

Elba, Myrtle Village Green, Bed Stuy, Brooklyn
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Rachel (00:00:00):

So, tell me who you are, where you grew up, where you live-

Elba (00:00:05):

Oh my goodness.

Rachel (00:00:06):

... now. Your age, where you come from-

Elba (00:00:09):

A lady never tells her age, but let's just say I've got a lot of gray hairs. I've got a lot, and I've earned every single one of them. I grew up around here, actually. I grew up in the Clinton Hill, Williamsburg area, and Park Slope. My mother's from Park Slope area. My father's actually from right down the block, on Kent Avenue. So, I grew up here.

Elba (00:00:35):

I know, I know. Actually, my grandmother had a lot of lots on Kent Avenue, and they're still there. And she had a lot right next door to her house, which she made a mini farm. She was a farmer's daughter. My grandparents were farmers. My other grandparents, one was a Merchant Marine, and the other one was a housewife. So, I have seen Myrtle Avenue and Kent Avenue change immensely. We never had so many tall buildings. There used to be an elevated train over here. There used to be a building right here in this garden. There wasn't a garden here, there was a building. And so, I learned how to farm on Kent Avenue.

Rachel (00:01:27):

Wow.

Elba (00:01:28):

A huge lot, very huge lot. I mean, I don't know the dimensions of it, but it was huge. And I remember we had chickens, my grandmother brought me a pet monkey. I named him Prince Albert. And we had animals. I mean, the health department had to tell her to get rid of the goat.

Rachel (00:01:53):

Wow. And there was enough open space for those animals?

Elba (00:01:55):

There was so much open space around here. A lot more than there is now, a lot more. There's a lot less open space now. Back then people would take the empty lots and turn them into gardens way before it became fashionable, or popular, or the fad, or the thing to do. People were just doing that. Sorry. I'm just swatting on the mosquitoes. So, yeah.

Rachel (00:02:22):

And so, you grew up here, and have you lived here most of your life?

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Elba (00:02:27):

The majority of my life, yes, has been here in Brooklyn and New York City. I've spent some time down in South Beach, but I did that for work. And then I moved back.

Rachel (00:02:41):

And how long have you been member here at Myrtle Village Green?

Elba (00:02:46):

Oh, I've been one of the founders. I'm one of the founders. And with the other people in the community, we got this garden, we fought for it for so long. Longer than it's been open, I think, because I'm the second wave of people fighting for this space. There was a first wave, as I like to call them waves, there was a first wave which included my father and my uncle, with a gentleman named Gary, and an artist. I forget her name at the moment. Trying to get this to be a green space, art space.

Rachel (00:03:22):

What year was this? Or around when?

Elba (00:03:27):

I would like to say maybe 2010, maybe? No, no. Even before that.

Rachel (00:03:40):

This is when your father and this artist were trying to-

Elba (00:03:44):

Even before that. Even before that. It was like in the 1990s, I think? Yeah. The 1990s, way before. So, it's been for a while, because it was an unused space, it was an empty lot.

Rachel (00:04:01):

But they weren't successful in getting this to be a green art space.

Elba (00:04:04):

No.

Rachel (00:04:05):

What happened?

Elba (00:04:06):

Well actually, no, let me take that back. They were successful. There was an artist named Judy, I forget her last name. And the city promised this space as an art space to them. And there was a contract. There was a contract. But I don't know why that wasn't pursued, and it wasn't until we got ... I'll just say her first name, Paula, environmental lawyer, actually took all that documentation and started the process again. And we had a lot of our meetings in the local Catholic church down the block on Kent Avenue. And there was this gentleman, this priest named Father Louis. He would allow us to use his basement

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for our meetings. We had meetings in different places. And finally the city gave us the go ahead. They signed a contract, and we got our keys in 2012.

Rachel (00:05:08):

Wow. So, this has been in the making for about 20 years.

Elba (00:05:13):

20 plus years.

Rachel (00:05:14):

Wow. Wow. And what was it like to turn this plot into a garden? What was it like before, and what did you turn it into?

Elba (00:05:24):

Oh my God. There was nothing here, except maybe these tall trees. And that was it. Other than that, it was bare. I mean, there wasn't even grass here.

Rachel (00:05:39):

So, it was dirt? I'm having a hard time picturing that.

Elba (00:05:43):

Yep. To see pictures of it, I'll see if I can find you some pictures. Actually, I think the pictures are on the website.

Rachel (00:05:50):

Okay.

Elba (00:05:51):

And it was just soil, that's it. Dirt. And then little by little, we started adding the different beds, and little by little we had different projects. One of the gardeners who ... One of the founders, he had a canoe that he had given me, and I turned it into a little school bed over there. And then all of a sudden it became the herb garden over there.

Rachel (00:06:18):

Wow.

Elba (00:06:19):

Yeah. So, people would volunteer their time and stuff that they had, and ...

Rachel (00:06:24):

How amazing.

Elba (00:06:25):

It was cool.

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Rachel (00:06:27):

And what kinds of communities are here? What kinds of community is this space, and what kinds of things do you grow?

Elba (00:06:37):

Oh, we grow anything that we can basically. Anything that we can grow, we grow. And some things have invited themselves, like the edible weeds. We also have a really big community. We have different communities. We have a big Bengali community. There are a lot of different Hispanics here. We have a lot of different Anglo communities. We had this little Italian man who taught us how to really ... How to stake the tomatoes, and how to properly grow tomatoes. And we've had people come and go. People have been here for a little bit. And then they move on. And then we've had people, I guess like myself, who's been here from the beginning. But the community has ... It keeps changing. It keeps changing. We have Hasidic families come in just to enjoy the space. They come on Saturdays and Sundays just to come in and enjoy the space and sit down. We've had school groups come and plant are. One of the local elementary schools, they've come here with their teachers, and I've given them tours, other gardeners have given them tours. They've planted their tomatoes, and their basil, and their different herbs here.

