If we use this as the center there were between five and seven major grocery stores-- I'm not talking about corner grocery stores, I'm talking about Safeways and Giant Food and so forth. And I can name those-- Grand Union was in Greenway. Jumbo was another. I mean these are names a lot of people may not-- they've moved-- A&P, Safeway, and Giant Food were right here on Minnesota Avenue. *Three* grocery stores right here on Minnesota Avenue. Two right here--

DH: What time period was this?

DC: Well, this was between like-- I was born in the late 40s in '49, so that would be in the 1950s, 60s. And the real change that took place-- I would say if we use one single period… when that changed, was in 1968 following the riots. And at that point there were stores that left and didn't come back. And that contributed to the drought of stores in these areas, but right there, I named probably five to seven stores that were all within walking distance of these communities where people lived. [00:17:12]

And then there was another tier of stores that people referred to as the 'corner stores', the 'mom and pops' or whatever they referred to. And these were corner grocery stores. I mean they sold mostly *food*. As opposed to like now, mostly now certain beverages and certain other kinds of products. But they sold mostly food, and fresh food! As a matter of fact most of them had a deli section in those stores. And these were scattered throughout the neighborhoods. And then there was of course the big market down on Florida Avenue. There were markets there where you could go and buy things wholesale, you could also get things that you wanted to really make sure you got fresh 'cause the farmers were coming to the Florida Avenue market area which is now referred to as, it's up there where the new REI is, NoMa...

DH: Union Market

DC: Union Market is up there. But that whole area was all an assortment of various markets that you could go and get fresh produce, meats, whatever. So that was the lay of the land as far as the food.

We're living in a time where there is the term food desert. There was no food desert! Now that was with the stores, but practically everyone that I knew-- and like I said I'm out here in Far Northeast so we all had yards. I was telling you about the fruit trees that were scattered about. We would leave out the house and we could stay gone all day and actually *eat* because Ms. Matthews had these sickle pears in her yard that you *had* to get at least a couple sickle pears every day because they were the best pears... But there were figs, there were fig trees, we got introduced to these kind of fruit as little tots.

You get hungry? You climb the cherry tree and you eat some cherries or you go get an apple. That's what we did. And you just keep going. It was a luxury to go to the corner grocery store and be able to buy some penny candy. And that's what it was, it was penny candy. So you might get a a few pennies and... cost you a few pennies, maybe you get three for a nickel. But we weren't consuming them, we were consuming a lot of the things we could afford which was *free*! Ok? But yeah most folks were growing food. Everybody had a little garden. [00:20:46]

DH: What types of things were people growing in their gardens?

DC: Oh man. Well, the interesting thing, I remember my mom and that's who I used to... be up under... most of the time when I was young. Across the street from my home, which is now a part of National Park Service land, it was just a field, and empty vacant lot. Now it's grass there, grass grows, keep it mowed. So it's a park. I'm not complaining! Because I love walking out my front door and there's park with some trees. I think it could be a little more done with it, but. But that was a corn field. And I learned as a small kid how good that white corn was, that sugar corn. Because we could go and shuck an ear of corn and just eat it right there. We'd sit down in a corn field and just eat a couple ears and it was great. [00:22:04]

DH: Whose corn was it?

DC: It was my next door neighbor's corn. His name was Mr. Downs. He was a farmer is basically what he was. See what you have to understand was, just like my parents-- you have to look at the migration that took place. You have to take in consideration a number of other things that were happening during those same time periods that caused people to migrate. You check a lot of people in Washington and native Washingtonians and you say ok at some point or another-- and not all of em, some of em may have been here earlier because their families were tied to the people who were here in the slave capacity. Working in that-- I don't like to use-- they were captives working in the city but eventually some of them became free so over a couple centuries there were some people who have been native Washingtonians for a few generations. [00:23:21]

My father came here in the early 40s and my mother came in the mid 40s, but they came from the South. The South was a different kind of place than it is now. A lot of folks I remember, my father use to always say-- I didn't pick it up until I was a teenager-- he used to always say "Yeah, I escaped from down there." He used to use that term! And I was just hearing it and I'd even say it sometime "Yeah my father escaped from the South." But then after we came older teenagers, a few times I'd hold still long enough to sit down and talk to him and I'd say "Now why you say you escaped?" And he'd explain it to me. And that basically is what it was. You wanna live? (laughs) You better head on out of here, once you get to a particular point.

