

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Jennifer Kanyamibwa by David Smith
Conducted on July 5th, 2023 in Atlanta, GA

[00:00:00] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** The following interview is a part of the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. It was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia by interviewer David Smith on July 5th, 2023. The narrator of this oral history is Jennifer Kanyamibwa.

[00:00:12] **David Smith:** Uh, can you go ahead and introduce yourself?

[00:00:15] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah. My name is Jennifer Kanyamibwa, um, Biggs, and I am a resident of West Atlanta and I am a budding urban farmer and I'm CE, COO of Plant Lady Juice Co.

[00:00:31] **David Smith:** Wonderful. So what we're trying to get at here is to talk about the history of your practice in farming, gardening, or your relationship with seeds. So what I'm going to start with is by asking you, what is your first memory in a garden or in a growing space?

[00:00:49] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So my first memory in a garden, um, so I was actually born in East Africa, in Rwanda. And, my family had a beautiful, beautiful garden surrounding our home and Rwanda in general is one of the most lush places in the world. So my first and early memory was actually being in the garden and, uh, playing and, uh, looking at all the beautiful plants and flowers and being so curious.

Yes. Growing up, my family did, did cook. Yeah, in America, when we, when we came to America, there were moments, uh, where there was more cooking than others, but cooking has always been a practice in my family.

So the main person that cooked growing up was my mom, and then I actually really fell in love with cooking, and now it's my husband.

My husband is definitely the chef of our, of our family. Yes.

[00:01:40] **David Smith:** And what did your, what did your mom cook?

[00:01:42] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** My mom growing up, so my, my, my mom has like a, a, a dual cultural experience. So, she's Rwandan, she was born in Rwanda, but she actually spent a lot of her adolescence in Europe. So between the ages of around 14 to her early twenties, she actually lived in Brussels.

And so we had a fusion of European food and Rwandan food growing up. And so that was kind of, very normal in my household.

[00:02:10] **David Smith:** And do you find yourself incorporating the influence of your parents or your upbringing in Rwanda into your cooking now?

[00:02:19] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, so really through my husband and his curiosity because he's an amazing chef, um, we actually explore different foods. So we cook West African and East African food. He actually made a very traditional Rwandan dish before he asked my parents for my hand in marriage. It was, we're not the most, I'm not the most traditional person. I think that was a really good look for him, honestly. Um, but yeah, we enjoy cooking food from across the diaspora. Yeah.

[00:02:46] **David Smith:** And what about, um, what did your family grow?

[00:02:48] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So growing, so my dad, he would grow a lot of things that he would eat when he was growing up. A lot of corn, yams, tomatoes. So these are the kind of things that my father would grow in our small backyard, um, in our home.

I've lived in many different states, but this is when we lived in Jersey. But I will say that meeting Akilah was when I kind of reignited my family's long lineage of growing things. It was really the first time when they saw something extremely abundant and not like small scale and it was really exciting for my parents to see.

[00:03:23] **David Smith:** Now, so when, when you met Akilah, did you already have like the company in mind? What was your vision for?

[00:03:30] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So my, I met Akilah actually around the corner. There is a natural organic food spot around the corner called Westview Corner Grocery. And she was actually working there and I started having this nagging sensation to learn how to garden and how to grow things.

And I literally went up to her and asked her randomly, Hey, this is kind of strange. I know we don't know each other. We always gave each other nice smiles. It was just a very good energy. And I said, do you know anyone that knows how to garden and is willing to teach? And she stopped in her tracks and she said, I do.

Like I, I have a background in this and she has an extensive knowledge. Uh, she was. She worked, she worked with Habesha, she was a fellow, she learned everything about green technology, urban farming, over a decade, she's been to Costa Rica, and, and, and done work as a medicine woman, she's, she's done, she's been everywhere, and she's so deeply rooted in this agricultural world, so we actually ended up teaming up, um, and she ended up becoming my mentor, she taught me end to end how to garden, how to design a garden, what to, what kind of foods need to be grown together.