Elba (00:07:55):

So yeah, we get a lot of different people coming throughout this garden, and we're still getting a lot of different people. Right now we have our handbook, we have it in three languages. We have it in English, Spanish, and Bengali. We're hoping to add maybe, because we are seeing ... We're getting Asians in here, a lot of Asians and stuff like that. East Asians. So, we're thinking maybe Chinese, or Korean, and stuff like that.

Rachel (00:08:28):

Who taught you how to garden? Was it your grandmother?

Elba (00:08:31):

My grandmother taught me how to garden. My father taught me how to garden. Actually, my family taught me how to ... Because I've always had a backyard. Even in these big city tenement buildings, there were backyards. So, we were fortunate enough to live on the first floor, in Park Slope. Had a backyard. My Uncle taught me how to grow tomatoes. I have a picture of myself holding a rake. My grandparents, who were farmers, they taught me how to guard. They taught me all of that. And also, I've taken classes in horticulture. I've taken classes in composting, I'm considered a master composer. So, I've taken lots of different classes. I'm a hydroponics instructor.

Rachel (00:09:06):

Cool.

Elba (00:09:06):

I've learned hydroponics and stuff like that. And a city arborist. Citizen pruner, that's the title, citizen pruner. So, I've learned how to care for trees. I got my husband into being an arborist. So, yeah. And I believe in a lot of different environmental issues and stuff like that. So, that's what-

Rachel (00:09:28):

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And before you were gardening here, you were gardening in green space that you had in your backyard?

Elba (00:09:35):

In my backyard, in my grandmother's house, and other people's homes, and stuff like that. I would go and teach them where I can find the spot.

Rachel (00:09:45):

Why is gardening important for you?

Elba (00:09:48):

Oh my God. Gardening is Zen. It keeps you focus. It keeps you in the moment. And sometimes just being in the moment, especially when the outside world, all this craziness is going on, just being in the moment and having a time that where you are just focus, and quiet, and serene. I think that's why gardening is so important to me. And I see that's important for a lot of people. It brings them tranquility. So, I'm a big advocate of people gardening wherever they can find a little spot, whether it's a bunch of containers in front of an apartment building, whether it's hydroponics in someone's balcony, wherever you can find a spot. Nature finds a way.

Rachel (00:10:49):

Cool. Yeah. It does seem very Zen, and very much in the moment because you can't possibly be anywhere than in the moment.

Elba (00:10:58):

Right.

Rachel (00:11:00):

So, this is a question that I ask everyone. It's kind of the framing question for this whole project. It's two parts. The first part is, when you think about climate change or the climate crisis, what do you think about? And then how do you feel?

Elba (00:11:16):

Well, like I've stated before, climate change is inevitable. It's just how we react to it. There's different ways-

Rachel (00:11:31):

Wow. Look at that snail.

Elba (00:11:34):

That is so cool. Why don't you put him over there, sweetie? Give him a home. Give him a little home, put him right over there. See those beautiful flowers? I think he'd like to sit on them. [Spanish 00:11:46]

Speaker 4 (00:11:47):

[Spanish 00:11:47]

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Elba (00:11:50):

I'm sorry. Say that question again.

Rachel (00:11:51):

When you think about climate crisis, what do you think about it and how do feel?

Elba (00:11:57):

Okay. So, like I said before, climate change is inevitable. I mean, it's going to happen whether we want it or not. And I don't think it's all human made. I think parts of it are, yes. How we respond to the climate. I believe we have to learn how to go with the flow, per se. We have to learn to work with nature, because every time you try to work against nature, nature's going to win. Nature's way bigger than us, and we have to be adaptable to nature. So, if the weather's getting warmer, we have to find ways to be sustainable. We have to find ways of farming, and raising livestock in a way that isn't detrimental to the environment around us. I'm not saying get rid of all the cows, but we have to find a way to utilize what the cows produce, all that methane that they produce.

Elba (00:12:55):

We have to find a way to channel it into something that's useful, and not ... Excuse me, and not detrimental to the environment around us. So, my thing is that more people have to be aware. And how do you make people aware? You educate. You educate them, at whatever age. At whatever age, you educate them and you show them a different way, because some people don't know how to go about a different way. So, you have to gently show them. I don't believe in forcing people who have done something for hundreds of years to all of a sudden drastically change a way of doing stuff. No, you'll have pushback, you'll have resistance. You have to gently show them the pros and cons of what they're doing, and how they can make it better, but more sustainable, more in tune with nature, as not being ... Instead of being opposed to nature.

Rachel (00:13:55):

And how do you feel?

Elba (00:13:57):

About climate change?

Rachel (00:13:59):

Yeah. When you think about it, how do you feel?

Elba (00:14:04):

I don't feel scared, because a lot of people are scared about it. I feel like, okay, this just proposes a challenge. We just have to do things differently. Instead of having our clothes made out of cotton, because cotton is a plant that has to have a lot of water, it's very ... A thirsty plant as I would call it, we could start making our clothing out of bamboo, or recycled clothing. I mean, if I have a pair of broken pants, those become my work pants. I put patches on them. I find a way. So, I'm not scared of climate change. I'm more like we have to find a way, there is a way to live with it, to work with it. I mean, there have been projections of saying Miami's going to be underwater.

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Elba ([00:14:56](#)):

Well, you know what? Maybe we start telling these people, "Look what's happening. Maybe there's a way we can take your livelihood, and the home you've been doing it, and maybe try to find a way to have you move somewhere else." I understand it's difficult because that has to do with economics. And that's always the most difficult part, but I'm sure we can find ways to help people escape that, or build around that, or somehow work with it and not oppose to it. I mean, nature's going to win. Regardless. Nature's going to win, but we can find a way to make it less ... Have a less of an impact on human life, and animal life, and life in general.

