

Marcia, Phoenix Community Garden, Ocean Hill, Brooklyn
September, 2021

Rachel (00:00):

Press record. If I look over here, I'm just going to be checking some of the-

Marcia (00:04):

Not a problem.

Rachel (00:05):

... audio levels. Okay. So, Marcia, if you could tell me your name, where you grew up, where you live now, how long have you been a member of Phoenix and what you do. Who are you?

Marcia (00:22):

Wow. That's a lot. Okay. My name is Marcia Denson. I grew up in North Carolina. I live here in Ocean Hill. I'm one of the founders of this garden. We founded the garden in 2006.

Rachel (00:44):

How long have you lived here in New York?

Marcia (00:47):

Since I was 14.

Rachel (00:50):

Okay.

Marcia (00:50):

Yes.

Rachel (00:52):

So I will start by asking you my ... This is the framing question of the project. When you think about climate change or global warming, what do you think about and how do you feel?

Marcia (01:04):

I think people took a long time to really grasp the severity of it. I think it's something that we can get a handle on, now that we know exactly what it is. There isn't much that I can do about it as a individual, but working as a group, say with this garden and the way that we grow food, the way that we handle our waste products, the plastic, the recycling, the composting, all that sort of thing. We try to do my part that way.

Rachel (01:46):

How do you feel?

Marcia (01:48):

How do I feel?

Rachel (01:48):

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Yeah.

Marcia (01:49):

About global warming?

Rachel (01:50):

Yeah.

Marcia (01:51):

What's there to feel? We knew it was happening. It was brushed under the table. Even today, politicians, they don't think it's really something that exists, and it does. You can see it in the weather, the way the weather changes. This past summer, how many days consecutive heat? Or when it rains or snows in places it never did before. With the way that the animals, the polar bears and all, how they're suffering. The huge snow barriers that were there for years, and now they're down to nothing.

It also affects the way that the animals can survive, because there's no way for them to feed. It's a very emotional thing. So you just can't say how I feel. I feel terrible about it, and just hope that I won't be here to see it, but somewhere that people will take notice and try to do the right thing.

Rachel (03:06):

Talk to me about founding Phoenix Garden. How did that come up? Why did you found the garden?

Marcia (03:14):

Well, it started with Green Guerillas. They approached us.

Rachel (03:18):

Who's us?

Marcia (03:20):

Well, we were neighbors together. I was a chef at Neighbors Together, and Green Guerillas had called a meeting of the community and they held it at Neighbors Together. That was during a time when they were disposing of certain gardens and all that sort of thing.

Rachel (03:47):

What do you mean?

Marcia (03:48):

They were getting rid of people or taking over gardens, like community gardens.

Rachel (03:51):

Like developers?

Marcia (03:52):

Yes. Well, Mark, his memory is better than mine. He can tell you. He can fill you in all those little spots that I miss.

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Rachel (03:58):

Yeah.

Marcia (03:58):

So anyway, Jerry Summers, myself, Fritz Anterano, Gary Smalley. We were founders of the Garden. This place was vacant for about 20 years. We get out here with our hands and bags, and we picked up broken glass and bottles and bricks, all that. We cleaned up the spot. I said I would never do anything like this again, because I grew up in North Carolina, picking cotton, harvesting tobacco, stringing tobacco, grading tobacco, picking beans, all that slave stuff. I said-

Rachel (04:41):

On your own farm or on somebody else's farm?

Marcia (04:43):

No, on somebody else's farm. My great-grandfather, he left us 240 acres, but he rent his land out. We can't sell it because it stay in the family. But I was a kid and I had no say in it. I went to live with a relative that put me out there on that slave thing. So the first day he put me out there, I passed out. I didn't know about the heat or thinking about cotton or anything of that sort.

Rachel (05:08):

You were young, right?

Marcia (05:09):

Yeah. I was about 10.

Rachel (05:09):

God.

Marcia (05:11):

Nine or 10. So there were people that could pick a row. Say a row started from here to Broadway Junction. My grandfather, he could pick two rows at a time. My cousin and I would be right here at this end. So we'd take dirt and put into the thing and we'd try to fool him, but it didn't work. So, but anyway, when I retired, I decided I wanted to start a farmer's market. So I approached Kelly, and then Mark got involved, and that was going our fifth year. We started being a farmstead. Because I saw in working in Neighbors Together that the people that were not getting nutritious food were the seniors and the children. This is what ... I'm for the senior. I wanted to be sure that they had the same fresh, sustainable food that everybody else had because you had grandmothers that were raising six of their grandchildren and it was hard. They would come in and sometimes on a Friday, you could eat a meal and take a meal with you. That's 14 plates.