I was thinking about the students at one of the universities here in the city, that-- and they rightfully so should be-- [were] very upset about finding a noose on their campus and so forth. My father would tell me about how he could be coming back from a day's work as a teen or after working all day, had to help in the fields or do whatever it was-- he said it was common for you to walk by and you see something hanging from a tree and the closer you get to it you realize it's a person! Ok? Now you think about that. He said, as soon as he get old enough, he started moving his way North. He got first as far as North Carolina. [00:25:35]

DH: Where was he from?

DC: He's from South Carolina. He was born in Charleston and grew up between Columbia-- around the Columbia area. He first migrated to Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He spent time there and that was where he met my mom, and they wound up eventually in Washington, D.C. And that's another whole story, but that was-- most of-- I had five brothers and three sisters and I'm the only one who was really born in Washington, D.C. The rest were born in either North Carolina or South Carolina.

So yeah, when he really explained it to me it was like “Woah!” This was right at a time when it was a lot of change going on for black people in America, at the time that we were having that conversation in the 60s. These were people from the rural communities. They came here-- using my family as an example, my father-- most black people got to Washington D.C. -- LeDroit Park, Howard University, Florida Ave, that area of the city was kind of moved toward Georgetown, which was a predominately black community. The majority of the people that was living there were [black]. That was in good part what was near Capitol Hill, same thing.

But my father, he saw Far Northeast Ward 7, and I think it reminded him of the South. I mean it was rural! It was really rural over here. There were people who still had animals. Talk about the Deanwood neighborhood-- when I was in junior high school-- and people call it middle school now, but junior high schools were 7th, 8th, and 9th-- I was going to school with students who lived over in the Deanwood neighborhood. And some of them still had outhouses. It was very common for folks to have chickens. People would have fresh chicken almost any time, cause chickens were around the yard. We'd earn extra money sometime going out to get eggs for people, out of their [yards]. We'd have to go around and find the eggs. They talk now about these free-roaming chickens? It was some free-roaming chickens! That's not a new

phenomenon. They were free-roaming. "Give you a couple pennies for every egg you find." Aw man, we'd dig round. This is not Easter egg hunting neither. We'd find the eggs and we'd come back with a handful of eggs and get enough to go down to the bakery and get a couple of pastries. Two for a nickel, day old stuff. That was the way it was out here in the area. [00:29:24]

There were local fruit and vegetable vendors that would come through the community. People think about pick-up trucks now. It was horse or mule drawn! And I'm 68 years old, so someone might say "Aw man, that sounds like it was back in the ancients!" This was in the 50s and early 60s, it really was when some of the change started to happen. But that's also tied to the other things. Like the civil rights was changing for African Americans, for black people in this country.

My father was in his 50s the first time he was able to vote! Think about that. It really bothers me how people take that for granted now. "Aw, it doesn't make any difference, I'm not gonna participate." Cause I think about it, how hard my parents' generation and I even experienced the early-- I mean some of the last edges of it-- how hard they fought to get the rights to participate as a citizens. And here he was a grown man in his 50s without the right to even vote for people who were representing him even though they weren't really representing him. They were representing-- anything they did affected his life-- but he couldn't even cast a vote for them.

