

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project

Interview with Zachery Hackney by LuAnna Nesbitt

Conducted on June 30th, 2024 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** This is LuAnna Nesbitt with the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. We are in Farmville, North Carolina. The date is June 30th, 2024. Could you please introduce yourself and tell me some things about yourself that you feel are important to share?

[00:00:19] **Zach Hackney:** Um, so my name is Zach Hackney, um, I'm from North Carolina, I'm from Chatham County, North Carolina originally, which is central, rural, um, North Carolina.

And I grew up there for most of my life, but spent actually time because of my father's work in Eastern Europe a fair amount as well. Um, my mother's family is from Appalachia. Um, she grew up in a large mountain family. Um, I feel like it's always worth mentioning that both my grandparents grew up in families of 20.

So I have 40 great aunts and uncles. And there's a small part of Virginia where I'm related to everybody. Um, I'm the community garden director in Farmville. And I'm also the president of the Farmville Food Hub, which is a group that helps coordinate, um, local food resources in Farmville, pre existing food resources to work better together.

My wife and I moved here a little bit over three years ago for her work. And I've found a lot of different ways to be part of the community and give back in ways that I feel are beneficial to me and the community.

[00:01:40] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** I'd love to hear a little bit more about your childhood. What was it like and what kind of culture did your family have around food and cooking and gardening?

[00:01:50] **Zach Hackney:** So I grew up in a kind of small family unit, which was just my sibling, my mother and my father. Um, but when we would go to family events, um, we only really were connected with my mother's family. We were all estranged from my father's family. Um, and we would go to those events and it would be massive quantities of people.

Like we would rent out state parks, um, to have family events. But my grandparents lived in a like holler in the mountains in Virginia and they had a

farm that was probably maybe a third of an acre that was all just for putting up, um, canning. They had a root cellar, which I was always commonly traumatized in because you could lock it from the outside and it was like a real root cellar.

So it went back into the mountain where it was cold and it was, um, cold enough that there was water running through it. So like you would go to the back and the water that was naturally running out of the mountains would help keep the root cellar cold. Um, but all of our events were based around food.

Um, both my grandparents on that side were Church of the Brethren pastors, which is like a splinter group of the Eastern Mennonite faith. And so like lots of coming together for making apple butter, um, for doing big cookouts. And then when you have so many people together, you always have to think about what you're going to feed them.

So I feel like all we talked about was food. Um, but then it was funny to go home to my little kind of smaller family unit where Especially in the 90s, which I grew up in the, as a child in the 90s, it was very convenience based food, health- convenience based food. Um, everyone ate salmon for three meals a week if they could, you know, but food wasn't very important to us until later in my life.

Um, When my mother herself became a pastor and she started a community garden at the church she was first assigned to and that community garden was called Anatoff Community Garden and it's where I actually did most of my like gardening and learning how to like farm growing up from an age of about 13.

And it was five acres, it was a big community garden and it had been donated to the church to be run as a community garden after a, um, after a racially motivated murder in the community. The family whose son was murdered donated the land to the church as a form of, like, wanting to have healing and a place for healing in the community.

Um, and the church they donated to was the historically white church, which My mother was the first person in 150 years to allow a black member to join that church. And the next day we had, um, like a letter from the Ku Klux Klan nailed to our front door. And I remember men with shotguns sleeping in beds of trucks in our front yard, just in case something bad happened.

Um, so that was my first like exposure to kind of like community organizing and gardening and it was not what we had planned to do. But Anatoff still exists, which is pretty amazing for a community garden that's almost 20 years

old now. Um, a lot of community gardens kind of come and go as they're needed.

Um, it's changed what it is many times based on what the community needs. Like it's not always been the same model. Um, but that was my kind of learning how to garden was in that garden primarily and then remembering being at my grandparents' gardens.

[00:06:02] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** Thanks for sharing that. You touched a little bit about how you discovered community organizing and the skills around that, but could you share a little bit more on how you found yourself in Farmville, what called you here, and how you got doing this community organizing around food?

[00:06:22] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah, um, my wife is a O-B-G-Y-N. And after you finish medical school, you do a four year residency. And she was accepted to do her residency at ECU. Um, and so we didn't choose to come to Farmville or Greenville. Um, you're matched into residencies. So you like list where you want to go and they list who they want to accept and then they make a pairing.