Rachel ([00:15:43](#)):

So, when you think about this adaptability, which is really what you seem to be talking about, what do you feel? What are the emotions that come up when you think about the necessity for the adaptability? The possibility of adaptability? What does that possibility feel like for you?

Elba ([00:16:02](#)):

Well, I think it can happen. I think it's possible to happen. You know what I mean? Throughout history, human nature has been ... They've adapted to so many things. Humans have adapted to so many things. So, I think they can adapt to this as well. I mean, there's so many different types of projects out there that people want to do, like living in a city above water, and stuff like that. There are actually places in Africa where they have houseboats on the water, and people have lived there for generations, and they've been fine. I think we need, as human beings, to not be so rigid, because many people are still very rigid. I think it might be fear. They're working from a place of fear. And I think we, as human beings, can give those people ... Teach them how to work from a place of hope, as opposed to a place of fear.

Rachel ([00:17:03](#)):

A place of hope. Yeah. That's what I was wondering about. It sounds like you live in a place of hope and possibility. What does hope mean for you?

Elba ([00:17:20](#)):

Hope is just finding new ways of creating a space for you to be in, whether it's your livelihood, whether it is your home, just creating a different space. Human beings are very creative. So, I have no doubt that they can get through this. And as someone who has taught people as a teacher, as an educator, you teach people hope. You teach them there is another way. Here are the other ways, you give them options. And once people are given those options, then they start to be ... Start to work from a place of hope as well.

Rachel ([00:18:04](#)):

I love that, hope is a way of creating space for yourself. That's wonderful. That's such a great way of thinking about what hope is, and the importance of it in a world where it feels like the space for ourselves is rapidly diminishing. So, you've lived here for a long time, and you've been gardening, and working with the land for a long time, can you tell me about the changes, if there have been changes, that you've noticed over the course of your lifetime here in New York City? In terms of weather, seasons, or growing patterns?

Elba ([00:18:46](#)):

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Well, what I have been seeing mostly is that the weather has definitely gotten warmer. It's gotten much, much warmer over the years, and we've been able to grow things that we didn't think we would grow before. I mean, it's very easy now for me to overwinter ... Excuse me, overwinter a lot of produce over winter. I mean, I just have to put a ... Some type of greenhouse over them, and I've actually had kale, and I've had delicate ... Certain squashes that are very, very delicate and just overwinter and just not ... Tomatoes, for example.

Rachel (00:19:37):

You've been over wintering tomatoes?

Elba (00:19:39):

Overwintering tomatoes. All I've had to do is put ... I used an old shower curtain. And I constructed it into a greenhouse, and I've been being able to overwinter tomatoes. The winters have been so mild and the tomato plant, and my bell pepper plant, has come back.

Rachel (00:19:59):

Wow.

Elba (00:20:01):

And tomatoes really need a hothouse.

Rachel (00:20:05):

Yeah.

Elba (00:20:06):

And they've tasted really good overwintering.

Rachel (00:20:09):

They haven't been fruiting in the winter, right?

Elba (00:20:11):

They don't fruit as much, but they do survive.

Rachel (00:20:15):

Wow.

Elba (00:20:16):

They don't fruit as much.

Rachel (00:20:17):

How long has this been going on?

Elba (00:20:20):

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The last several years. The last several years I've been able, and it has a lot to do with where the tomatoes are situated. In an urban community, you can actually overwinter tomatoes between buildings.

Rachel (00:20:34):

Because it's so much warmer, these micro climates.

Elba (00:20:38):

Right, because New York City has become a micro climate, and it's much hotter here. The snow melts faster. And so, you're able to really protect the delicate annuals, because tomato is considered an annual here in New York City.

Rachel (00:20:52):

That is wild to me. And so, when did you start noticing warmer weather?

Elba (00:21:08):

When I really started noticing warmer weather, it was maybe about six years ago. I was able to go outside in a tee shirt and I was just like, "This is not usual. This is not usual. I'm able to go outside in a tee shirt?" It was like 65 degrees in December. And I was like, "Wow."

Rachel (00:21:35):

What does that feel like emotionally?

Elba (00:21:39):

Unusual. Curious, maybe. Like, "Okay, what's going on?" I didn't feel afraid though. I wasn't afraid, but I was just like ... I was curious. It's like, "Okay, what is this all about? What's going on here?" Because I also follow the Farmer's Almanac. I love that book, and they've been predicting warmer weather, and all the rest. And it's just, it's unusual.

Rachel (00:22:17):

You read the Farmer's Almanac every year?

Elba (00:22:19):

I try to. I try to.

Rachel (00:22:21):

And so, you must be able to track from that when they've been predicting warmer weather.

Elba (00:22:29):

Right. So, also predicting snow that, when I was a little kid, there used to be a lot more snow, snow storms, but not as ... They weren't as, I should say, as strong. You'd have snow falling down, they would fall to your knees. I mean, I had snow to my knees, but then I was a little kid everything was up to my-

Rachel (00:22:49):

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Right.

Elba (00:22:50):

But I remember it snowed a lot more, but it wasn't a strong storm. Storms now are stronger. I mean, Brooklyn and Queens never got tornadoes. And I remember 20 years ... No, not even 20. It was like eight years ago, maybe eight, between eight or 10 years ago, there was actually a tornado in Queens where the tornado touched ground. And it was called a jumping tornado, and it touched ground. And I know people who live there, my friends who lived there said it touched the ground and it would jump up and down.

Rachel (00:23:34):

They could watch it?

Elba (00:23:36):

They saw it.

Rachel (00:23:37):

Oh my God.

Elba (00:23:38):

They were brave. I would be in the basement. I was like, "No, I don't mess with that. I'll mess with the flood. But I won't mess with a tornado." They actually watched it jump.

Rachel (00:23:50):

Wow.

Elba (00:23:50):

They actually watched it jump. Yeah, and it took a tree.

Rachel (00:23:54):

That must've been very scary.

Elba (00:23:55):

A huge tree. I mean, how tall, like 30 feet this tree is? 30 foot tree.