Here in D.C. we, being the last colony of the United States, didn't get the ability to even vote for any representation in this city until the 70s. And that was the school board, was our first elected body. We were able to elect or own school board. Prior to that, the school board was appointed. And it was appointed by the federal government for the most part, 'cause the federal government appointed the local commissioners who ruled and managed the city. And I say 'ruled' but they managed the city. They were business people, whoever, people that were favorable or colleagues or whoever with the Congress. But after that eventually we got our first mayor, who came as a result of that push to get home rule and to be able to vote for who represents us. Who spends our tax dollars.... but man, Far Northeast it was 'over there.' [00:32:59]

Now see this is very interesting. I went to high school completely on the other side of town. The junior high school that I went to was built while I was in elementary school, prior to that there was no junior high school in this community, period. There was one, Kelly Miller, and that was it. Ron Brown, Carter G. Woodson, none of those-- Sousa, I didn't include Sousa because some people say "That's in Ward 7, that's in your community!" No, Sousa was in a white community and that's who went there. Benning, the elementary where the metro station now sits, I went in one of the first-- we integrated that school. In the early 60s.

DH: So Woodson wasn't here yet?

DC: I'm talking Woodson junior [high school], Woodson senior [high school] definitely wasn't here.

DH: Ok. And then everyone around, where did y'all go to high school?

DC: Spingarn

DH: And where was that?

DC: Right up on Benning Rd, just past the Langston Golf Course, Oklahoma Ave, sits up down there. There's a rural school, Spingarn was the high school, Charles Young the elementary, Brown the junior high school, and the vocational high school Phelps. And that's primarily where we went.

Eastern was one of the-- during integration, equal accommodations integration, was one of the things that pushed Eastern to begin to get black students. And D.C. was a little ahead of certain other parts of the country. It's kind of the way it is now with the way charter schools rolled out. People should have known it was getting ready to blast off because they tested first here in D.C. and all of sudden we got charter schools [everywhere]. So that was the same thing. When D.C. -- we were able to go to schools that were traditionally schools in white communities, that were predominately white all the way up to that point. In Virginia, just across the river and the bridge, they closed the schools. To not allow any black students to attend those schools, they just closed the whole school system. Because people who ran the government were like 'Hey we're not lettin' them go to our schools!" They just closed the school system down and send they kids to schools at the churches, and community centers, and things that we didn't have anyway. So a lot of people who were fortunate enough to maybe have some of their children come and live with relatives in D.C. I went to school with some kids who came into school at a certain grade level because their school system closed down. So those White Citizen Councils and things that's the way they operated. [00:36:41]

You have to keep in mind those times and the impact of those times and those things having an impact on the overall operation. But food was kind of like a common denominator with the stores... to some extend. There were some small black grocery stores. Some of the corner stores-- there's still a family over in Deanwood that has one of the corner stores, the Parkers. And they had-- part of the history of Deanwood, you have to really understand that Deanwood grew out of the plantation owners who turned a lot of that land over to people who were working, who they had working on their plantations. It was two families, the Deans and the Sheriffs. One road is named after the Sheriff family, Sheriff Road. What is now Burroughs Avenue used to be Dean Ave. And there was a marriage between the two families, wanted to bring the two families together, so they basically had *all* this area over here in Far Northeast. But the Deanwood "plantation" pretty much grew into a black community. [00:38:17]

DH: Of course there's been a lot of shifts and changes in the food system. What do you think were the main factors that led to less people keeping up the fruit trees, or gardening in their yards, or things like that?

DC: A couple of factors I think. One-- "upward mobility." Just, the younger people weren't doing that. All of the time I spent down on my knees, help my mom plant and do all of things, making a couple extra coins, helping Mr. Downs, whatever. Once you get up to a certain point, you become a teenager, it's not as cool. And then when I got across town going to school with sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers and federal employees, all that kind of stuff-- that mindset of disassociating with that kind of lifestyle. "That's farmers. That's guys with brogans and jeans." It's amazing that jeans became popular. Because it wasn't until I was basically getting ready to go to college when we would wear some *jeans*. [00:40:13]

DH: Farmer clothes!