Um, but we knew we wanted to buy a house and we drove through Farmville, saw two or three houses we liked and we saw the community garden. We saw the public library. We saw what Farmville had to offer. We drove to Greenville. We looked at 16 houses and on our way back to Chapel Hill we put a Offer in on two houses in Farmville.

Cause we were like Farmville better. And it met our needs. Like we wanted something that was walkable. We wanted something that had signs of community investment. You know, the library was brand new at that point, pottery studio, glass blown studio, community garden. Um, and honestly, my wife's the one who is the bigger community gardener.

It had been kind of like what kept her sane during COVID was community gardening. And I had always seen it as like work because I was made to work in a community garden as a child, um, and smile a lot because I was the pastor's son. So I couldn't complain. Um, but her residency didn't really allow her to participate so much.

And I started just taking care of one bed at the community garden. And, uh, then that turned into two. And then that turned into three and then that turned into four. And I was always very conscious of kind of like rolling in and like taking charge. Cause like that didn't feel right. But, um, people at the garden,

especially Miss Eulalia, we're always so encouraging of the work I did and not in a way that was like exploitive, like just like happy to see someone enjoying the space that they had helped create.

Um, And for me, it was also, I wasn't working at all at the time. It was like a nice way to get out of the house, even though I lived two blocks away, it was like, okay, I'm going to like repair my old house, go work at the garden and then come back. Um, and the garden COVID was surprisingly hard for the garden.

Cause it was hard to organize. It was hard to, even though you were outside, it was hard to want to get people together. And so I had moved out here, not that COVID is even over now, but like once some of the restrictions were starting to be lifted. Um, and I felt how much I was embraced by the community that existed there, but also didn't feel like they just wanted me to like, take care of it for them.

Um, and I enjoyed it so much and I started to make relationships with the people who were there. And those were like the first real like friends in the community I made. Um, you know, beyond my wife's colleagues and stuff, it wasn't easy to meet new people always. And meeting Eulalia and Kathy and the existing members, they were so like happy to see someone loving the space.

And eventually the president of the garden, Kathy, Her health was kind of declining and she had foresight and asked me if I wanted to be president. And I was like, really? No, like, I don't feel a hundred percent comfortable with that. Like I'm new. This is your thing. I don't want to take over. Um, and I was like, but if like everyone agrees that that's what they want, like I, I would enjoy doing that.

And that's how I ended up being the president of the community garden. Um, And then it became more of a organizing effort after that, because I felt empowered by the community. I felt like I didn't have to convince anybody that I was part of the community, because they had kind of brought me into their stuff, versus me coming in and being like, I'm in charge now, I know best, y'all are bad at gardening.

Yeah, so, but up until that point, it wasn't as much of a community building effort for me except building my own like personal community and connection with people.

[00:11:05] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** While speaking about the community garden, could you share some of the varieties and crops that y'all have growing in the

community garden and sort of how they're connected to community members, garden members and what they mean to the work that the garden's trying to do?

[00:11:21] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah, that. Yeah, that's like a very, very long answer.

But I can kind of share some examples of like how we use the garden to like support people. But then also to like try to bring new stuff into the community as well. So we do have a space in the garden that we call the demonstration garden, which is where we try to grow varieties of plants that maybe people aren't as familiar with to expose them to different vegetables. And like one of the reasons I participated in the community garden to begin with is like my backgrounds as a chef and like, I like good vegetables. I hate bad vegetables and like, I just wanted better stuff. And even within the world of plants, there are seeds you can buy that grow better tasting plants than others.

And so part of the demonstration's goal, garden's goal was to like show that there are vegetables you're already familiar with that taste better than what you're used to. Um, so, we grow Armenian cucumbers in that area, which technically aren't a cucumber, they're Um, in the melon family, but they're a cucumber that never goes bitter and it can grow three to four feet long and it can weigh eight to 10 pounds and is the best tasting cucumber you'll ever have.

Crisp flesh, easy to grow, heat, heat tolerant, like you don't have to do anything to it except give it someplace to grow. Um, it's also a space where like people can bring in plants and just see if they're going to work out without very much risk. Um, We've tried a bunch of different varieties of, you know, different African seeds and stuff.