Rachel (00:23:59):

Yeah.

Elba (00:24:01):

It actually ripped out of 30 foot tree. It was amazing.

Rachel (00:24:07):

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It's crazy to me. I am trying to wrap my head around this experience of change. My driving [inaudible 00:24:19] is like, "What does this feel like?" What does this feel like to be living in this transition, when what we thought we to know no longer-

Elba (00:24:26):

Applies.

Rachel (00:24:27):

Applies.

Elba (00:24:30):

Right. Yeah.

Rachel (00:24:31):

And it's interesting for me to talk to people who've lived here their whole life, because you have this long lens of history, of your own history, your own sense memory history.

Elba (00:24:46):

Yeah. So, I mean, New York is now experiencing earthquakes. We have two fault lines in Manhattan, and we've never really had an earthquake that we could feel, and now we can feel them. I forget what it's called that records ...

Rachel (00:25:08):

A seismograph?

Elba (00:25:09):

Right. Earthquake. But they've stated that the earthquakes have been getting stronger. The fact that now New Yorkers can feel an earthquake?

Rachel (00:25:18):

Is that from fracking or what? What's going on?

Elba (00:25:21):

We don't frack here in New York City. So, I think that's from an actual earthquake. Those are earthquake tremors.

Rachel (00:25:26):

But why are the earthquakes getting stronger?

Elba (00:25:29):

That I'm not sure of. That I am not sure of. But I just know they've gotten stronger. We've gotten tornadoes here. Certain parts of New York City are now flooding more than usual. There is a Catholic school in Queens called Christ the King. Every time now that it's storms, they are flooded. Every time they have a rainstorm, they are now flooded. Yeah, the world is changing.

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Rachel (00:26:06):

What was my next question for you? I had one, it was on the tip of my tongue, and it was like five thoughts ago.

Elba (00:26:12):

Oh, look. Cool. What is that?

Jeff (00:26:15):

Collard greens.

Elba (00:26:15):

Collard greens?

Jeff (00:26:15):

You want some?

Elba (00:26:17):

Would you mind?

Jeff (00:26:18):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I have so much of this. It's ...

Rachel (00:26:21):

Those are huge, huge leaves.

Jeff (00:26:23):

There's some sort of mite on them, so I just wash them.

Elba (00:26:26):

Okay. That's way too many just for me. Come on. No, no, it's too many. Give me half, okay? Half, and the little ones, because just me eating them. My husband doesn't like ...

Jeff (00:26:38):

Yeah. I just soak them and then ...

Elba (00:26:41):

Salted water?

Jeff (00:26:43):

I don't use salted water. But just to like get the white stuff off, whatever that is.

Elba (00:26:46):

Okay.

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Jeff (00:26:47):

Yeah.

Elba (00:26:49):

Cool.

Jeff (00:26:51):

Yeah. You see the little white bugs?

Elba (00:26:55):

Oh. That'll go away.

Jeff (00:26:55):

Yeah. Yeah.

Elba (00:26:55):

You cook them, you're fine.

Jeff (00:26:55):

They're like mites, or ... Who knows?

Elba (00:26:58):

Salted water.

Jeff (00:26:59):

Yeah.

Elba (00:27:00):

Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff (00:27:02):

Yeah.

Elba (00:27:02):

These are beautiful. You want some?

Rachel (00:27:03):

No. I'm okay. Thanks.

Jeff (00:27:04):

Okay.

Rachel (00:27:05):

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You guys are taking home a nice little harvest today.

Jeff (00:27:09):

Yeah. Yeah. I know. Well, the [inaudible 00:27:12] already eaten like half of bag-

Rachel (00:27:12):

I know. I'm so impressed how your girls are just eating vegetables.

Jeff (00:27:17):

All right, nice to meet you.

Elba (00:27:18):

Bye Jeff. See you, hun.

Rachel (00:27:19):

Nice to meet you. Yeah. I was like, "How you guys girls going to eat those?" And they were like, "Just straight from the garden." I'm like, "Great." She's munching on a raw bean.

Elba (00:27:30):

And see, that's the beauty of it. You teach the children how to farm the land. They're the next earth stewards. Education's a big thing. It's a huge thing. This is the future because we pass the torch onto the next generation, and sustainability, and sustaining all of this. And this is why green spaces throughout New York City is so important, and not just New York City, a lot of places. There are a lot of food deserts throughout New York City. And instead of building more high rises, and developing more buildings, why don't we just take the buildings that are already here and utilize them better? And using the spaces, the empty lots. Not even the empty lots, in front of a storefront and in front of a school, and just make it a green space. Nature can grow anywhere.

Rachel (00:28:26):

Yeah. It really does feel like the need for capital leaves us with no imagination for how to build our cityscapes.

Elba (00:28:35):

Yeah. And I truly believe the people governing our cities are the wrong people.

Rachel (00:28:41):

Who should be governing our cities?

Elba (00:28:46):

Oh my goodness. Gardeners, teachers, anybody who has a stake in their community. The community should be governing the cities, because the people we've elected will say one thing and then do another. So, I don't believe the people governing our cities right now. And I mean, I'm not going to get too much into politics, but either side, it doesn't matter what affiliation. I think the city needs to be ,... All the cities needs to given back to the people.

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Rachel (00:29:24):

So, are there any other ways that you've noticed your gardening has changed in the past few years, other than overwintering?

Elba (00:29:36):

Sometimes when it rains a lot, there's been summers, more summers, that it rains more than not. I have to change the type of produce that I garden. Lavender doesn't like a soggy area. So, less of my lavender was growing. So, I had to stop growing lavender, and I grew tomatoes, but if it's too much rain the tomatoes would overgrow and burst, and that wasn't good. So, I had to find a way to not ... Oh, what's the word I'm looking for? I had to find a way to regulate their water intake. The cucumbers were loving it, so I planted more cucumbers. Anything that was a water vegetable loved it. I mean, I had so many cucumbers, it was amazing. And I did different varieties of cucumbers just to see which variety adapted better to an overflow of water, an abundance of water.