DC: Yeah man. Pride. Khakis maybe, but jeans? Oh no. But at any rate-- some of that. Upward mobility mindset was just crazy. But also the suburbs began to grow. As people moved out of some of the inner city areas to the suburbs, suburban areas-- as they began to open up. Because at one point they weren't open to us either. So it's part of that whole migratory situation. To a great extent, not only did the lifestyle shift, same people that would have a garden in their yard growing up, get out to some of these areas and they got a whole lot more yard, but it's all grass! America has a love affair with grass. So that was it. "Some corn growing over *here*? Oh no! Can't have nobody walking over here and corn growing! Say it isn't so!" [00:41:32]

So all of that was part of what took place. But also the convenience of stores followed the people. So I said 1968 was the real pivotal point. I was in college in North Carolina when Dr. King was assassinated and the riots took -- I mean there were riots in some cities a little prior to that. Detroit, New Jersey, California, Watts. But in '68 that was when the country went ablaze, after King was assassinated. Well my school was shut down.

DH: Your college?

DC: Yeah, that April. Sent us home! A lot of people lost that semester. I still think now about-- I was a sophomore-- but I think now about the people who may have been seniors. This was in April. This was spring. They're maybe not far from graduation, and they were sent home! And what's the recourse? Most of ‘em were already struggling to pay for-- just think about that. It probably caused a lot of people to not finish right then. But I came into the city, and I remember the National Guard were occupying the city. Smoke, you could smell the smoke. I came into Union Station on the train because they weren't letting buses cross the 14th St Bridge. They had to keep North, they weren't stopping in D.C. I was able to get off in Richmond and get on the train and come in Union Station by way of the train. And when I came out of Union Station you could smell the smoke. It was like, I guess just like what the people in California are experiencing now with these wildfires. You could smell it. And you walk down H St and wherever, it was all burned out. And then the thing I was leading to is, the grocery stores were burned. [00:44:18]

DH: Over here?

DC: Yeah! They burned the grocery stores down. I'm saying (empathetic shrug)... but strategically, dag, that's the last thing you want to burn down. And then people wound up in lines having to be fed! Because they had burned down the food source. And a lot of those stores left and didn't come back. So D.C. was in a drought for a good twenty years. And those communities were impacted by that. Tied with the growth of the suburbs. It caused a lot of people who could to say hey, and move on out. So that caused areas as far out as Brandywine, Fort Washington, and further.

DH: That's where my family moved. They left Anacostia and went to Clinton.

DC: And see at one point we couldn't live in those communities. When I was in my teens, early, maye 10, 11, 12 years old in junior high school. There was not one black police officer, well I would say no this was when I was in high school-- there was not one black police officer on the Prince George's County police force. One. So you think about that in 1967 up until maybe 70. (laughs) and Prince George's County now. .... and I say right on! They got black County Executive, black school [board]-- [00:46:11]

DH: took over!

DC: Yeah! One of the wealthiest black counties in the nation. Which is wonderful! But some of that was a result of Marion Barry becoming President-- I mean Marion Barry becoming Mayor, that was a Freudian slip-- and building, what I call, he built the black managerial class here in the city. That coupled with getting control of the school system and having a voted-in school board. That's when D.C. was "Chocolate City." But basically Prince George's County can attribute their growth to Marion Barry being Mayor, because these folks were able to buy in places they couldn't buy before. Fort Washington became one of those. Clinton, Bowie, Upper Marlboro, Montgomery County, northern Virginia [was] a little harder egg to crack. [00:47:29]

DH: Charles County, Accokeek

DC: Yeah! Far out. But all of that, this is where I remember my children, my older children started graduating from high school in 1990, and the first one was in '90 and then the 90s. Well as they were finishing college, there were not, there wasn't a lot of affordable housing-- apartments-- that they could afford. It wasn't that they were expensive, they just weren't here. Especially in this area, they gravitate back to the area where they grew up in. Well there were some, but they were like "Hey I can't live over there, not with what's going on." There were some *things* going on in the 90s! It impacted them too. They went on and did the same thing. Get an apartment in Prince George's County or even Montgomery County. ‘Cause with their degree they could maybe get a job with the government, all of that figured in. That too is part of the change that took place. [00:48:53]

DH: And how do you see people here when a lot of the food business left... how did people compensate for that, what did people start doing?