And she taught me how to select seeds, how to be very intentional around where the seeds are purchased and supporting local, uh, seed farmers and really how to grow things, how to take care, how to tend to a garden. And so, it just, essentially, that really, it, it opened my world and my parents came over to my home here in West Atlanta and there, they felt like they were home again. That was like the first thing that they said.

And from there, it was really interesting because I then commissioned her to make some teas because one of the things that she was doing, she would have these pop ups, amazing pop ups at Westview Corner Grocery where she was selling these teas that she would hand make herself.

And I commissioned her to do it for my company's huge global conference here in Atlanta, a four day conference. We flew folks from my team from all over the world. We're talking from Iceland, to Amsterdam, to everywhere, to Atlanta. A lot of them had never even been to the American South. And she had her teas there. Everyone was raving about them.

And then after that, um, my husband and I were actually interested in investing in her as a creative. And she said, well, You have the skill set of strategic operations, and I have the skill set, why don't we combine forces, and that's where the company actually came from.

We literally grew things together, literally, and then now we're growing things together in the form of a company. So, yeah, yeah.

[00:05:59] **David Smith:** And nowadays, obviously, since the primary focus of your company is tea, you're well acquainted with the medicinal Uh, qualities of food and herbs. But when you were a child, did your family have an emphasis on using food as medicine?

[00:06:16] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, so we, so the company uses teas and elixirs. Um, but growing up, to answer your question, yes, so my mom is actually, and I saw her go back to school for this, my mom was a registered nurse. And so, a lot of my understanding of healing and taking care of yourself stemmed from my mother. And so I've always been someone who's always been very, very aware, I would say, of the importance of like how food, how food can, food is literally a life source, um, or it can be, you know, a source of deterioration.

And so I think having a mom who, you know, grew up between Rwanda and Europe and then also is, is, is what was a nurse. It really influenced me to think about food differently.

[00:07:01] **David Smith:** Does that affect how you choose what you grow nowadays?

[00:07:04] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So, it doesn't affect what I, how I choose I grow now, what I grow nowadays, but it affects the way that I think about what, about why I'm eating what.

So I sense myself, if I'm very stressed, I start to, you know, maybe deviate and then, and start to eat things that are not as nutritious. So I'm, I'm very aware of like what my body's telling me and how food and your mood are very connected. So that, in that way, does kind of influence, yeah.

[00:07:33] **David Smith:** And without revealing any, you know, secrets, tell me about the process of the tea.

[00:07:38] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So the juices, teas, elixirs, so honestly, yeah, so essentially it's picking the right produce. It's, it's, it's really, it's a, it's a trendy kind of term right now, seed to

bottle, but it's real, you know, like where did the seeds come from? Who are the farmers? We actually source the majority of our product ingredients from our network of local farmers.

So these are folks that, you know, we have a farmer that's focused on growing celery and cucumber and then maybe another farmer that's focused on growing beets, for example. And so, um, just being very aware of who's growing the food, that's like the first step and where the seeds come from.

And then, uh, the process, and, uh, Kila is more product development, so I'm more strategic operations. But, you know, my high level understanding of really her process and developing is really thinking about how do all these ingredients talk to each other? Because they're all telling them, they're all telling you a story when you put them together and they're all doing different things for your body and then together they're doing something that's very miraculous, right?

Whether it's hydrating you or giving you a bit more focus or making you feel more alert. And so, um, a lot of the experiment of putting together the product was based on, like, her ancestral knowledge of how these products interact. With teas, it's, it's, it's, it's, it can be like a bit more simple because you're kind of boiling these things together and with juices, you have to do the act of like, you know, the juicing and that can be very hard to clean the juicer, so it's really a labor of love, but it really starts with where are these products coming from, how are you putting them together in order to optimize for what's best for your body, and then how are you telling people how to use them in their day to day. Yeah.

[00:09:18] **David Smith:** So you explained the tea the juice. How would you define an elixir?

[00:09:21] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** An elixir I think is a more concentrated type of beverage that really really targets something specific. So we have something called the immunity Elixir and that is really for when you're not feeling well or the beginnings of you not feeling well. This is when you should really target it.