Elba (00:30:39):

So, I had to actually change the type of things that I grew. And so, I had to change the type of food that I was eating. So, I didn't have lavender tea. I didn't have as many tomatoes, but I had a lot of cucumbers. So, I had to change the way I was eating, and adapting to that.

Rachel (00:31:03):

So, more about this idea of adaptability, and adaptability in real time.

Elba (00:31:10):

I mean, I think the key word is adaptability. I mean, with all the stuff that's going on, if you can't adapt to the situation, you're going to have a hard time. So, I think we have to be more adaptable and more in tune with what nature wants to do, as opposed to what we want to do. I mean, like we were talking about before, there's so many weeds here in the garden, and no one harvests them. No one harvests them. And I think it's also because a lot of people don't know what to do with them. And again, education is key. Education is key, and teaching the younger ones. Teaching yourself is fine, but you have to pass on all that knowledge. All of that knowledge has to go somewhere.

Elba (00:32:00):

So, it should go to the next generation, because they're the ones who are going to be the next stewards of this planet. They're the ones who are going to come up with the solutions because they're the ones going to be living in that time of when there's no more Miami Beach, or New Orleans is underwater, or San Francisco Bay is a bigger bay. So, they're the one as we have to teach.

Rachel (00:32:26):

Is there a way that climate crisis, global warming, affects you on a daily basis?

Elba (00:32:36):

I wouldn't say a daily basis, except maybe for the weather, because I have to navigate, especially when the storms come, because there's more flooding. And if I have to walk somewhere, or go somewhere, some places might be closed because this flooding, and the electrical system went out. So, I would say that's how it affects me personally of places that may be open. So, a store may not be open, if it's a

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pharmacy and I can't get my medicine then that might affect me. Because like I said, I'm diabetic. So, if the stores close, I can't get medicine. Other stores are flooded, or whatever. I can't get food. This is why I tend to want to grow my own food. And I believe that should really be a big part of it. So, I would say that's how it affects me personally. But it also, I've seen it affect other people. The school that I live nearby, whenever it rains they're always flooded. And then the kids can't go to school because the school's flooded. So, it impacts their education. So, things like that.

Rachel (00:33:54):

Yeah. Yeah. Is there a way that it affects the way you plan for your future?

Elba (00:34:03):

Where I'm going to live. The last storm that we had, the last storm was a big one, and it flooded a lot of basements, and I had to get rid of a lot of stuff, especially ... What hurt the most was getting rid of a lot of personal stuff, like pictures. And my mom was a big letter writer, and I kept all of her letters to the family. And a lot of those got destroyed-

Rachel (00:34:35):

Because they were in the basement?

Elba (00:34:37):

Because they were in the basement.

Rachel (00:34:38):

Oh, that's heartbreaking.

Elba (00:34:39):

And even though it was in a plastic container, somehow the water found a way into the plastic container.

Rachel (00:34:45):

Oh no.

Elba (00:34:47):

So, I lost a lot of that. So, a lot of emotional ties, a lot of emotional stuff has been, I would say destroyed. And it used to be an area where it didn't flood at all, and now it's an area that floods a lot. So, now my husband and I are looking for a different place to live. So, it affects where we live, and it would affect our economics because then how do I get to my job from the new place that I live? Do I need to get a new job now to be ... That's closer to home, and all the rest.

Rachel (00:35:21):

Oh, I'm so sorry. That sounds like such a devastating loss.

Elba (00:35:25):

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It was, it was. But I just have to remember ... I once asked my mother, when I lived in South Beach, I told my mother there was a hurricane coming. She's like, put everything in the middle of the room, living room, get in your car, get the category, and just drive wherever the hurricane's not going. All those things are replaceable. You are not." So, I just remember hearing her saying that, "Yes. I understand." Probably saying to me, "I understand those are letters and you want to see ... Feel close because all that stuff that I've written to the family, and they've written to me, I get it. But they're replaceable. You're not." That was my mother's attitude about a lot of things. People are not replaceable.

Rachel (00:36:10):

But it also sort of hits home, the way that living in a change in climate does create this disconnect between our past, our present, and our future. And in a very literal material way you've experienced some of that.

Elba (00:36:27):

Yeah I have. I have, but I still believe that I can create new memories, and new experiences. I mean, I have a grand nephew who's two years old, and I'll make ... And I'll keep whatever I have for him, and make new experiences and stuff like that. And yeah, I did do lose some things, but you know what? I still have them. And I think that's more important because, like my mother said, those are just material things. We could lose them. We can't lose you. So, I think in those terms, whenever I lose something, I'm like, "Okay, yeah." It hurts to lose a picture of my mother when she was little, and stuff like that. But you know what? I still have my mother here. I have her here in my heart, and I'll talk about her to her grandson. And when he asks me all these questions about the family, they'll be alive through oral memory. Maybe not materials memory, but definitely through oral memory.

Rachel (00:37:42):

Do you have any kind of religious, or spiritual, or ethical practice that helps contextualize this moment of change for you? Or helps you navigate it, or understand it?

Elba (00:37:58):

I wouldn't say I'm an overly religion person. I would say, I believe in spirituality. I have gone to church. But I do remember a priest, and actually he was one of the priests who was the founders of this garden. He'd always tell me ... We would talk, we'd have conversations. And he'd always say to me, "This too shall pass. This too shall pass." So, I always think of that. Excuse me. I always think of that whenever I feel down, or something gets destroyed, or something gets lost, or somehow I get affected by something. Or even when I become afraid, I always say, "This too shall pass." We'll go through it, but this too shall pass. So, I remember those words. So, that's how I like to think of it.

Rachel (00:38:56):

I like that. My next question is, I guess the question is, how did we get here? And what is here? If you're looking at the long lens of history and where we are at this moment, how did we get to where we are? And how would you define and articulate where we are now?