DC: Well a lot of people became overly dependent on those corner stores who didn't have other means. It wasn't like every grocery store left. Cause out of the maybe five that were in this area, two may have hung in. And one, Giant Foods, was one of the first ones to leave and left Safeway as being the only one. That's why Safeway is the only one. Because right now where the Unity Health clinic is on Minnesota Avenue, that was a Giant Food store. And it was the last one of the larger grocery stores to actually leave. And it left, it was after, much later after-- they hung in for a while. But those who had transportation [of] course could just go across the county lines and shop. But people who were limited by transportation, income, these things-- they depended heavily on the corner stores.

That meant that nutrition was an issue because those stores gradually began to provide less and less of the kind of things people really needed grocery wise, and started providing more and more of the kind of things they could make money off of to keep their stores up. A lot of them became, I call them beer, wine, cigarettes and candy stores, with a little bit of food stuff ... [00:51:03]

DH: Spread

DC: Yeah. Spread in there. Bread. This was also because of a change in the ownership of these stores. Early on, those corner stores were owned by the Jewish merchants for the most part. There were some other merchants, black merchants too. There was two of those little grocery stores right on 42nd street- well three really. One was on 42nd and Benning. One was on 42nd and Foote. And in between Foote and Edson Place there was a black small store. This is within maybe a five or six block radius. And there were others. The Jewish merchants, that changed over to for the most part, Asian merchants. Because of some of the crime conditions in the community, those places changed from the kind of store as I described to you that most of them had a deli where you could go and get fresh cuts meats, fresh fruit and vegetables, all of the dairy products, everything from ice cream to cheeses-- the same thing I would say right now someone would associate with a Tenley Market for example, and that's even changing.... But up in some of those communities that's what it was. You could even go on and get a sandwich made, with--

DH: Like New York?

DC: With cold cuts. Yeah that's what it was! But with the crime violent all of a sudden the stores change because between the people, the folks who were utilizing the store and the retailer--plexiglass came up in between them. And of course that changed the whole nature of shopping. But that also worked for them because of what they were selling. So those are some of the kind of changes that I saw. And like I said it was almost like if you could afford to move to

the suburbs and you wanted to have a better quality of life, more access to certain kinds of accommodations then-- and the stores follow the rooftops. Also at the same time it was an opportunity-- people like I was saying people referred to D.C. as Chocolate City-- but it was an opportunity for those who were in the city to so to speak grab the bull by the horns and fill that gap. [00:54:27]

I made one of those attempts myself in the late 70s when I opened the first and only health food store East of the River. The next closest one that came in shortly after we opened ours was one that stayed for a little while up on H St. But it was pre-H St like it is now, it was H St on the 'try to come back and maybe get something in there.' I was right on Minnesota Ave. Store was called Roots Natural Food Store. We called it natural foods rather than health foods because we focused on natural foods. Everything from honey that we had in five gallon vats, assorted honey that people could come and purchase by the ounce. They could bring their own mason jars or we would sell 'em one and they could come back and get a discount. It was all kinds of thing like that.

We one time were interviewed by the Washingtonian magazine because we had the largest herbal tea assortment in the whole city. They came and interviewed us because of the assortment of herbal teas. We were selling herbal teas and also doing classes of that nature. We really focused on being a non-traditional food store to really promoting health through natural foods and healthy foods. We had connections directly with the International Herb Traders Association. We would get certain herbs, like peppermint, by the 55 gallon drum. We would even sell to some health food stores. Glut used to buy their herbs for Roots! Smile Herb shop and their first purchase of herbal tea was from Roots, that helped bring them up out of the ground. The same thing with a couple of the stores that opened up on Georgia Avenue.

