

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (00:00):

So Jean, let's start. Tell me your name, who you are, where you grew up, where you live now, your age, what you do. Give me the whole rundown.

Jean (00:16):

Okay. My name is Jean and I was born in Africa. So I came to the US and I live in Brooklyn right now, but for some reason I like growing my own food, because of global warming and all those.

When you buy food from the store and then it's not organic, all those pesticides they use, all those chemical they use, I don't like it, so I start growing my own food. But since I'm not experienced, I've been coming here to learn a little bit from Brendan and his team.

So last year I grew a lot things like tomato, peppers, eggplants and all kind of things, but as a young farmer, I should say, I've been making a lot of mistakes, so by coming here and then help them out, I pick up a few things.

Rachel (01:24):

That's really cool.

Jean (01:25):

Yes.

Rachel (01:27):

And where are you from in Africa?

Jean (01:30):

Togo.

Rachel (01:31):

Togo.

Jean (01:31):

That's in West Africa.

Rachel (01:33):

And how long have you been here in New York?

Jean (01:36):

Oh, quite some time.

Rachel (01:39):

Like 10 years, 20 years, 5 years?

Jean (01:42):

22 years.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (01:43):

Oh, quite some time.

Jean (01:44):

Yes.

Rachel (01:46):

So Jean, I'll start. My first question I ask everybody is when you think about global warming, what do you think about and how do you feel?

Jean (01:58):

I think global warming is a very serious issue, because if you say, let's say 10 years ago, we don't have those, and I'm saying now, but it's not the climate change, they're not as harsh as we see now.

When we got winter, we got a lot of ice, and when it is summertime, we got a lot of heat wave, or when it's raining, you'll see a lot of rain and some area will be flooded and all that. And most of the time they attribute those things to the global warming, and to combat that, they urging people to use less of... How should I put this? Okay.

When it come to, let's say driving. Yeah. They urge people to, if they can ride bicycle, so it would be less driving around.

Rachel (03:03):

Right.

Jean (03:04):

Less pollution. When it come to energy consumption, people, they encourage people to go towards solar panel or wind, and so growing your own food too is, I should say, part of the fight against global warming.

Rachel (03:28):

And how do you feel when you think about it?

Jean (03:28):

How I feel?

Rachel (03:28):

Yeah.

Jean (03:36):

I feel like I should do my part, just like simple recycling. When we have all those plastic in the ocean, in the trash, and they don't break down. They take years and years, so by using less plastic, for example.

Rachel (03:57):

So you feel a personal responsibility?

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Jean (03:59):

Of course, of course.

Rachel (04:00):

And how else do you feel? Like an emotion.

Jean (04:05):

About that?

Rachel (04:06):

Yeah.

Jean (04:06):

I used to be at, in one building somewhere in East New York, 11 years ago. So whenever I park my car, and I work from one to nine, so when I park my car, I get there like around noon to take my car and go to work, it feels like over because of the sun.

And I noticed around that building, there is not even one single tree around that building.

Rachel (04:37):

Wow.

Jean (04:38):

So I went to the management. I was like, hey, why don't you plant some trees around here so we can cool off the building, the cars and the asthma rate in that area is high as well. They was like, how, now, we spent too much money for maintenance. We don't want to spend a penny to plant some trees around [inaudible 00:04:59]. Okay. What about if you give me permission to go to the city so the city can come and plant some trees here, and it going to be free for you guys. They say, are you sure? I say, yes.

So I went to my community board, and I told them my project. Can we have the city plant some trees around my block? Okay. They say I need the management signature. So I went there, I called them, I give it to them. In six month, they came, they plant, I think between 72 or 74 trees around the two block they manage at the time, and they were happy. So after 11 years now, when you go there, the trees are really big.

Rachel (05:43):

Wow.

Jean (05:46):

And so I feel like I did my little part.

Rachel (05:50):

That's like a, that's a big deal. You made some real meaningful change in your neighborhood.

Jean (05:57):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Thanks.

Rachel (06:00):

So you also talked about how you feel like the climate crisis feels like it has increased over the past 10 years, that it really feels different the past 10 years than the previous 10 years that you've been in New York. Can you tell me more about the changes that you've experienced?

Jean (06:20):

I've been reading a lot about the ice melting, and they say every year we have more ice melting, which is kind of causing the global warming. And when we have, let's say a rain or tornado, they are violent or they are intense, or when we have heat, the heat wave is kind of intense. When it's cold is either too cold, or when it's hot it's too hot, so they say those are some of the things.