Elba (00:39:27):

How we got here. That's a many layered cake.

Rachel (00:39:31):

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I know, it's a big question.

Elba (00:39:32):

It's it's huge, because there's so many ... I mean, I guess you just have to look at history. I mean, there are people who always want to do what's right. And then there are people who just want to do, for whatever reason, they have. And I personally believe there aren't enough people who fight to make a change, and you have to fight, and I don't mean physical fighting. I mean in any way you can fight, whether it's educating people, voting, voting for things that are important. Not just for yourself, but for the human family, because in the end we are all a family. We're interconnected in so many ways you can't even figure it out. So, I believe not enough people have risen up to help. And I think more people should rise up to help. And I'm not sure why they haven't risen up, but that's always a question.

Rachel (00:40:50):

Talk to me more about that. What does it mean to rise up to help? And you just said you didn't know, but I want to know why people don't.

Elba (00:41:01):

I don't know if it comes from a place of fear. I think most things are from a place of fear, but I'm not sure if it's a place of fear, or not knowing, or not being educated. As someone who's an educator, because I'm an educator also, people will come to me and it's like, "I did not know that. I didn't know that." And I hear that a lot from people.

Rachel (00:41:29):

That people aren't aware of the extent to which we are living in an environmental-

Elba (00:41:34):

Right. They don't know the-

Rachel (00:41:35):

... Holocaust.

Elba (00:41:36):

Yeah. They don't know things. People will believe what they're given instead of researching, or looking, or seeking. And I think for those of us who do know how climate change, and other things affect human beings, I think we have an obligation to teach. We have an obligation to share, we have an obligation to be transparent. What is the real reasons that people do things? The real reasons are politicians are saying no to green spaces. What's the real reason why our politicians will have stopped things like biofuels made from algae? Because that's a reality. I'd rather buy a biofuel made from algae than from fossil fuels. So, what are the real reasons? So, not enough people get up to find out the real reasons. They have a tendency to believe what is given to them. And I think that's one of the problems. So, I believe leave people like us really need to say, "Hey, this is what's going on." But why they don't believe it, I don't know. I personally think it might be from a place of fear.

Rachel (00:43:08):

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See, it's interesting actually. I talk to a lot of people where I feel like there's actually quite a bit of knowledge and education around these issues. And yet, there's a lot of inertia around "doing something about it."

Elba (00:43:28):

They might be waiting for somebody else to do it. Because I'm coming from where I'm teaching and everything. I teach in lower income immigrant communities, and they just don't know. They don't know. For the people who do know, and don't move, I mean, it might be laziness, which I hate to say, but it might be laziness. Or it might be that they're looking for someone to lead, they don't have enough confidence in their leadership skills. They might be looking for someone to lead them. And again, maybe they're coming from a place of fear. They're afraid of something that we don't know what it is.

Rachel (00:44:18):

Yeah. And then, so, what does it look like to rise up to the moment?

Elba (00:44:27):

When I personally try to teach people, and instruct people, on what's going on, I do see some pushback. Some pushback, and then people saying, "No, you lead us. You do it, and we'll go behind you. But you lead." And I think that comes from fear, or under confident. They're not confident enough in their own ability. I think people usually do things when shit hits the fan, and they're forced to do it, as opposed to being proactive and going ahead and doing it. I think that's how I've seen most people work. They're like, "Oh my God, this is happening right now. And there's nobody around. I got to do it." So, I think that's what it is a lot of times. I mean, that's what I've seen.

Rachel (00:45:28):

Yeah. I had this ... It was a conversation that I had with a friend very recently, that made me be like, "Oh my God. Yes. I'm seeing things totally differently," even though I see the climate issue as also an issue of white supremacy, and power, and understand the way that privilege works in here. I was talking to her about malaise and saying like, "How do people show up? Because I talk to so many and everybody's paralyzed." She goes, "No, Rachel, you're talking to white people and they're paralyzed. And that's part of white malaise. And it's about the disinvestment, hundreds of years of disinvestment from white structures of power." And I was like, "Oh my God. Yeah."

Rachel (00:46:36):

And I keep saying like, "But we just had Hurricane Ida that flooded so many peoples ..." But for the most part, it wasn't the more well-off white people whose basements were flooded, and people died there. There's still a way that you can stand at arms length, if you're able to, from this problem, and not get involved, because getting involved also is asking for a full restructuring of our world. It's a lot of work, and people are lazy, and you can have the privilege of being lazy. I'm lazy.

Elba (00:47:19):

I don't have the privilege of being lazy. I don't, because I grew up here when everybody left New York City, and there were mostly Hispanics, poor whites, and Blacks here. And coming from a Hispanic background, I've never been able to be lazy. I can't. Things don't happen if I'm lazy. But that's interesting. I never heard of that. What you just explained to me, I've never heard of it.

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Rachel (00:47:55):

Yeah. And it puts all of the issues together in a way that feels clarifying, and useful for me.

Elba (00:48:08):

I don't think people are going to have that opportunity to be lazy anymore. I don't think that's going to happen anymore. I think it's going to hit home for everybody. Not just the people of color and stuff. I think it's going to hit home for everybody because this is not something that picks and chooses. I mean, you'll have the people in South Beach, and there's an area in South Beach that's very poor. And also Little Haiti, and mainland Miami that are experiencing the floods, and things like that. And you have places also, like little islands and things like that where the rich live, that are swallowing up those islands. So, it's not going to be any one person or community's problem anymore. I think it's going to be everybody's problem.

Elba (00:49:10):

I think it is everybody's problem. It is everybody's problem. So, this is an opportunity for people to really get together and say, "Hey, my house is going to flood just like the person next door. Maybe their house will be flooded, but this climate change is going to take my little island away." So, no matter how rich you are, it's going to affect you. So, I don't think people are going to have much of a chance to be lazy, and distant, and distance themselves as much as they want to-

Rachel (00:49:44):

Or they've been able to in the past-

Elba (00:49:45):

... or been able to in the past. And again, I think that comes from a place of fear. I think a lot of things, I think the majority of things are coming from places of fear.