And some of them have worked. And then some of them don't like our weather all that much. Um, one of the earliest connections was to like people growing different types of collards and the community garden. And one of the members who was one of the original members, Miss May, Had collards in her bed and they just like kept coming back every year I was here.

Like you didn't have to do anything. Um, which is actually a little bit odd for us cause we can have really, really hot summers that can kill collards and we can have really, really cold winters that can kill collards. So like for a plant to be able to kind of self seed and come back and grow true to type, um, it's a little bit odd.

And so that's one of the ones that, And it's, um, in the kind of cabbage collard family, which is what people like around here more. Um, and so that's one that we've, like, kept kind of propagating on. Um, I personally love hot peppers and so I grow a whole different bunch of varieties of peppers. Um, some of which are just like non true-to-type type, um, crosses that I've grown over the years that, Usually come out right, but not always.

Um, especially for making hot sauce and stuff that's way hotter than what we grow for the small x pepper project. Um, but because we also have collaborations with people who gives those seeds, we also will plant a little bit of whatever we get. Um, though this year we did focus in on growing vegetables that like the community really asked for.

We took feedback from last year and like really tried to tailor in on growing more sweet peppers, more crookneck squash, more okra, um, things that people really wanted. So I'm not always asking people to experiment.

[00:15:12] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** While being here at the garden, I've noticed a lot of love and sharing and just generosity in general. How do you think folks have built that within the garden, and how do you think they continue that, um, on a day to day basis?

[00:15:30] **Zach Hackney:** I

think people have a lot of love to give, but aren't always given the opportunity to give it.

And gardens are good places to give that love. You know, we're often told to hold back or, you know, reserve a certain amount of love or self care, but gardens are a great place to just, like, let it go loose. Um, some of it is based, like, philosophically, like the garden that doesn't charge anything to participate.

And so like, I mean like nothing to them, seeds, plants, soil, it's all covered. And so like we break down those barriers of entry to start with, which I think allows people to care more about your neighbor in the garden. It becomes less of a competition. You feel like, you know, you're never asking yourself, am I getting my money's worth to participate?

Um, Are they, are they doing better than me? And it's like, no, it's an equal playing field. Um, like we have County, we have town commissioners next to people who like don't have the money otherwise to like support, um, activities

in the community. Um, but also like sharing food is lovely. And so like getting to grow something and just like give it away feels great.

Um, you brought it into the world and you also get to point it the direction you want to point it with. And like, we don't get to be generous in that way very often without feeling like something has been taken from us. Um, and food's just such a nice way to be able to do that. Um, and you get to share your excitement too.

Like if you've grown something new or delicious, like you're not just giving it away, you get to be like you're part of my experience now. Um, and I think all of that has fostered like a higher level of care in the community. Um, people ask me a lot, like, how do you make certain people don't steal from the garden?

Um, and early on the garden had some incidents that either would be stealing or stuff disappearing, or someone not understanding the rules of how the garden worked and, You know, that's frustrating. You've put your time and effort to grow something. You want to reap the benefits of it, even if you're just going to give it away.

Um, but we, I was very against the idea that we needed to like put signs that say, keep out, or, you know, I said, we need to make certain the rules are clearly posted so that like people aren't confused. But then also we just need to like give so generously and freely that, Why would you take from us when we're just going to give it to you?

Um, and knock on wood, like it's been about a year since we've had anything that was even perceptively considered stealing. Uh, the last thing that we thought, someone thought was stealing, um, carrots were disappearing from his bed and I have a little like trail cam. I put it up and I was just more or less like trying to be nice to the person whose carrots were disappearing.

And, um, we caught. Chuck, like a groundhog stealing carrots. And he would like pick one carrot, run to the shed, eat it. And I could tell in the trail cam, like 30 minutes later, he would come back, pick another carrot, take it, eat it. So I trapped, I trapped the groundhog and took him across the river. Um, but it looked so human cause it wasn't just like messy or anything like that.

It was individual carrots were disappearing overnight.

[00:19:22] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** And kind of continuing on that and bringing back a little bit more around your culture growing up and traditions. Last night we



had a pig roast at the community garden. I would love to hear where you learned how to do that and just the nitty gritty of the steps of it, how you built the contraption it was done on, and yeah, just a little bit more about that.