So they were having a birthday or something. I make sure they had had a cake or all that sort of thing. But it's seeing what was going on in a community that made me feel better about farming and making sure that the seniors and the children were taken care of.

Rachel (06:53):

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What was the difference between farming in North Carolina and farming here?

Marcia (06:56):

I was a slave. Farming here is just something that I want to do. It wasn't planned that way. I wanted to do. In North Carolina, you are working somebody else's land and you don't have a say about it. You're up at four o'clock in the morning with socks on your hands picking cucumbers, things like that. But I learned how to string tobacco, hang it, grade it. We have raised tobacco, cigarettes, pipe tobacco, cigars. So it wasn't a very happy time. That's why I said I would never go into a field again.

Rachel (07:46):

So then why did you say yes when they approached you about starting Phoenix?

Marcia (07:50):

Well, because it was just something, I didn't realize it was going to be to this extent when I said yes. Come on, let's do it, let's do it. So I said yes.

Rachel (08:01):

You didn't know what you were getting yourself into.

Marcia (08:05):

I did not. I didn't. But it's been very fulfilling and could be. I've gone through a lot of illnesses and all that, and God is right there with his arm around me. Maybe he did have me suffer to come back a full circle and have some fulfillment in things. So it's this garden. See, I went through the cancer and all that stuff. Like they say, I'm running around with a cast. It's something that it has to be done. So I don't know if that makes sense to you or not, but-

Rachel (08:54):

It does. I want to know more about fulfillment. What feels fulfilling about it? What does gardening here do for you?

Marcia (09:03):

Well, this is our open space, and a lot of people don't know the space is here. See the birds.

Rachel (09:11):

Even though it's so big.

Marcia (09:11):

The birds fly over and the birds look down and say, "Oh, I want to be there." We have ducks stop in, beautiful, different ducks on their way, wherever they're going. They stop in. I also do a summer youth program. You knew that. This way, it's out here with the kids. We created so many things. We make wine. We use-

Rachel (09:40):

With those grapes?

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Marcia (09:42):

With those grapes, and we also make wine from different things in the back. I make cranberry wine. I make peach brandy. We make plum wine, all that.

Rachel (09:53):

Wow. That's cool.

Marcia (09:56):

We could have a wine tasting one day.

Rachel (09:56):

Yeah. That's so cool. Wow. Yeah. It's really a space. It's a space in nature.

Marcia (10:11):

Definitely, definitely.

Rachel (10:12):

It feels good to be in here.

Marcia (10:15):

The birds think it belongs to them and they allow us to come in.

Rachel (10:19):

They're probably right.

Marcia (10:20):

Yeah. They are. It's their space and they allow us in, because some days we sit here and they're talking. They're talking to each other and then sit here. Yeah, yeah. So I found two little birds were outside on the sidewalk. We don't know how they got there. So we're, "What are we going to do?" So I took off my hat, my cap, threw it over him, picked up one and brought him back. I put him over here inside. That way, he won't be in any danger. If his mommy comes or something, he cured and she'll find him. I go back and I get the other.

So we've rescued birds. We've rescued cats. Mark and I came here one morning and there was a cat on top of the fence, little teeny, little thing. So we took him, Mark. He's still living with Mark today. That was 10 years ago.

Rachel (11:12):

Wow.

Marcia (11:14):

Then we rescued another and then we've rescued people in this garden, people that needed something, some type of to fill that void in their life, something they wanted to do and find something gratifying. This is it. You know?

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Rachel ([11:33](#)):

Yeah. What kinds of changes have you noticed over the years of gardening here? I'm thinking in the context of global warming, but also broader than that. What kinds of changes have you noticed?

Marcia ([11:51](#)):

Well, not really any changes because the global warming hasn't really affected us. We've had the weather change sometimes and all that. Other than that, no. We harvest rain water from the building there to water the garden. We also use a hydrant. I wanted to do a drip irrigation system. So I did a fundraiser. So we are putting in the drip irrigation with solar paneling and all that sort of thing. That way, the whole garden can be watered at one time or people that want their bed to water. Everybody doesn't want that.

Rachel ([12:27](#)):

Is drip elevation, it's elevated?

Marcia ([12:30](#)):

No, it's low. It's a tubing that runs along the ground into the bed underneath. That way, you turn on, it waters the bed.

Rachel ([12:41](#)):

Wow.

Marcia ([12:43](#)):

Some tubings are about the size of a lot of my fingers. Some of them are flatter. The ones we use on Governor's Island were a little flatter. That's why with the timer and the solar paneling, it turns itself on and off. You have gardens, or not just a garden, I guess, but I mean massive gardens that use irrigation that way. Or they do have the ones that spin their pokes on top. That's the irrigation system we used when I was a kid. But here, with something, it's a whole entire different thing.