Rachel (00:49:56):

What do you think people are fearful for?

Elba (00:50:00):

People are comfortable. People are comfortable in their way of life. Very comfortable. Hey, I mean, I was very comfortable to just be grandma type, doing my little gardening and all the rest, and now I'm going to rallies and I'm documenting everything I see, because it's like, I can't be comfortable. I have children in my family that I'm going to leave this planet to, so I can never be comfortable. So, I think a lot of people are going to be very uncomfortable soon.

Rachel (00:50:39):

Talk to me about the activism work that you do.

Elba (00:50:42):

Oh my goodness. So, without saying much, I've been going to rallies and stuff like that, and I'm getting a press pass to be a photojournalist. And I am going to document the different rallies that have to do with the mandate, the V mandate, what's going on with the nurses, and the teachers, and all of that, and how it's affecting them. And also I'm going to be documenting a lot of other things. I mean, I want to

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start documenting this climate change stuff. I want to document the rallies that we are having, that nobody knows about. Nobody knows about the different rallies because it's making people in political power very uncomfortable, because they're trying not to address the issue. But the issue's here.

Rachel (00:51:42):

Do you think the rallies have an impact?

Elba (00:51:44):

Yes and no. I've been to a lot of rallies since I was 14.

Rachel (00:51:49):

Of all different kinds of issues?

Elba (00:51:51):

All different kinds of issues. Food justice, jobs for youth, Roe versus Wade. I mean, so many different rallies. Being a supporter of my friends who go to rallies also. So, I've been to so many different rallies, and I thought that I could just like, "Okay, now that I'm older I could just lay back and just relax." No such thing. And that's okay. And that okay because I thought to myself, "Okay, so you know what? That means I just have to help the young ones, the ones who come after me, what needs to be done, and how to do it the right way." Do the rallies work? Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. But that quote, there's strength in numbers, that's when rallies work.

Elba (00:52:42):

We don't have people out by the hundreds, but when you have people out by the thousands, hundreds of thousands, that's when it works. When enough people, when communities get together. and I'm not just saying separate communities. I mean, everyone gets together then, yeah, things start to happen. Things start to change. I mean, look at the civil rights. My uncles were part of that. And those were in the hundreds of thousands, and things had to change because the powers that be that said, "Okay, if we don't do something ..." I mean, how many times have we been ... The scales were tipped in almost having a revolt, in many instances. Many instances. That's when the powers that be do not listen to the people that they serve. We don't serve the politicians, the politicians serve us. And that's what people seem to forget. And that's what the politicians are hoping we forget.

Elba (00:53:39):

So it depends. It depends on the strength of the rally and how big the rally is. And if it goes across cultural, and religious, and ethnic lines. When that happens, and everybody has the same mindset, and thinks this is not good, that's when things start to change.

Rachel (00:54:10):

What do you fear for the future?

Elba (00:54:18):

I don't know. I mean, I've seen a lot of corruption going on in our governments, and stuff like that. But that has always happened. That's always been. And they're going to push, and they're going to push, and they're going to push, and push. And then at some point the dam's going to break, and the people will

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push back. I mean, I've seen that. I mean, I was born in the early '60s. I have seen the Vietnam War and how it affected my family. I've seen how the civil rights affected my family. I've heard stories from my families, things that have happened. And I'm telling these stories to my younger family members. So yeah, it's a spiral. It'll happen again, and again, and again until people get it right. I mean, if it's happened before it'll happen again until people get it right. Until people evolve to a certain mindset. Once people evolve to a certain mindset, I think these things will stop.

Elba (00:55:35):

I had a conversation with a friend of mine. And I remember she wanted a utopia to happen. And I told her, "Hey, I believe in that. I think that's great. But you will not get that until people evolve to a certain mindset." And once you have the majority, and I'm saying a good majority, if not all, I would love it if we're all, but if you had a huge majority change their mindset set, to what should be as a collective, you're still going to have the same problems. So, I think that's what I see for the future. Do I see a bleak future? I don't think so. I hope not. I don't think so. I mean, you have people like you documenting this, which is great. So, other people can hear and maybe some people be like, "Oh wow. I agree with that." It's a form of education. Most of the arts are a form of education. And people don't see that. But I think they will. I think they will. Again, this too shall pass.

Rachel (00:56:54):

Yeah. So, my next question is, what do you feel hopeful for?

Elba (00:57:01):

A lot of things. A lot of things. I mean, I think some things might get bleak, but then I think things will turn around and get better. They always seem to. As someone who likes to read history, and has taught history, you have moments of horrible things happening. And then those moments stop, because people finally wake up and say, "Enough." So again, I think things will get to a certain point, and people will be like, "Enough," and then they'll wake up.

Rachel (00:57:46):

I hope so. I hope so.

Elba (00:57:48):

I think it'll happen. I mean, history has shown that it has always happened.

Rachel (00:57:54):

Even though this is outside of any scope of our own history.

Elba (00:57:59):

Yeah, because human beings, for the most part, I believe most human beings, especially when push comes to shove, are adaptable and realize, "Oh my God, I have to adapt. I have to adapt or the world just passes me by." They have to adapt. Adapt or die is usually ... I mean, look how we've adapted to all these ... Before we had the conversation of all these non-indigenous plant life, and animal life, and yet we've adapted. They've adapted, we've adapted. And we found a way. I mean, all these pigeons, so many pigeons. So, what do we do? We allow buildings to have hawks. I mean, the school right here had a hawk nest. There are hawks in this area. And we've put hawks in certain areas where there are too

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many pigeons. So, we let nature take its course. And the pigeon population reduce. So, we adapted. So, there's always room for adaptation.