So it's super concentrated, it has all the things in it, um, apple cider vinegar, honey, and it's something that's like, very targeted, uh, for your body, especially when you need something, um, that is extremely, extremely, um, po, potent, I would say, and so that's how I would kind of define an elixir.

Yeah, it's almost like a sh, like, it's almost like a shot, you know, like you're kind of getting straight to the point. Yeah.

[00:10:05] **David Smith:** I mean, so they're probably not made for flavor though.

[00:10:09] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Honestly, ours are pretty flavorful. Yeah, like ours are pretty flavorful, I will say, Akilah, and also elixirs kind of like, you need them to like, settle.

Especially like our beauty elixir, like it has to settle over a certain amount of time, like let everything fuse together. And then you're kind of ready to, to sell and, and to partake.

[00:10:27] **David Smith:** Now can I ask, I, I saw you were growing stuff here. Yeah. Do you also grow elsewhere?

[00:10:31] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So, um, we actually just, um, got a really great thing where my neighbor, he has a family farm about two hours and he's given us a plot of land. So that's something that we're going to be looking to do. But right now, um, we just grow our herbs here.

We use our herbs, um, especially for our teas and, which are super popular, but yeah, we, we are very, we're pass scale. We got this, we got this, uh, little garden here. And this is where we plot all the things that our customers love.

[00:10:59] **David Smith:** And what, what does your customer base look like?

[00:11:02] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so the folks that are buying our products, um, you know, it's really, it really started with, with our friends and our family first. And that's where you start. Um, but what we've been seeing and expanding is it's, there is a really beautiful movement of Black and Indigenous people, particularly here in Atlanta, where there are a lot of Black people really looking to take care of their health and getting back to the basics.

So we have been seeing, uh, looking through the demographics, we've been seeing Millennials, um, we've even been seeing Gen Zs were interested in our products and purchasing. We've been also getting a lot of older folks who are maybe coming back to their health or trying to understand more about their health as their bodies start starting to continue the aging process.

So we have a wide span of people in terms of age, and we also have been really tapped into like the fitness community. People who are, we actually did an activation with Lululemon, which was really big for us. They reached out to us on our Instagram, and uh, they did an activation with a bunch of influencers, the yoga and Pilates, who are also interested in supplementing what they do, in terms of physical movement with the things that they put into their body.

So it's been really fun to kind of see the different clients and that we've been able to get some attention from and also to buy our products. It's been really, really encouraging for the things that we're looking to build.

[00:12:24] **David Smith:** When you your family came to America, did they come straight to Georgia? Have you been here since?

[00:12:27] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** No, I've moved. Oh, my goodness. I've moved throughout my entire life. The first state we came, we lived in was Louisiana. So my dad actually won a scholarship to LSU. And so he did his master's there. And then we moved to Pennsylvania.

And then from, so my dad did his PhD at Penn State, and then after that we moved to Maryland. We moved to PG County in Maryland. And then after Maryland, we moved to Connecticut. And then from Connecticut we moved to New Jersey. And then I lived, I, I'm, I'm, I'm pretty much a Jersey girl. I went to high school and college in Jersey, but.

Like every northern Jersey girl that follows in Lauryn Hill's footsteps, I move to New York City. And I lived in New York for like eight years and then I moved overseas to Berlin, Germany. Lived there for two years, came back, moved to California for three years, and then moved to Georgia. So when I say I moved a lot, most people are like, okay, well, where was this going.

But, yeah, it's quite a bit, quite a bit of places.

[00:13:35] **David Smith:** Did any of your growing or cooking practices from your childhood travel with you?

[00:13:40] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Oh, absolutely. And also I was influenced by others. So if I think about my, my, my adulthood, right? Uh, when I moved to New York, I have an amazing friend. His name is Adam Amir.

Um, his family, they're Iraqi Jews. They're from Florida. They have a family restaurant. He taught me about Middle Eastern like spices and how to fuse those things with some East African type of flavors.

And then, um, when I lived overseas in Berlin, extremely international community, I had friends from all over the world.