Rachel (06:55):

And you've also experienced that in New York?

Jean (06:57):

Oh, of course.

Rachel (06:58):

Yeah.

Jean (06:59):

Like a couple of weeks ago, it was in the 90s, but it feels like 105 or something like that. And it was, it was really-

Rachel (07:07):

What does it feel like? Did you have an emotion? When you experience unseasonable weather, when you notice the changes, do you have an emotion that comes up for you?

Jean (07:20):

Of course. You feel something, but how to express it, I don't know how, or whatever we doing is contributing to solving the issue, but of course.

Rachel (07:34):

How do you express it? Yeah. Let's try to express it, because that's what I'm interested in. What is the feeling? What is the emotion that comes up for you?

Jean (07:46):

First, you don't like it when it's either too cold or too hot. Yes. Even though I came from a part of Africa where it is hot, but this heat wave is out of control, so what can we do to help out?

Rachel (08:05):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Does it feel... A lot of people talk about like they have anxiety around it. It feels like they get anxiety or worry or feelings of powerlessness, frustration. I don't know if any of those words resonate for you.

Jean (08:21):

Oh, of course. Let's say even if you have AC in your apartment.

Rachel (08:27):

Right.

Jean (08:28):

Sometimes when it's too hard, the AC is kind of powerless.

Rachel (08:32):

Right.

Jean (08:32):

And forget about those who have only fans. How are they going to feel?

Rachel (08:37):

Right.

Jean (08:38):

Yeah. They can be anxious. They can be... If they cannot take it anymore, they have to, they feel like they have to do something, so all those emotion you mentioned, yes. We all go through those.

Sometimes you feel powerless. Oh, what can I do? Even if you almost naked, it's still hard, so you going to be like, there is a way to do it. You can drink a lot of water, try to calm yourself or be out there under the shade or under a tree so you can have some fresh air, and so on, so...

Rachel (09:27):

Hold on one second. I just want to... Hey John, if you're waiting, I don't want you to wait. I can also give you a, we can be in touch later if you want to do this later too. I just don't want you to wait around, but if you're happy to wait, wait.

John (09:43):

I can wait a little more. I don't want to rush you.

Rachel (09:46):

Okay. Cool. Well, come over if you get tired. I'll give you a thing and we'll be in touch later, but otherwise I'd love to talk today. Okay. So, whoa, oh, no. Excuse me.

Jean (09:46):

Bless you.

Rachel (10:03):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Okay, Jean, let me find my next question for you. Has there been a moment when you feel, when... Oh. When did you first learn about climate change?

Jean (10:26):

That was since I was back in Africa, because reading is kind of my thing, and I don't know if you hear about this group Greenpeace.

Rachel (10:43):

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Jean (10:43):

Yes.

Rachel (10:44):

Yeah.

Jean (10:46):

They kind of very vocal about fighting for the environment, so I've been reading a lot since then, and when I was here too, I've been doing the same.

Rachel (11:01):

And is there, when you first learned about it, which was, must have been over 20...

Jean (11:01):

Yes.

Rachel (11:01):

Yeah.

Jean (11:05):

Well over 20 years.

Rachel (11:09):

Has your understanding of the crisis changed since you first learned about it over the course of these past many years?

Jean (11:18):

Yes. Yes, of course. Yes. Since it was a long time ago, I cannot remember the topic they pick at the time, but there is this group, PETA.

Rachel (11:37):

PETA, yeah.

Jean (11:39):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Yeah. For the-

Rachel (11:39):

Animals.

Jean (11:41):

Animal, yes. So in a way, those animal, they have, should I say stabilize the nature? Because when we end up killing all of them, then it's like, we, first, we kind of destroying the forest, and when there is no forest, it is going to be really hard on us. No matter the technology we have right now to cool ourself, we still need forest and we still need trees, so...

Rachel (12:17):

Was there a moment for you when you feel like the climate crisis sort of showed up in your own backyard, so to speak, when you were confronted by the climate crisis in a way that felt personal?

Jean (12:31):

Yes. Yes. And this is one of the reason. Right now in our backyard, okay, they say the soil is not good for planting produce, so still we put some pots to raise our own...

Rachel (12:53):

Oh, here, please.

Speaker 4 (12:56):

Oh, really?

Rachel (12:56):

Help yourself. Yeah. Have as much as you'd like. Here come over. Yeah. Have as much as you'd like, there's so many.