That was right out here in Far Northeast Ward 7! What upset our apple cart was the Metro construction. Made it impossible for people [to] get in and out of there and we had to wind up leaving off of Minnesota Avenue. With the subway construction. [00:57:28]

DH: How did you decide to open the store? Who did you open it with?

DC: I opened it with a few other colleagues. We were very much into -- see you have to think about those 60s. I went to college and I got introduced to things I had no idea. I was a different guy in a matter of a couple years, in a lot of ways. Got introduced to... I even became a member of SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. All of that was all connected in. I began to interact with people in fields of trying to do things the natural way. It wasn't even along racial lines. We interacted with a lot of people, used to call them the hippies, we used to interact a *lot* with the folks they were calling the hippies! Because they were a source of a lot of the products that we used to sell in our store.

I mean we had connections with folks that had farms up in Pennsylvania and Maryland, down in-- we had an Amish connection where we would get fresh butter from the Amish. We had

certain days that we would have it in, and on those days we would have our patrons lined up waiting for the store to open so they could come in and get that *fresh* white butter. Most of 'em were some senior citizens. There was a lady who used to make these pound cakes. And boy she used to be in and we used to say "You can't buy it all! Save some for somebody else!" That's what we were promoting. We had a connecting with a bakery over in Baltimore that we got these oatmeal raisin cookies that were all natural ingredients and we would go to Baltimore and buy 'em and bring 'em back. And the youngsters, people they would buy-- the kids would come in, think about this combination: they buy those oatmeal cookies, and we used to sell the bottles of pineapple-coconut juice. And that was one of the big sellers. Pineapple-coconut juice and those oatmeal cookies. And then some of the adults would get some ginseng or something to go along with it. [01:00:32]

That was the kind of thing. We were basically just promoting the kind of lifestyle that we were living. That was the same period of time that the Nation of Islam was at once of its peaks.

DH: The late seventies?

DC: Yeah the mid seventies going to the late seventies.

DH: Sounds like you were very successful. Sounds like-- was the overall community reaction to the store it was the first of it's kind, seems like people were really--

DC: They supported it, yeah! And like I said, especially seniors-- but it was a cross-section-- but especially the seniors, they were some of our best customers. ‘Cause it kind of related. But the younger folks-- that's why I say we combined education with-- because we were competing with, as a matter of fact I keep thinking back on it-- we used to sell this bread from this Columbia Union College up in Montgomery County, up into Takoma Park. And it was a monastery and they would bake the bread. Bread was round, whole wheat bread, whole raisins. And we get that bread, and folks couldn't wait to get it, to get that bread. So we were selling so much whole wheat bread out of Roots Natural Food Store, the Giant Food store at that time was not carrying whole wheat-- and Giant had their own bakery. And people were demanding it as a result of us not being able to meet that demand, and Giant Food started carrying whole wheat bread! So I say we contributed, we caused Giant to start carrying whole wheat bread out here in Ward 7. [01:02:44]

DH: That's awesome. Anything else you want to share Dennis?

DC: Getting back to our original point. Food sovereignty I think is -- I'm a person who looks at everything has two sides to it. There's a saying that I heard at one time that really resonates with me a lot. For every difficulty there is a relief. So sometimes the relief is right within the difficulty but because of our short sightedness as human beings-- like Stevie Wonder has an advantage because he doesn't have this sight with his eyes, I constantly hear him sing about things where I say “Wow, he's seeing that.” Well I guess he is-- but sometimes we are limited

because of that. So for every difficulty there is a relief and sometimes the relief is right within the difficulty but because of that shortsightedness of ours we can't see it. I try to look at the opportunity out of these things. Instead of just saying-- just harping, harping, harping on the problem-- well, ok. We know what the problem is. *What* are we gonna do? What do we need to do to solve it? Might be a part of my carpentry training. You all can look at that like 'Well yep, it looks bad, that thing is hanging off, we don't even know if it's gonna stay up there!' But you got to figure out how to tighten it up and make it work. So that's the way I look at it.