And so, I was just partaking in all of these amazing culinary experiences. Uh, California opened up my world to the actual importance of the produce. Because folks in California, it is a stereotype, but it's true. Like, healthy living is part of the California way. And it really introduced me to, like, how many different types of avocados can there be? And how do you think about produce in a way in which you're trying to figure out the source?

But I would say Georgia was really my place of full enlightenment because my husband, as I mentioned, is an excellent cook. And I'm starting to really grow my own

[00:14:48] **David Smith:** What food or, or maybe crop or plant, like, do you think represents your identity the most? Which one do you feel closest to?

[00:14:57] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Cassava. Yes, because in Rwandan culture, you actually use the full cassava because you cook cassava leaves. And it's a dish called isombe. And cassava is something that I, throughout my travels in different countries, especially on the continent, of Africa is like a thread and then also it's so delicious whether you fry it or you pound it or you boil it. You can do so many fun things with cassava. So I am a cassava gal.

I still do use cassava all the time in my cooking and I'm hoping next year to grow some cassava. That would be awesome.

[00:15:30] **David Smith:** Now you know my next question is going to be kind of similar about like what crops do you feel connect you to the African Diaspora?

[00:15:38] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think for me it's Cassava. And I, I honestly even like if I think like, uh, another common, another really common crop is, is you find a lot of corn, you know. Corn is big and corn is, is so nutritious and it, it's, it's a, it's, it's definitely a threat as well.

[00:15:56] **David Smith:** Are there people in your, in your network of, of farmers that also are, are doing something to grow crops that are important to the African diaspora or, or that are preserving African or indigenous, uh, traditions?

[00:16:08] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think, honestly, yes. I think whether directly or indirectly, um, especially if you're a black farmer, you're coming from a tradition where this is something that has been passed on.

So there is this misconception in America, especially for African Americans or black Americans, that this is something like growing things is like a slavery, like, you know, but that's not true, you know, um, growing things is the most human thing you can do. And if you go throughout Africa and you see how people use herbs and use food as medicine and as celebration, it is something that's so intrinsically African and black and indigenous about growing your own vegetables and plants. And I find that a lot of, uh, the farmers we work with are very, very, um, committed to growing things that are, are natural to the surrounding environment and then really have a lineage and a thread to things you can trace back to Africa.

[00:17:04] **David Smith:** Now, you, you've kind of come back to growing and gardening recently, um, you know, relatively. What, um, what was, what do you think is the main thing that maybe you were surprised by, or a big thing that you learned that was a misconception that you had, in coming into it again.

[00:17:21] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I, you know what? It happened so fast. Like, it's kind of like you know, they, plants are kind of like children, like I always hear parents, people who have kids think it happens so fast and like, you know, like, you know, enjoy the moments and like the plants, it happens way faster than you think it, it's definitely a labor of love, but, um, you start to kind of see how life can move both very slow and very fast at the same time, and that's something that, um, really surprised me. Yeah.

[00:17:51] **David Smith:** And do you, do you find the work rewarding. Would you recommend it to others?

[00:17:56] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, it's healing. It's healing. When you grow something and you see it from seed until you actually partake in it, you have respect for life. You have respect for other people and also you have more respect for yourself. Um, and so it's something that I recommend, um, definitely.

And it's something that I think should be part of the curriculum of schools, especially schools that happen to have land. Um, and, and, and, you know, honestly, probably it'd be even more important for schools in extremely urban environments to teach children, uh, the act of growing. So, yes, absolutely.

[00:18:34] **David Smith:** And, uh, what do you think is your, is your relationship to the plants?

Do, do you feel like, uh, do you have any sort of practices that...

[00:18:44] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Oh, absolutely. So my husband, his nickname is Plant Zaddy, and he plays amazing music for the plants. Yes, he plants, he plays amazing music for the plants. He says kind things to the plants. And he thanks the plants for all the work that they're doing to like feed and to nurture, so, he's the one that waters them. I tend, but he's, he's the one that provides the water. And it's, it's really awesome to see him in his element.

So yes, when I'm tending to them, I usually play some music as well. And then I also like, I usually take time to meditate because removing weeds is like meditation.