Rachel ([13:24](#)):

That sounds amazing, with water that you've harvested from the rain and solar-powered power. So it's this fully sustainable irrigation system.

Marcia ([13:33](#)):

Yes. So I guess it is something to do with global warming, in that respect.

Rachel ([13:36](#)):

Wow. That's amazing. That's amazing. But so you haven't noticed any changes in growing or even with the weather being a little more chaotic, you've been growing the same things on the same timeline?

Marcia ([13:51](#)):

Yeah. Sure. Can't blame it on global warming. It could be anything but yeah, I can't really say it's affected us in any way. Because we're sort of on top of things and with the watering and the taking care of soil and all that.

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Rachel (14:09):

Would you say there's any way that global warming affects you on a day-to-day basis?

Marcia (14:14):

Me?

Rachel (14:15):

Yeah.

Marcia (14:16):

Probably, but I'm not smart enough to tell.

Rachel (14:18):

I think you're bloody smart.

Marcia (14:21):

It probably does. No, not really.

Rachel (14:34):

How about how you plan for your future?

Marcia (14:39):

Well, the cancer's in remission. I'm trying to survive as best as I can with pain and all that sort of thing, but when I'm out here, I don't think about it, until it hits me and I get another pill or something or yeah. Just have some water, sit down for a while. My future, I can't say, but I'm going to do this as long as I can, as best that I can. When I can't walk around and do it, I'll sit down and do it. This is why we got that gate over there. People forget seniors. Some of the people have access to the garden with their walkers and things like that. They don't realize they're going to get the age one day when they can't get down and do the planting. So we wanted to put the raised beds in. That way, you can roll your walker over, do your planting or whatever.

Rachel (15:43):

Wow.

Marcia (15:43):

You're not getting down here.

Rachel (15:43):

So you've made raised beds to be accessible for older people or for people who can't bend over.

Marcia (15:49):

Everybody. Sure. But probably, that's definitely.

Rachel (15:52):

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What are other ways that you've built this garden to accommodate all different kinds of people?

Marcia (15:57):

Well, I'd say it could be the walk, the passageways. That way, with the wheelchairs or whatever. This is pretty solid ground. So before with everything shaky, but we are total accessible because even young people have problems or that can't really do the things and bend over and carry water and all that stuff, the way they did at one time. So I want to get to the point where everybody feel welcome. Nobody feels left out because they can't bend over and pick up 10 gallons of water and all that stuff.

We don't want anybody to be shut out. The thing is we don't want elders to feel that they don't belong or they don't have place with us. Because before you blink, it's over. I lost 30 years. I don't know where it went. I'm telling you. What happened?

Rachel (17:11):

You blink, and all of a sudden it was 30 years.

Marcia (17:21):

Yeah, it was like, "Whoa. What happened? What happened to my hair?"

Rachel (17:21):

So I want to hear more stories about this garden. Do you have any moments in the life of this space that felt really challenging?

Marcia (17:32):

All the time. Sure. I think people breaking in and stealing all our tools. Some members getting beds and not taking care of it. The one thing, you don't want to waste the food. We're not leaving food in a bed to go to waste. If you can't maintain your bed, if you're sick or something, we have teams. Tell your team leader and somebody will maintain and take care of your bed because things happen. Could be a family crisis. Could be anything.

Other than that, we haven't had any real problems because nobody knows we're in here. So we don't really have a lot of no police. Other than people breaking in and doing little silly things, no, we haven't had any real problems. Well, I'm on a steering committee, which I've been on since 2007, 2006, there's no president. There's no one person making all the rules and all that stuff. Those people [inaudible 00:18:46], it's no good. We vote on things. We have members. We have different programs, all that. Everything is structured. So that eliminates a lot of problems also.

Rachel (19:05):

Because it sounds like you have a very strong set of self-governance within the community.

Marcia (19:12):

Yes, within this garden.

Rachel (19:13):

Within this garden. Yeah.

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Marcia (19:15):

This garden.

Rachel (19:15):

Yeah. Do you have a moment in this garden where you just ... What's some of your happiest memories in this garden?

Marcia (19:30):

Let's see. I like the way that people responded to the music, jazz in the middle of the garden. Fantastic. I like to bring Julliard here. Green Guerillas has a thing where we went to our meeting, and Julliard. But then the virus started. So then I have next season to bring classical music-

Rachel (19:58):

Wow.

Marcia (19:58):

... into Phoenix, this space, this space. Dancers up there and the music goes out all. You can hear it for blocks.