Speaker 4 (13:05):

Oh, thank you.

Rachel (13:05):

You want another? You want some?

Speaker 4 (13:10):

He was asking me for donut and I couldn't find it anywhere, but when I see it was yours it freaked me out.

Rachel (13:11):

Yeah. Help yourself and have as many you'd like, okay.

Speaker 4 (13:15):

One more, one more? Take one more.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Jean (13:20):

Oh.

Speaker 4 (13:23):

Thank you.

Rachel (13:23):

Thank you.

Speaker 4 (13:23):

What do we say? What do we say?

Speaker 5 (13:23):

Thank you.

Rachel (13:26):

You're welcome. Enjoy. Okay. So you were saying that they say the soil isn't good for growing.

Jean (13:33):

Yes, because-

Rachel (13:34):

Here in Brooklyn? Or where exactly?

Jean (13:35):

Yes. We were right off the Belt Parkway.

Rachel (13:38):

Oh, where you live.

Jean (13:39):

Yes. So they say about hundred years ago when they building the Belt Parkway, they dump the construction stuff in those area, so we cannot grow anything from the soil unless you do raised bed or in a pot. So we cannot grow anything [inaudible 00:14:01], but still we using pots, and I have about close to 80 pots where we grow all our spice, tomato, all kind of things, yes, so we think this is our way of helping. First eating organic food and helping the climate.

Rachel (14:29):

And you're growing these vegetables with your neighbors or your family?

Jean (14:32):

With my family, yes.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (14:34):

That's really cool. So how does global warming affect your day-to-day?

Jean (14:46):

Whether you notice or not, it is, because you live around here and when it's... Let's say when we get 10 inches of snow. They will laugh at you, of course. Or you see the downpour we have yesterday, the day before yesterday? Flooding New Jersey, somewhere in Long Island, and so on and so on. So it may not affect you directly, but when it's affecting your neighbor, it's like just you.

Rachel (15:22):

Right.

Jean (15:23):

Or some of the road flooded. Yes. So every day. It's affecting us every day, one way or another.

Rachel (15:36):

You've talked about this, how you've made changes in your own life, especially around growing your own food. Is there... What responsibilities do we have as individual people who live on this planet, as people who live in this country and this city? In what ways does this moment ask us to show up to it?

Jean (16:10):

You cannot force everybody to change their whole life, but the climate is affecting us in general, and I know recycling is something everybody is doing right now. Yes. So this one step, and I know they banning the plastic bags from the stores, which is kind of going good so far, and whatever they say, we'll do our part to comply and help.

Rachel (16:51):

What kind of impact do you think it makes?

Jean (16:56):

It may be a little, but hey, I've seen the amount of plastic we have in the ocean, or when you see some fish or, okay, some life in the ocean that get caught in those plastic, and it's horrible.

So they, most of the time, they end up in those, and pollution. Pollution is kind of getting bad, so whatever they suggest in the news and all that, at least my family and I will do our best to help. Yes.

Rachel (17:46):

How does thinking about climate crisis impact how you make plans for your future?

Jean (17:56):

I work outside in the field so I watch the, mostly the news, but the Weather Channel every day, so I can plan for my day because I'm going to be out there in the field, and when is running, I'll know the kind of boot or kind of clothes to wear. When it's too hot, I'll know the type of clothes to wear, and so on and so on.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

So I have to pay attention to the nature because I work out there in the field every day and that's how I'm kind of interested in how our daily life impact nature and the weather. Does that make any sense?

Rachel (18:40):

Yeah. Yeah. And how does it impact? How does our daily life impact?

Jean (18:48):

Okay. Does it impact your daily life?

Rachel (18:51):

Oh, absolutely.

Jean (18:56):

How?

Rachel (18:56):

Well, when I notice change... Here, John, you can email me here and I can meet you anywhere. I can meet you here. I can meet you somewhere else, but I'd really love to chat.

John (19:09):

Okay, great.

Rachel (19:09):

Yeah.

John (19:09):

Will do. Thank you.

Rachel (19:11):

Yeah, thank you.

Jean (19:11):

Sorry I took all the time.

John (19:12):

I'm glad, no, I'm glad you're talking. It's good. It's good. I'm glad. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Rachel (19:15):

Cool. Thanks John, I'll talk to you soon.