[00:19:49] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah, so that is related to some of my like mountain family. Um, so like cooking pigs is often associated in North Carolina with Eastern North Carolina, but people in the mountains do it too. Um, and it was something that we, I would see as a child at these big events. Um, and because we would have such big events, um, We would do like natural ways of cooking, like digging in the ground or building something out of rocks where we were at because we needed to cook a lot of food.

And it wasn't always pigs. Like sometimes it was chickens. Um, but it was often a pig and looking back as a kid now, I'm like, it was definitely like someone in the family farm who was giving us a pig. Um, and that was my first kind of exposure to that. And then Trying to like connect to North Carolina culture and food culture.

The easiest inlet to that is barbecue. I think there's more depth there than barbecue. And I think often like people are like, yep, North Carolina barbecue. Goodbye. Like that's enough. Um, and so I think it can be kind of bad sometimes to, to like, it's almost, uh, a stereotype or a mask of culinary stuff.

But as I was kind of starting my culinary career, I was like, I guess I have to be good at this. Um, and so actually the first time I did one like in the ground was, um, I think it was for my parents, like wedding renewal or something like their vow renewal. And I had done them growing up, but like, I had never done one solely by myself.

And then I realized I, As I was kind of moving my way through the chef ranks and stuff, I could do them for friends and then I could do them as a side hustle because you can charge a lot of money, especially in a wealthier area to do something like that. Um, and it was nice too, cause I didn't have to own equipment.

Um, and people always responded. Everyone always had a story. Oh, I hadn't seen that since my uncle did this, or I haven't seen that this way since homecoming at our church used to do it that way. Um, And that always added a lot of value for me was that. And so the older style of roasting a pig would be, you dig a hole in the ground and you don't even have to reinforce it.



It could just be a hole. Um, and you have a fire on one side of it where you make coals. So you never want to have a direct fire under the pig. Um, you only want to pull coals up under it. Um, and then you have something covering the hole. Um, that's the basic um, what you need for it. And this would often be done in pairing with like other pig processing.

So it's like you maybe would slaughter pigs in the morning, start roasting one. It would go all day. And then the rest of the day, the other pigs you slaughtered, you'd process into sausage or into, um, you know, cuts and stuff for curing. Um, and then at the end of the day, you have a meal waiting for you.

Cause it's not, especially if you're doing it in a group, it's not high effort. like you need to have a certain amount of sense about you. Um, but it's not something that you've got to be like micromanaging constantly. You can kind of walk away from it and stuff like that. Um, and I think eventually. I actually have a pig cooker at my house.

I could have just pulled my pig cooker over from my house and done it that way. But like, I think it becomes a point of engagement. It becomes a point of sharing. Um, it makes people realize like, that we can connect. It doesn't have to be fancy. Um, and I've done a whole bunch of them now. And I've, I'm actually like the only person I've run across in North Carolina that does it that way consistently.

Um, I've never tried to see if there's other people who consistently do it that way. But, um, it's more fun for me. Though yesterday was hot. All right. It was very, very hot. Um, I kept thinking like everyone else must be so hot. And then I realized I was standing like by a fire and I'm like, okay, well, okay.

It's at least a little less hot somewhere else. Um, yeah.

[00:24:17] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** I would love to hear more about the other North Carolina delicacies, maybe mountain delicacies that aren't necessarily pig, but maybe some of the food you grew up eating or some of the sides that were at those large cookouts with your family. What else was on the table and who was cooking it?

[00:24:35] **Zach Hackney:** Um, so yeah, my, like my family stretches kind of from like Boone, Galax. So it's like from North Carolina to Virginia, um, the Western corner of Southwest Virginia. Um, and we would, so it's a very different than out here. Um, so it's, I don't know if you've read Ronnie Lundy's book, Vittles, great book, great author.

Um, the food in that book reflects a lot of what we would eat. So we ate a ton of home canned food, like a ton. Um, so peeled, boiled potatoes, green beans, um, corn, but less like jellies and jams, a lot more pressure can stuff. That was just like neutral. Um, and then we would eat a lot of fresh dairy products at those events.

Um, cause there's a lot of dairy cattle up in that area. So like clotted cream and buttermilk, um, and We would eat a lot of then fresh vegetables mixed in with that. And I don't remember eating large quantities of meat unless it was a big celebration. Um, like maybe like they would call it chipped ham.