So I really get into a zone where I'm very still and quiet in terms of like, not my body movement, but my mind, you know, I try to tune things out and just like be in a, in a In a form of meditation when I'm, when I'm, when I'm removing weeds.

[00:19:34] **David Smith:** Has there been anyone that has become like a mentor?

[00:19:37] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Well, definitely Akilah, even though, you know, we are business partners, she's still a mentor to me. Um, and then also, um, I have been following an amazing gardener here. She has a show on HBO. I feel like her name is Jamila, but, uh, she has Homegrown on HBO, it's an incredible show. Yeah, so, you know, from Atlanta, you know, Atlanta farmer, very inspired by the work that she does.

Uh, Baba Kashan of Habesha, having a chance to meet, um, him and to learn about all the work that he's done both here in Atlanta and overseas in Ghana has just been super inspirational to me.

And then I've been reading a book called Black Farmers in America. It just provides you with a snapshot of how farming in America, especially for Black folks, has kept us. Um, it's built us, and it's allowed us to continue to form community in some of the hardest times. Now, I'm not African American, my husband's African American, but our kids are gonna be African American, and I am a Black person in America, and I think that understanding that is so important.

[00:20:42] **David Smith:** What do you, what do you think is, is one thing that you would like people who don't know anything about farming or gardening to know?

[00:20:52] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, I want people to know that it's, it's a labor of love. It's not something you, it's not something you can do and walk away from. You have to give it attention. The, the, the, the farm or the, the garden will react to the amount of care you give it. And, being intentional about that, because we were very intentional, like, last year I planted a absurd amount of things.

I was talking spinach, I had butternut squash, we had watermelon, we had, but we knew that this year we were growing in a different way, which was the company. So I didn't want to do that

and have all these crops that weren't getting the normal amount of care that I could. And so I scaled back and I'm doing herbs.

But I'm finding out through herbs a different type of understanding around crops. So I'm getting really deep into herb medicine and things like that. So just be, don't, don't overwhelm yourself. Start small and then also be intentional about what you're growing and why.

[00:21:50] **David Smith:** Well, I'd love to hear more about what you're learning from switching more towards herb focus.

[00:21:55] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so I think herb focus, or herb focus gardening, um, kind of like puts you in a position to really partake in what you make, like, a little, so, for example, like, there's only a certain shelf life for very organic things, so you need to consume them, and also you need to share them with other people very quickly, or else you can't, or you can use them a different way, you can put them back into the earth.

But with herbs, you know, all season long when I have this mint, so you can try so many different things with them. You can kind of go a little bit deeper in some ways. And so I made a mint and watermelon salad, making mint teas, giving mint to friends for different things. And so I think herbs are something that you can really have a lot, a bit more longevity through a season and kind of figure out how to, how to use them, use them fresh, you can dry them and you can have them for a really long time. And so it just gives you a different way to think about using.

[00:22:46] **David Smith:** What's your favorite thing that you're growing right now?

[00:22:47] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Tulsi basil. It's super healing. It's really, it's, it's, the history of it is just amazing. Um, they use it a lot of Indian teas, and it's just makes you, it actually gives you a really good mood boost.

And lemongrass, lemongrass is just an incredible, incredible, um, plant. And it also allows you to really, we actually have a, a beverage called Taste, Taste of the Light. And it's, and it's the lemon, it's used lemon, we're using lemongrass from last season because we've dried it. And it just automatically puts you into a certain mood, even for aromatherapy. Lemongrass is amazing. If you're feeling a little bit down, you put in your essential oil diffuser. If you have one, it's a great boost. So yes, lemongrass and Tulsi basil are my faves right now.

[00:23:31] **David Smith:** How do you typically prepare to consume the Tulsi basil?

[00:23:35] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So the Tulsi basil, um, I have some that's drying and so, um, I'll put them, I'll steep it into like my tea steeper and then I'll just pour it over hot water. I'll add a little bit of, of honey. I'm also very critical about where I source the honey from, so I try to source honey that's actually local to West Atlanta.