Rachel (00:59:13):

Interesting, looking at invasive plants as useful models for adaptation rather than what we usually have. We have a xenophobic way of thinking about invasive species. It's an interesting reframing.

Elba (00:59:32):

What have they done about ... The fishing industry has done about the jellyfish and the carp. Now they fish for them and they sell them overseas. I mean, I've eaten crackers made out of jellyfish. They're a little bland. I got to put some peanut butter and jelly on them, but I've eaten them and they're okay. I've introduced them to my students, because I used to teach hydroponics and cooking. And I've introduced them to my students. I've had my students think outside of the scope. I mean, my students came from different backgrounds, and one of my students actually brought in ... He was from Mexico, these were sixth graders. And he brought in fried crickets with chili on them. And at first I'm like, "Okay, it's a bug." But I ate a leaf, and it ... Not a leaf, a wing.

Elba (01:00:23):

I ate its little wing, and I was like, "Okay, this is not so bad." And it's protein. I mean, I've eaten chocolate covered ants, because I told my kids, "Yeah, I'll do it." And I've gotten chocolate covered ants. They have the scorpions with ... That are in lollipops. So, we find a way, we adapt. And and when you share with the other cultures and you're like, "Okay." I mean, in this garden, the Bengali have been great. I did not know you could eat the stems of pumpkin plants.

Rachel (01:00:56):

Wow. Me either. That stem?

Elba (01:00:59):

The stem?

Rachel (01:01:00):

Yeah.

Elba (01:01:00):

You can eat the stem.

Rachel (01:01:01):

Wow.

Elba (01:01:02):

It's a like celery.

Rachel (01:01:03):

Yum. I love celery.

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Elba (01:01:05):

Yeah. So, you just have to just like de-vine it, take all the little fibers out, take the little spikes out, you could cut it up long, like celery, and then you just blanch it.

Rachel (01:01:18):

Wow, cool.

Elba (01:01:20):

They put it in curry. I was like, "Wow."

Rachel (01:01:22):

That's so cool.

Elba (01:01:23):

Yeah. Something new, something different. And with all this rain, pumpkin loves the rain. It's a different crop that we can grow.

Rachel (01:01:30):

Everyone's talking about pumpkins in gardens this season.

Elba (01:01:33):

Yeah.

Rachel (01:01:34):

Everyone's talking about pumpkins.

Elba (01:01:38):

They're big water eaters. They just drink. They're thirsty plants.

Rachel (01:01:42):

Yeah.

Elba (01:01:44):

And they're huge. This can feed ...

Rachel (01:01:48):

A family.

Elba (01:01:50):

This could feed a family. One pumpkin can feed a family. Plus the vines. Plus the vines. You can eat the vines.

Rachel (01:01:58):

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That is so cool.

Elba (01:01:59):

Yeah. People throw away things like carrot tops, and radish tops. You saute those.

Rachel (01:02:04):

I love eating a radish top. I hate having to eat a carrot top. I also try to eat the carrot tops. I dutifully make a carrot top pesto, and I never want to eat it.

Elba (01:02:17):

Well, you could always compost it.

Rachel (01:02:18):

That's what I do.

Elba (01:02:19):

Yeah. You could always compost the things you don't like to eat. You could always compost it.

Rachel (01:02:22):

I know, when I started composting, it was like, "Oh this is great. I don't have to waste all this food anymore. Food just goes back into-

Elba (01:02:31):

Back into the soil. I mean, sunflowers we have here. You can eat the sunflower heads. Or you can leave them for the birds. Either way.

Rachel (01:02:39):

Yeah. That is so cool.

Elba (01:02:41):

The roses here, you eat the pedals. You put them in the salad. Yeah. A lot of people do not know that. Make rose jelly. Oh my God, that's so good.

Rachel (01:02:50):

Well, you must be able to eat them because you could eat ... There's rose essence extract for pastries and stuff. So, that makes sense.

Elba (01:02:59):

Yeah. And when you take the pedals and it becomes a rose hip, you make tea out of that. Or you can make rose hip jelly. That's vitamin C in that-

Rachel (01:03:08):

I bet that's delicious.

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Elba (01:03:09):

... it's the vitamin for your whole day.

Rachel (01:03:11):

Wow.

Elba (01:03:12):

Yeah. Yeah.

Rachel (01:03:14):

So, my last question is just, are there any questions that I didn't ask you that you expected me to ask you, or that you wish I had asked you?

Elba (01:03:22):

No, I really don't have any questions, but I do have something I'd like to say.

Rachel (01:03:27):

Oh yeah.

Elba (01:03:28):

I would love, I would totally love, for people to really educate themselves in different things that they haven't learned before. Anything to do with sustainability, anything to do with recycling, whether it's recycling your clothes, whether it's teaching someone how to cook, pass whatever knowledge you have onto other people, become an educator, because an educator's not just somebody in a school setting. An educator could be you and I talking on this mic, and imparting our knowledge to other people. That's educating. And I would like for people to become educators. And so, if people became educators, other people would understand and other people would be less fearful, and they wouldn't be working from a place of fear anymore. Hopefully they'd work from a place of hope.

Rachel (01:04:26):

That's beautiful. Thank you.

Elba (01:04:29):

No, thank you.

Rachel (01:04:30):

Thank you for talking with me.

Elba (01:04:31):

Thank you for allowing me.

Rachel (01:04:31):

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It so generous. I love this conversation, really, really fascinating and interesting to hear your thoughts, and your experiences. And taking this time to talk with me. I really, really appreciate it. And I love talking with you.

Elba (01:04:45):

No problem. This was a great conversation.

Rachel (01:04:47):

Yeah. I really, really enjoyed it. Thanks.

Elba (01:04:49):

Me too.

Rachel (01:04:50):

I'm so glad I caught you at the garden. It was just like, "Oh. Oh, you're the person who I've been in contact with. I've been wanting to talk to you."