It's kind of like chipped beef, but it's like, it is a very dried country ham that's been. Maybe cut on like a meat slicer or something that you would then mix in with the potatoes Or mix in with your green beans. And we always had rolls instead of cornbread yeast rolls were like the most important part of every meal. And Like you needed to make like eight to ten per person. So there would be like hundreds of handmade yeast rolls at these events Um, and then that's where then your like jam and fresh butter would come out.

Um, and that is usually what most people like commented on throughout the meal would be like, whether the rolls were good or not, like the vegetables, it's like, yes, those are going to be good. And yes. Um, but I always liked that food, but I never like connected with it that much. Um, it seemed like. Like looking back, I can now be fond about it.

But as a kid, it felt very like poor, even though it was bountiful and stuff, but it just like felt, you know, going into a cellar to get your stuff out. Now I like dream of a root cellar. Um, and we always had plenty of food to go around. And it's funny as like, as I got older and older, and as the older generations died off, we like kind of just like migrated to the middle.

And these events now are just like hamburgers and hot dogs. Um, they're not the same thing they used to be. Um, so like when my grandfather and grandmother's siblings started to die out, they're not the same. There's like, things that we still make that are traditional. Like we make filled, black walnut filled cookies, um, which is where you like make a, Like a mincemeat out of black walnuts and put them in cookies.

I'm allergic to tree nuts though, which is like tragic. Um, and I like developed the allergy as I got older. So I like lost each one, one by one. Um, which was, uh, especially as like at the time I was like running restaurants and stuff too. So it was very sad. And then like in Eastern North Carolina, I'm very personally

connected to like seafood culture out here, which like, That's a whole different subject for me.

I'm very interested in like the history of seafood culture in eastern North Carolina and like why it doesn't exist in a sustainable way and why it doesn't maybe define the culture out here as much as it used to. And like, there's a lot of good history around that and a lot of good reasons why we can't eat as much shad or like, um, You know. North Carolina has herring runs historically, which you don't think of herring as like a fish in Eastern North Carolina, but like people in Farmville grew up eating herring.

Um, and you would go down and like, that's a super common fish, but now they're gone. Blueback herrings are endangered. Um, and it's cause like of sign and pushnet fishing on the rivers in the like 1920s and thirties. Basically caused that fish to go extinct, but you used to catch, you know, millions of pounds in North Carolina a year.

And now, you know, there's still small fish that people enjoy, but they're just not as mainstream. So like spots and croakers, mullet. But it's also one of those things too that like, it's dying away in a way that, you know, is because the populations of fish are dying away, but. That is, that's my, like, side interest is because, like, you go to all these other places in the South in the United States and there's, like, very strong fish- based food culture and North Carolina just doesn't have it and it's a good question to ask, like, why?

Like, Calabash is the only, like, Fish food culture that is like distinctive, um, to Eastern North Carolina. There's also rockfish stew, which is actually like tied back to colonial British traditions, um, which it's, I kind of think it's kind of gross. Uh, rockfish stew is like rockfish, eggs, potatoes, and tomatoes all boiled in one pot, which like I just can't get behind.

And then cowbash is just like fried. Um, it's delicious, but like you can't eat it every day and not much of it's from North Carolina anymore. It's just clam strips and shrimp and whatever you can get fried up.

[00:30:41] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** Speaking about the loss of food and traditions and kind of tying it back to this project and the goal of, you know, collecting and archiving those stories,

um, Could you share a little bit of how you first became involved in this project? What kind of called you to it? Um, maybe you could touch on how you

originally connected with Miss Benita and other heirloom gardens and Ujamaa folk. Um, yeah.

[00:31:17] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah, so we were looking at expanding some of the culturally significant foods that we offered at the community garden.

And trying to encourage people to explore, try new things, um, try things that maybe they grew up eating and couldn't get to the grocery store. And, um, we run a really, really, really tight budget over there. And so I was just like calling places up and being like, can I have free seeds? Can I have free seeds?

Can I have free seeds? And I reached out to miss Bonita and I think it was maybe an email or a phone call. I can't remember, but it was very, just like, I was spreading my net wide and I think we played phone tag for a while back, a while, but the first time we actually talked was in January and I was getting on a boat, my boat at the time, to go up the Roanoke River with my wife to go camping in the middle of January for one of her few days off, which, Maybe it was a poor choice.