John (19:15):

Okay.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (19:23):

For me, it impacts me more in like the way that it makes me feel anxious and worried about the future, and I actually, I guess when there's extreme weather events, I get scared in the moment for the safety of my friends and my family, but for me, the thing that impacts me the most is thinking about the future and how I worry about increasing climate stability will lead to a more unstable life for myself and my loved ones.

Jean (20:01):

Yes. So do you think that will affect in a way, not just produce, but in a way we consume food?

Rachel (20:19):

Yeah.

Jean (20:20):

It will be bad. When I say bad to the point where let's say this crop will be completely damaged, whether it's too hot or it's too cold.

Rachel (20:34):

Right.

Jean (20:35):

Because right now it's supposed to be at least in the 70s. With that climate change could turn around to the point where right now, when it's supposed to be in the 70s, 80s, could turn to like in the 40s to damage all this. I hope we are not going to go that far though.

Rachel (20:57):

What's your prediction?

Jean (21:02):

That's why we have the weather forecast, because you may predict but it could turn out to be completely wrong, so...

Rachel (21:19):

But what's your prediction for the future and kind of the health of the planet?

Jean (21:29):

I know more people are paying attention to it now, and like about, let's say nine, 10 years ago when Mayor Bloomberg was planting those three trees, like 1 million trees.

Rachel (21:50):

Yeah.

Jean (21:51):

I believe this is one of the way to help out, and a million trees, that's a lot.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Rachel (21:51):

Right.

Jean (22:00):

That will, those who have asthma, that will clear the air for those who have asthma, and the root of those plants, they will filter the water we drink, and that will make the blocks look beautiful and provide shade, and when the winds are too, let's say, too rough, they could, the leaves can slow down the wind and that could help out everybody.

Rachel (22:25):

Oh my God. Yeah.

Jean (22:26):

Yes.

Rachel (22:29):

And trees feel like a really important solution in your mind?

Jean (22:34):

For me, yes.

Rachel (22:36):

Yeah.

Jean (22:36):

Yes. Because look at how many things they do.

Rachel (22:41):

Yeah.

Jean (22:41):

It's not just to make the neighborhood look beautiful, but hey, they provide shade too.

Rachel (22:51):

Do you think that climate change will affect you differently because of your race, or gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability?

Jean (23:02):

It doesn't matter. Whoever you are, Black, white, Asian, Spanish, LGBT, straight, no. It going to affect everybody. It doesn't matter who you are, your... No.

Rachel (23:02):

Yep.

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Jean (23:18):

It will affect everybody. Yes. So this is some sort of everybody's fight. Yes. We should chip in to help. Yes.

Rachel (23:29):

Do you see everybody chipping into help? Do you see that happening?

Jean (23:40):

I think more and more people are doing it. Yes.

Rachel (23:44):

What do you see around you that gives you that information?

Jean (23:48):

All right. I can start with the recycling.

Rachel (23:50):

Yeah.

Jean (23:52):

People are taking good care of it, and people are walking more. Those who cannot walk that much, they kind of riding the bikes, which is, and they're making a lot of bike lanes now.

And I went to Amsterdam. Oh man. I saw... I believe there was more bikes than cars, but this is the opposite here. We have more cars than bikes [inaudible 00:24:23]. The bikes are coming up. Yes. Slowly they're coming up. What are you doing or what are you seeing around you that make you feel like we going in the right direction?

Rachel (24:44):

Me?

Jean (24:44):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rachel (24:45):

Oh, I don't know. I don't think that I see enough. I worry that we're, that I'm seeing some positive movement, but I worry that it's not fast enough.

Jean (24:55):

But you want more than that? Okay.

Rachel (24:56):

That it's not happening fast enough.

Jean (24:57):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

So what do you suggest then?

Rachel (25:01):

Well, what we need is a massive restructuring of our energy, agricultural infrastructures and transportation, and I don't know if that's going to happen fast enough, but I don't know what to do to make that happen.

Jean (25:30):

Okay. When you say energy, what do you mean by that? How-

Rachel (25:30):

Like oil, gas, and moving over to renewable energies like solar and wind.

Jean (25:37):

So what do you think about fracking? I saw your eyes. I was like, okay, yes.

Rachel (25:46):

I do not support fracking.

Jean (25:48):

Yes. So we should be moving away from oil?

Rachel (25:57):

Yeah.

Jean (25:58):

And then go more for, okay. Yeah. I agree. I agree.

Rachel (26:04):

If you were talking to like a great, great, great, great, great, great grandchild in the future, how do you think that person would... What do you think that person would think about you right now in this moment, and us in this moment?