So, um, at, um, a local tea shop called Just Add Honey, they actually have honey that's, that is producing your neighborhood in Atlanta. It's best to use that for allergies, so like, if you use a honey that's actually based where you actually are, you're, you're, it helps you with allergies. So,

um, so I love to do that with honey, and then, I also like to just, um, put some Tulsi basil in some of my, the dishes that I make as well. So just a little bit of that. Yeah.

[00:24:19] **David Smith:** Do you feel like there's anything that you've done in, in your gardening practices or in your business practices? I know you're kind of the business end of the operation, uh, that you think is unique that other people don't do.

[00:24:32] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah. So my, my professional background, as much as I've moved, I've worked. I've worked in so many different industries. Um, I've worked in the nonprofit sector. I've worked in city government, New York City mayor's office under the Bloomberg administration. I've worked in, in corporations, I've worked at Nike, I've worked at Twitter, I've worked at Slack, and within these places, I've been on founding teams, I was on the founding team that took Slack International from a branding perspective, so I've worked with, so the person that designed our labels is actually one of the best brand, and I, I say this not, not, it's not even an exaggeration, he's literally one of the best, best brand illustrators and designers in the world, he's incredible, and we work together at, at Slack.

Um, and then our content, our cop, our content strategy, one of the things that I did a strategic operations when I worked at Twitter is I worked with the content strategy team as well that did both marketing type of content strategy as well as product development content strategy. So I think, based on the fact that I've worked with such leading brands and I've worked in a, in a, in very different sectors and I have like a cross understanding of the different demographics of people that either are, are, either relate to a product or service, um, that one is producing and, and, and, and trying to get to go to market, it helps me bring that type of thinking to Plant Lady Juice Co. Yeah.

[00:25:52] **David Smith:** Do you think the relationship between the business side of things and the growing or producing side of things? Is it synergistic?

[00:26:00] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, I think for us, Akilah and I are intentional about trying to make it synergistic. And I say that because, even going through the development of our brand identity. So everything that you see, like on our Instagram, on our website, that's hand drawn that Viet drew that for us. That's not a, from a stock. Um, that's literally for, for our use. We've gone through iterations together.

We really thought about what does plant lady mean? Like when you look at it from a design perspective, the content strategy on our website, that is done by an amazing woman, um, Megan. And she has extensive, extensive experience in the industry for some of the best brands in the world and she helped us find our voice.

And so we try to make sure that what we're doing is connected, even the folks that we work with, whether it be the photographers that we work with. So one, another background that I have is, is, um, I've living in New York, especially before Instagram and all these things. I lived and worked with a lot of creatives, especially folks in photography that would help to be on set.

And so just working with people that we feel understand us as a brand and our vision and then who we see as potential customers. Everyone we work with, we see them like drinking one of our products. Like that's always kind of like our gauge.

[00:27:12] **David Smith:** Is there anything from your family or your family's history, maybe parents, grandparents that you saw growing or that you love to eat? And, like, the recipe or the means of growing it or the seed has been lost.

[00:27:27] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So, you know, you know, having a refugee background and, you know, I have a grandmother that's still alive. She is 98, um, and there is a lot of things, unfortunately, that have been lost. You know, I think that the, the, the way that we, we commune around food is something that I, I need, I, I think I need to bring back, you know, with my family a bit more. I think even me growing food, that's something that can get, could have gotten lost.

You know, my parents came to America, it's a different place. But, um, I'm trying to figure out how to recover these things, you know, um, I'm aware that I'm, I'm kind of a, a, the last thread. Cause I was, I was, I'm the last person probably in my family lineage is going to be born in Rwanda. Maybe, you never know, but that's a high possibility I'm the last person born in Rwanda.

And so I'm consistently trying to think about how to preserve different things, especially around food. And what food means to community.

[00:28:27] **David Smith:** And are you still close with your grandmother?

[00:28:29] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, the, the, the, the thing is I'm, I, I'm close, but I, I don't speak the language fluently anymore.