Um, because there's these like river platforms that you can go up into the swamp and camp on. But I remember being a little bit like, yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm interested. This is great. Not the best time to talk. Let's follow up soon. Um, and that's when I first heard about the larger kind of like oral history project, seed saving project, not just me trying to gain resources for my community.

Um, and. I'm overall good at following up, but not always. Um, and I, you must have been, um, Ms. Benita must have like enlisted Tessa to follow up with me, or you had given my information, but it was that first conversation that Ms. Benita and I had where I mentioned Ms. May and the idea that there might be some culturally significant seeds and practices in the Farmville community, and I didn't realize how much that was going to get

the ball rolling. It was just my observation at the time. Um, and the next time I talked to someone, I think maybe there'd been some emails, but the next time I talked to someone was to Tessa. And interestingly, I was also fishing at the time. Um, and I was supposed to be working my office job at the time.

And most of my office job was answering the phone as like a county employee for coordinating stuff. And I knew I could do my job that day just by having my headphones in. And so I was actually about four miles offshore on an island standing in waist deep water when my phone rang and I had my headphones in and I normally wouldn't have answered.

But since I was supposed to kind of be in the office, I answered and it was Tessa with the idea of bringing the oral history project down and bringing ujamaa seeds down and bringing the, um, you know, seed saving and story saving to FarmVille. And I, it was like three weeks before the proposed date. It was like really, really short turnaround.

Um, I think because I was feeling good because I was fishing, I said, yes. And then like I ended up camping out there for a couple of days after that and like thought about it a lot and was like, yeah, we can do this. Yeah, we can mobilize the people and people can get excited about this and it can be something good to carry some of the momentum that we were having at the time.

And then there were emails, more formal conversations and stuff, but, um, It was a good level of both. Trust on both sides, both parties, that we would get it done.

[00:35:03] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** Speaking about connecting your community to this garden, could you share a little bit about your role at the garden and how you kind of play as a connector and just a little bit of why you do what you do at the garden?

[00:35:20] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah. So we wanted to increase participation in the garden. Um, and I saw that people, if they were not actively invited into something, they thought it wasn't for them. Um, and that actually like applied to all the different groups in Farmville. Um, and it, for me, I'm like, if I see an opportunity, I'm just going to jump at it.

But I realized that we had to like do the outreach to make people feel like they belong. So even if the cost was nothing, even if the resource was there, even if we educated people about what we were doing, it wasn't enough. People want to feel invited in. Um, and so once I started that process of going And reaching out to different churches and the library and individuals and to school groups and stuff,

I realized there was a lot of power in that kind of embrace that you can offer when, from my perspective, I'm not offering too much. I'm offering for you to come and work and do your own stuff but people like feel flattered and invited. And it doesn't really matter what different group they're coming from.

Um, everyone all of a sudden has something in common, which was they were invited into this process. Um, and that's like the common starting point for

people is like, there's no question why you're there. Like you're there to grow, learn and do all that. But you're also there because you were invited into it.

And it actually like hurts my feelings every once in a while when people will be like, Oh, I didn't know I could participate. I'm like, dang it. Like, there's a little, you know, there's a little holdout that I didn't reach out to properly. Um, or when people say, Oh, I didn't know that was for me. Or I didn't know

I could just come and pick this or do that. Um, and so that's like, okay. That is something that I work on, but I think it's like a good way to go about it. Cause it's not promotion and it's not self aggrandizing, being like, look at what we're doing. I'm like, you want to be a part of this and we want you to be a part of this.

And it's kind of got a cascading effect, like as things grow and expand and we do cool new things like this, or, you know, Cook a pig or grow plants that are cool or expand our space. The invitation becomes even more powerful and powerful. And the parties that maybe you're missing are even more vocal that they don't feel like they were invited.

Um, and it's never intentionally missing someone, but like, you don't know what you don't know. But if you can be like a beacon for people to say like, wait, why am I not there? And you get to turn around and say like, well, you should be like, that's such a strong way to connect and like not using a lot of the traditional silos of how you do outreach in a southern community being like, well, we're going to do outreach through church networks.