Jean (26:27):

They will be like, they talking about issue. They are living at the time now, or they kind of try to anticipate, so even if they have those climate change, it won't be intense or it won't be damaging to them the way it will be at that time.

Rachel (27:05):

Do you have a spiritual practice or a set of values or ethics that help you understand this moment?

Jean (27:15):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

No, but when I wake up in the morning, I pray. I thank God. Hey, thanks for waking me up this today, and when I go out there, protect me. I can go and come back safe. You know how New York anything could happen sometimes, so that's all I do.

Rachel (27:41):

I think it's amazing that you did that, that you got your building to get trees planted and that you're growing your own food, and I think it's amazing because so much in my interviews, I often talk to people who want to be doing things but aren't, and I'm curious about what is it that makes you act?

Jean (28:10):

Because when I was reading the news, East New York was one of the neighborhood where asthma rate was the highest, and at the time I was in those building. Like I told you, I go to work at one, so when I get there around noon to start my car, I'll turn it on and then stay under the shade of the building for five minutes, just so it can cool off a little bit before I go.

I've been doing that for a while. I was like, no way. And I look around and say like, wow, how come those two buildings, each building is around the block, not even one single tree. So that's where I talked to the...

Rachel (29:12):

The management.

Jean (29:13):

Yes, the management, and then the community board.

Rachel (29:18):

So you just, you looked around and you saw a need, and you-

Jean (29:22):

A need to have trees, yes.

Rachel (29:23):

And you took it upon yourself to make that happen.

Jean (29:26):

Yes. And the same year they planted those trees, that's the same year I move out. It was funny, but...

Rachel (29:35):

So you gave them a lasting important gift before you left.

Jean (29:40):

Before, yes. I said like, oh, okay. I'm not going to be around to see them, but okay. Every while and then, still I drove around just to look how they, yeah.

And you see how you recording this? I record my interview with the management, and then I record my interview with the community board, and I was lucky. The day they breaking the ground,

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

doing the [inaudible 00:30:10] that day. They told me one day ahead of time that, oh, tomorrow they're going to start breaking the ground, so I was there. I took some pictures of those guys doing it, and from there, I keep following them. So whenever they come in to put the trees in the ground, I was there too. I took some pictures and all that and just so I had proof.

And when I left, the manager of the community board, he invite me to one of the meeting. I don't go to the meeting that often. So when I was at one of the meeting, there was one daycare. The lady that ran the daycare, she was complaining that she called the city about more than a dozen time for them to give computers to the kids so they can start learning how to use computers. But she was like, the city is not getting back to her for more than three years, and she been calling. She been calling, email, call, letters and all that, but it's not going anywhere. At the time, I work at JFK Airport. I was a computer technician. And a few months after that, we kind of getting new computers.

So the old computers, they going to send them to somewhere. And I asked my manager, can I have some of those computers for those kid? It was a lot. We don't want any, we don't want to be... The kids are going to be using those computers. What about fire? What about somebody, the desktop falls on one of those kids.

Rachel (32:06):

They were worried about damage.

Jean (32:09):

I was like, okay, I'm going to have all of them sign you a release form, so anything that happened to those computers or to any kid using them, you are not going to be in any way.

Rachel (32:21):

Responsible.

Jean (32:22):

They say, can you do that? I say yes. So I drafted the release form. I gave it to the school. They sent it to all the kids. They sign it, and when we end up deploying the new computers, they gave me, I think, seven computers that I gave to the school. And I put some games for the, because-

Rachel (32:46):

That's amazing.

Jean (32:47):

I put some games for the kids and all that, and...

Rachel (32:51):

So you're a person who problem solves and gets people what they need in your community.

Jean (32:54):

I try to help. Yes.

Rachel (32:59):

Jean, Red Hook Farms, Red Hook, Brooklyn
July 10, 2021

Jean, is there any question that I didn't ask you that you thought I would be asking you or you wish I had asked you?

Jean (33:05):

Oh, you asked a lot, so...

Rachel (33:12):

Too many. Well, thank you so much for talking with me.

Jean (33:14):

Hey.

Rachel (33:15):

I really, really appreciate this. This was awesome. Any last final thoughts?

Jean (33:15):

I hope you can use something out of it.

Rachel (33:24):

I will. Absolutely.

Jean (33:25):

Yeah.

Rachel (33:26):

This was great. It was really nice to talk with you.