So it's getting harder and harder, you know, so yeah. And I, and I haven't been back to Rwanda since we left because of what happened in 1994. And there's still a conflict that's going on in that part of the world. Yeah.

[00:28:47] **David Smith:** Uh, did your grandmother cook as well?

[00:28:49] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, she was amazing. She's still an amazing cook. Apparently, now she just tells people what to do. She doesn't actually cook. Uh, but yes, um, cooked everything, grew everything. Just a beautiful soul. I have some of the best pictures of her actually still shucking beans and things like, things of that nature. So she'll help, but then she'll tell the people what to do to actually prepare the meal.

[00:29:09] **David Smith:** What was your favorite thing that she cooked?

[00:29:11] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Beans. Yeah, beans. The beans are delicious. The flavors of the beans and the way that she would just make the beans, definitely.

[00:29:18] **David Smith:** And what kind of beans were they?

[00:29:20] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, kidney beans mostly. And, uh, but beans are a very big part of Rwandan culture. But yeah, kidney beans. Yeah.

[00:29:27] **David Smith:** And like, were they seasoned

[00:29:29] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so Rwandan food isn't like overly seasoned. but, um, at the same time, we'll just use, like, a lot of just this, sometimes the simplicity of something, like, if you have pepper from a store versus, like, pepper that's, like, freshly made, like, from the actual kernel, it's just gonna taste so different.

So, I do remember certain I feel like there's certain tastes that you can, that call on home, you know? So yeah.

[00:29:54] **David Smith:** Is there a place that you feel like reminds you of home culinarily? Like, I'm, I'm finding that African cuisine is very underrepresented. So yeah, is there a place for you that reminds you of home?

[00:30:05] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, you know, um, I think for me, I really, I really I really, really, really love, like, Middle Eastern food. I think it's just so, uh, Mediterranean food, also. I think that, something really beautiful about that. And then, but, if I had to choose a cuisine, which I think is just an amazing reflection of the diaspora, is, it's Caribbean food, Jamaican food in particular.

All of the, the ways in which Jamaican food, kind of, like, calls on a story. And also, if you think about the slaves that ended up there, what they were able to cultivate, and the spices. And you go to, like, West Africa and you see, like, I, I did a travel with my husband, we went to Senegal and to Ghana. And you see, like, the story can, like, that's originated, where it originated from, where it continued. It's just It's really amazing.

Yeah, it's really, really amazing. And Ethiopian food. I am East African, and Ethiopian food, this is, this is some of the oldest food in the world, one of the oldest cultures in the world. And so eating Ethiopian food is always like you're coming back home to yourself.

[00:31:05] **David Smith:** Is there a large community of people in your position selling, you know, natural herbal products or supplements or juices that are black or African?

[00:31:16] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think, I think you're seeing a trend, like, you know, you know, you do have, um, like, uh, juice bars and, and things like that, but I don't think anyone's doing it with the knowledge of infusing herbs or understanding what those herbs are doing and I think that that's where we stand out and I think also like the the story that we're telling like our Tagline is deeply rooted and so you'll see that in a lot of our marketing.

We have an amazing photo shoot that's coming up In August, that kind of fuses that together. Then I'm getting married in September. And one of the things we're doing for the wedding is during, before the ceremony starts, we're having a libations hour with Plant Lady Juice Co. And everyone's going to get a chance to actually drink the, one of the juices before they sit down.

And then we're having a picnic the next day. She's got a picnic, a cookout the next day. And we are also going to be providing product there. And I have family coming from all over the world. And a lot of them have never been to America. If they're coming to see my end up being a refugee in America, I have family that end up being refugees in Norway, in Paris, in France.

Um, in South Africa, like all over and it's going to be really interesting to see them partake in Plant Lady Juice Co. and like to bridge so many stories into one.

[00:32:28] **David Smith:** Does it make you excited to share your, your company and your product?

[00:32:31] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes. It makes me very excited because I think it's going to also provide us with an understanding of just how where this could go, you know, and having people with so many different taste buds from everywhere coming together to Atlanta, and a lot of them for the first time in the States, I think it's going to be really beautiful.