Rachel (20:09):

That sounds so magical.

Marcia (20:11):

Yes, it is. Two, I was with the kids. They come in, little kids. You give them tours of the garden, things like that. The summer youth program. The children that were in shelters and foster children were the best cooperative children. It seems that the ones that had more and all that were just sort of ... But the ones that had less, that were more needy, were the ones that were more responsive. Well, a couple seasons, that's the way it was. I remember that because they learned so much and they were so happy to get here. So that's one of the really good moments.

Rachel (21:06):

What kinds of things do they do at the summer program?

Marcia (21:08):

Oh, they learn. They plant. We teach them how to prune trees. We had them clean up also the perimeter, things of that sort. Everything that we did here in the garden, they had access to.

Rachel (21:28):

What's the value of learning how to grow things and taking care of things like that?

Marcia (21:31):

The epidemic you just started, so you never saw so many backyard gardens in your life and people growing things in the kitchen and on the window sill. That's what it is.

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Rachel (21:43):

What's that about?

Marcia (21:45):

What's that about?

Rachel (21:46):

Yeah.

Marcia (21:46):

It's about survival and learning how to, the way your ancestors did long before you could walk to the corner and get it from a grocery store. Being self-sustainable, being able to take care of yourself and your family just in case something happens that you can't. There are none, there's nothing on the shelf in the grocery store. Learn seed saving. That way, you can start your little patch. You can grow food anywhere you got a light. You know? Sure.

Rachel (22:19):

I was talking to somebody at another garden recently not far from here, who was describing community gardeners as the stewards for the future. She was saying that the people who know how to garden in communities are going to be the ones who are going to be able to feed the communities in the future. In a future of food shortage, the community gardeners are going to be the ones to take care of communities.

Marcia (22:48):

That might be true, but we're doing it now. They're talking about the future. We're doing it now.

Rachel (22:54):

So the future is the present, actually.

Marcia (22:54):

This is it. This is it.

Rachel (22:57):

Yeah.

Marcia (22:58):

This is it. You know? We ran into our situation where these are the kind of young ladies that, "Oh, I'm black and I want to be in a community. I want to do this for the community. I want to bring this up." Who do you think we are? What do you think we've been doing all this time? Do I look black? All these things you're talking about, we've been doing it for years.

Rachel (23:23):

They came in and-

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Marcia (23:23):

Like they came in-

Rachel (23:23):

... said, "We're going to do this new thing."

Marcia (23:26):

"Oh, yeah, I'm going to save this community. I'm going to ..." Yeah. Right. Talk is cheap. Not really.

Rachel (23:40):

Well, it's like the younger generation never remembers that the older generation has been there before and has already been doing the work.

Speaker 3 (23:49):

The cash box is down here?

Marcia (23:49):

Huh?

Speaker 3 (23:49):

The cash box is over here?

Marcia (23:51):

It's down here, baby.

Speaker 3 (23:51):

Oh, you brought ... oh, right.

Marcia (23:53):

I put it in the chair underneath the table there.

Because when I was 17, I was like, "Oh, they're so ..." Everybody feels that way, that they know more than the parents. Your parents say, "I can't wait for you to have kids, till you get your turn. You're going to get it." But it's not easy. It takes years to learn things. We think we know everything we know. We don't know diddly. It takes years to get into, until actually know. You think you know. You might know how to do some things fine. You can be a jack of all trades and master of none, just doing all this. You're all over the place. But be able to show, develop something.

Rachel (25:00):

You mean in any aspect?

Marcia (25:02):

In any aspect. It's going to take more than gardening to save a neighborhood or community. You can grow food, but you got to get into the person. You can grow fresh vegetables all day long, but you can't

force a person to eat it. You cannot. You can go to the supermarket, all these things, talk all these healthy food, and he's going to go pick at those chips and cookies anyway. You can't force people.

I was doing a cooking demonstration. I work with the United Way and Just Food and all that. I teach healthy cooking. I'm doing a demonstration, and the man, he's talking to me. He's telling me, "Oh, I have gout and high blood pressure, ladi da da." He picks up the salt shaker as I was doing it. He didn't taste the food, but he picked up the salt shaker and started adding the salt to the food. But he just told me he got high blood pressure and gout and all this stuff. But he's like, "I can't stop." He was 100 pounds overweight or something, probably more. I don't want to ... So you can't force people. You try to save people. You can't save everybody.

Rachel (26:09):

So what's the next step? How?

Marcia (26:14):

Do the best you can with those that do want to be helped. You can't save everybody, but be there for people that do want to eat healthy and learn how to do things. Be of assistance and volunteer.