Well, church networks are don't include everybody. What church network? Traditionally white churches, traditionally black church? Okay. We're gonna use the town as our way to outreach to people. Well, some people don't trust the town. Some people feel alienated by the town. Some people are in active conflict with the town.

Um, So you're missing people that way. Um, just saying we want the best gardeners. We want the cream of the crop garden. Well, you're clearly going to miss people. So changing the way that we invite people in has been important. And that like allows for us to have the diversity at like an event last night at the, um, pig picking.

Because like, if you're not from the South or if you're not from Farmville or if you're not from here, that level of diversity is like rare at any sort of event. Um, and not just race, but age and socioeconomic demographic and like who was

participating in helping get it off the ground. Um, but it also wasn't like, um, Let's bring everybody together for a kumbaya moment.

And let's just get a photo op of our diversity. It was like, no, this is actually the community that makes this space up. And we didn't have to specially make certain that we were diversely represented.

[00:39:59] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** Well, thank you for that answer. Um, you kind of touched on this next question a little bit in that, but I would love to hear any other explicit advice you could give to folks in similar towns who want to kind of start similar garden projects.

[00:40:18] **Zach Hackney:** Um,

this

is a really hard question because it is going to be tailored to your community and you do have to like make choices. Um, I think you do have to, my background in the restaurant industry meant that one of the things I brought to the community garden is I was going to run it. I was gonna make certain that the backbone of it was run like a business and that like, I wasn't going to just wish and cross my fingers that we had money or wish and cross my fingers that goodwill would be enough.

So like my first year of being the president of the community garden, I like Took what was a handshake agreement with the town to use the land and turned it into a five year lease with dollar a year. They pay for water. We have a right of first refusal if they ever decided to sell the land. Um, and like that was a skill I brought to it, but I'm also like, that's why gardens like this disappear is because someone's kind to you one day and you never know what they're going to be the next day. And so you need to make certain that you are not just being like, Oh, everything's great and it's going to be great forever. Um, or the other thing I did immediately was make certain that we were a standalone 501(c)(3) so that we wouldn't be grabbed up by the town and become part of the town into the, that we got to make all our own decisions when it came to that and we're able to apply for larger grants and organize like that.

So I think even if all of the like feel good side of things. They are super important and the community building parts, but you can't miss the actual things that are going to allow you to exist into the future. And like, whether you have someone in your group who can do it, great, but like don't let those things fall



by the wayside just because you want to be idealistic or you just want to be, um, utopian.

It would be nice to not have to have those things, but they're a safeguard for us to know that we can be a little bolder. Like I'm okay ticking people off about, you know, maybe the way we do something or maybe the way we, you know, like the town. I'm less afraid of standing up to them and saying, Hey, you're supposed to make certain this happens,

this happens because I also know they can't break their lease with us. So, but they also were at the dinner last night too. So I'm obviously not that ticking them off that badly.

[00:43:00] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** Are there any lasting hopes or goals that you or other community members share for the garden that you would like to make present in this story?

[00:43:19] **Zach Hackney:** Yeah, like, I think the garden wants to give back to the community almost like first. And that is like in tackling some of the Food inequity and food access issues that exist in Farmville. But I think our overall goal is to bring that like joy to food. Um, when you're struggling to find food that makes you feel good, find food to put on the table.

It's hard to find joy in growing and eating because it's now just like survival. And so like if we can bring that happiness around food, like That's probably, I feel like, the biggest thing that we can give back, um, and I see it a lot. I'm not worried about us becoming the biggest, best community garden in the world.

Like, that's not serving the purposes of our community. If we need to expand, great. If we need to grow in that way and get more grants, great. But if we also can just, like, operate the way we're doing and giving people that joy they need, I think that's also us meeting our highest goal.

[00:44:38] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** To wrap up this interview with you, is there anything else you'd like to share? Either about the garden, your own upbringing, or anything else that you feel is important to leave with us?

[00:44:53] **Zach Hackney:** No, I don't think so. Um, I, I always will remind people like, the garden existed before I came to Farmville. Like, it, it, people, people, See me doing the organizing and they see me planning stuff. And I'm like, yeah, it was here like six years nearly before I moved to town. Um, it's, it is the will of the people that it exists.

Um, and it's not just someone who happens to have the skills to organize it into a different thing. That's the reason it's there. So yeah, that's the last thing I'd leave it with.