I think that the community needs to figure out-- because look if we sit around and wait and wait and wait on the "leaders" to do it totally, it's not gonna get done. Or at least we'll be way down on the totem pole when whenever gets done and that's when we'll get it, at that point. So we have to figure that out. And I think we can. I'm so excited about your generation and what I see in these younger generations which keeps giving me hope all the time. And that's why I can remain a blue sky guy. And I think that's the way we have to look at it. We have to get out of the traditional box and create a way to do this. [01:05:45]

Last thing. I was in Cuba and they have a -- now a lot of people say a lot of things about Cuba and I just used to think that if I had the ability to just get groups of black people and send them over to Africa, because I got that same experience when I visited Africa. And I said man, if I could just get folks over here for a month at a time and just get ‘em there and expose ‘em for a month and let ‘em come back, they'd operate differently. And I went to Cuba and observed that too.

And they have a system-- and people talk about "Ah, the central government controls everything." Far from the truth. They have those things that under the central government is responsible for, and they should be! Cause those are security, national security all of that, it should be. But the real control in Cuba is at the community level! Those communities pretty much set everything from even from local community policing, local safety. The health care. Every 1800 people practically are part of a collective health care. Under the health care of the basic clinic that operates there with a small medical staff that is responsible for all those 1800 people. They know all of them, they know their families, they know their medical history, they have the routine things and then it eliminates them having to go the hospital -- they have a routine program.

They have also the same thing in permaculture. Cuba is a leader in permaculture in the world right now. But they were forced into it by being overly dependent on the industrialization that the Soviet Union brought in. But when the Soviet Union got broken up, they pulled out of Cuba and left Cuba-- Cuba was on the brink of starvation if they didn't do something different. So they started growing everywhere! Rooftops, yards, and they developed a system of making it work by developing permaculture. [01:08:29]

Just like right now in Cuba they don't do amputations for diabetes.

DH; Wow

DC: Wow, think about that.

DH: Because people don't need it?

DC: They developed natural remedies using their medical research and there's no need, they don't amputate, amputations don't happen there. So this is what I'm saying. I think of a Lincoln Heights. Because when I was down in one community it just blew my mind, this one neighborhood, this community we went in. The whole process I was introduced to. And I couldn't event speak the language all that well. I could communicate a little. I said "Man I should have paid more attention, all of them years in Spanish." I said, this was no different from a Lincoln Heights. Or a Potomac Gardens. Or whatever, you name one of these... but when people are sitting back waiting for the government for people who they say "They the ones supposed to do it for us." Then that's the situation you wind up in, becoming dependent rather than independent.

So they have local power grids. Think about that. People forget just like the devastation Puerto Rico just experienced-- Cuba is the best in the world at hurricane management. ‘Cause it happens to them all the time! And they were ready to help Puerto Rico but was cut off from helping Puerto Rico by the federal government. Same thing they were ready to do in Katrina, but were stopped by-- ‘cause you know they [the government] got this Cuba thing. [01:10:51]

But I'm just using all that as comparison. I'm just saying that what I would really hope, and this is my thinking and I try to exercise it first myself, me and my family and so forth. We need to be able to do a lot more of that ourselves. There are farms all around this town, outside the city. Right now is harvest season. We should be picking, and canning, and storing. Because that was the way that we used to make it. Folks can have a kitchen and some mason jars and can! Learn how to can. Learn how to survive, That'll keep a few pennies in your pocket. Pick some corn and stick it in a ziploc bag and put it in the freezer. Go get some of those greens-- they're getting ready to get at the best during this fall season. Pick ‘em, blanch ‘em, stick ‘em in a ziploc bag and throw in the freezer. I've even had watermelon in the middle of the winter, in December, as a kids because they knew how to get a watermelon in the summer and when Christmas Dinner would break out they would cut a fresh watermelon open. Imagine!

DH: (laughter)

DC: I would like to thank you for giving me an opportunity to talk about this, and any way that I could help don't hesitate to let me know.

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