Rachel (26:31):

Do what you can.

Marcia (26:34):

Do what you can. But don't waste a lot of energy on things that you can't do anything about. You can do all day long. Oh, I'm going to go save the community. Oh, I'm going to save the world. I'm going to teach you how to eat healthy. Right. They leave the demo and go right to the corner and get fried chicken or something. It sounds good. I've been doing demos or cooking, teaching healthy cooking for, it's got to be 20 years.

Rachel (27:05):

Wow. You must be an amazing cook.

Marcia (27:08):

Right. I did my best for United Way and Just Food and all those and Green Thumb. I let the audience participate within the demo. Because I say to them, "I can learn something from you" because most of the time, they're older people. You don't want to let them come in and thinking, "Oh, I can show you how to do this. I know more than you do." Yeah.

Rachel (27:37):

Right. They're thinking the same thing that you're thinking with those young women, like, "I've been doing this for longer than you."

Marcia (27:42):

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. They appreciate ... with that, that makes me feel good because they're, and some of them are really sincere about taking, getting recipes and cooking. I also do soap making.

Rachel (28:02):

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Ooh.

Marcia (28:02):

So I have seniors that come from Queens to my workshops and they follow me around.

Rachel (28:09):

I want to go to a soap making workshop.

Marcia (28:12):

Yeah. We're setting up one here after the children's harvest, like right here in the structure.

Rachel (28:17):

Cool.

Marcia (28:18):

Or I go to ... Where else? I did one out in Brownsville and we go to the Bronx, wherever.

Rachel (28:27):

All over.

Marcia (28:28):

Yeah.

Rachel (28:29):

Talk to me. I have a few more minutes, but I want to know. I feel like there's this unspoken connection between healthy eating and quote/unquote "saving people and saving the world." Can you talk to me more explicitly about that connection between healthy eating-

Marcia (28:51):

And saving people?

Rachel (28:52):

Yeah.

Marcia (28:53):

You have to have people who want to be saved.

Rachel (28:56):

But what's the importance of healthy eating, I guess, for you? What's that connection?

Marcia (29:03):

Well, it makes me feel better. I know I'm taking care of myself. I know with the cancer and all the other things that are going on with myself, I know how to treat it, how useful it is to have healthy eating, all

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those things. If I were not eating healthy and exercising and getting out, not just exercising and getting out, walking, doing something helped me. So I know it would assist and help somebody else, healthy eating. You can do a little, half a day where you just eat something that is not good for you. Pick a day out of the week and have ice cream or cake or something, whatever you want, and go back to your healthy eating. It's not what you do. It's how you do it. You know?

Rachel (30:05):

Okay. I have two more questions for you. The first is, what do you feel hopeful for, for the future?

Marcia (30:13):

That Phoenix will be here forever, and the garden won't be taken over and-

Rachel (30:24):

By who?

Marcia (30:26):

By anyone and all the people shut out. That I'll be here also, but that's not going to happen. I know that the community and the garden, that includes the schools, all of those things that can come together and work together. Our children, that they can have a more positive response to the garden. It's difficult getting teenagers to want. This is not their thing.

Rachel (31:12):

Totally.

Marcia (31:16):

Because we have a Green Guerilla, they had a farm program and the young people. They're wearing their Gucci thingies and all this and their what, so hopefully, they'll have a better response somewhere along the line.

Rachel (31:32):

They just need to grow up a little bit more. They're in that in between space.

Marcia (31:36):

Yeah. But you have some children that are really interested in gardening. But I mean, in this community, you have kids. I've worked with some really great kids that are gardeners and that's what they want to do. But you have to find the right one.

Rachel (31:48):

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

Marcia (31:57):

I don't think so. I think you covered everything. No, it was very nice. I appreciate you wanting to even ask me any questions.

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Rachel (32:08):

Oh, I'm thrilled. I'm thrilled that we got to have this conversation, and thank you for talking with me, especially on a Saturday, which is so busy. I really appreciate you taking the time.

Marcia (32:20):

Did I give you the right answers that you wanted or-

Rachel (32:22):

Yes.

Marcia (32:22):

... was I lose?

Rachel (32:23):

You passed the test. You got eight out of 10 right. The two, we'll be going over later.

Marcia (32:32):

No problem.

Rachel (32:32):

Yeah, no, this is so fun. It's so great. It's awesome to hear stories of people who founded the gardens, who were here at the beginning. At this point, that history is getting so long. This has been on here for almost 20 years.

Marcia (32:51):

Yeah. That's those 20 years that I lost. I told you I had a breakdown.

Rachel (32:54):

Well, at first, you said 30.

Marcia (32:55):

Okay. See?