My, my husband's family is from Philadelphia. So also just kind of like bridging our families and having the juices there, it's going to be very, very great. And Akilah is going to be the vending during it. So it's just. All these things kind of coming together, I think it's going to be super special.

[00:33:04] **David Smith:** Is it isolating to be a black person in the wellness industry?

[00:33:08] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, it's a very white dominated industry. It's very whitewashed. The way that people talk about health is very white centric. And, the interesting thing is, you know, Civilization started in Africa. The, the, the, the understanding of agricultural practice started in Africa. Wellness is something that you see throughout the continent, you know.

And I think there's an, an awesome moment right now that we're part of which is reclaiming that narrative and making sure that wellness is accessible to people that look like me and people that represent the folks that have, that have been doing these practices since before the beginning of what white people start to be, think is like the beginning of time.

[00:33:49] **David Smith:** Do you feel any sort of pressure to succeed or act a certain way in the industry because of your identity?

[00:33:57] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So not yet. You know, I will say we are fortunate. We are, we are, we started in Atlanta. Atlanta has a lot more black people than other places. I think if we did this in, in, uh, you know, San Francisco, California, it'd be a little bit different, um, which is a place I lived. So I'm referencing something that is real.

But, at the same time, I think that we are forever. We are, we are for everyone in the sense that we want to have customers from all different backgrounds, as long as you respect are what we stand for, definitely. You know, you are, you are, you are a plant. We call our customers plant people.

And so you are, for us, you are, you are our people. You are plant people. Um, but, you know, in terms of pressure to act a certain way, I don't think, I don't see that. I think maybe starting also a business when you know yourself more. You know, I am turning 35 this year. There's always room to grow. I want to be someone that remains teachable for the rest of my life.

Um, that's a very, very important thing for me. But I also want to acknowledge the work that I've done to kind of know myself better and not to feel like I need to be someone that I'm not. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:35:01] **David Smith:** Do you think that's like giving you like a drive and having your business be successful?

[00:35:06] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think it has. I think Akilah, Akilah has been doing, Akilah's been doing this type of work for a decade.

You know, I've been in my, in my career, I've been building these connections on the strategic operations side, design side and and all that for a really long time. And I think that it's positioned us to really be thoughtful about what we're trying to build and how we're trying to build it. Yeah.

[00:35:27] **David Smith:** And, and what do you think about the longevity of not just the business, but also your growing practice and relationship with herbs and fruit?

[00:35:36] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, I honestly, next year, one of my goals is to grow cassava. Like I mentioned. And to really start to think about how to tap back into the things that are important to the part of the world that I come from and seeing how I can cultivate and grow them here. So, as, I feel like the first instance of the garden was let's try everything, let's learn.

The second instance is let's get into herbs and let's, let's, let's do that. The third instance I think is like let's get back to the roots of what are the things that are grown in Rwanda.

[00:36:08] **David Smith:** What other things might you grow next time?

[00:36:10] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, definitely want beans, want corn. Um, and I also want to kind of think about, just kind of maybe doing some research into different other herbs that I may not be aware of. So that's the, those are the, those are the main things. Yeah.

[00:36:24] **David Smith:** Is there, uh, a way of eating in Rwanda that you'd like to replicate as well?

[00:36:28] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So, unlike, unlike the amazing way in which, in which Ethiopians eat, which is everyone sharing like a, a plate, um, you, you, in Rwandan culture, um, you know, with the influence of colonialism, people use, use utensils, but a lot of things you could eat with your hands. And I think that that's also really wonderful too. Yeah.

[00:36:45] **David Smith:** What about like the gathering of people?

[00:36:47] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So the gathering of people is, I would love to host more people because Rwandan culture, you cook for a village, you cook for community. You don't just cook for your home. You cook for others to come in and to eat as well.

And so like, how can I invite that and then do that? One of my neighbors, he actually, great, because he shares all these, and he grows, and I was sharing last, I share as well, but how do we share more of the things that we're cooking and making and growing? So, yeah. Yeah.

[00:37:11] **David Smith:** Do you feel, what about, um, do you feel that there's anything you want to grow in the future that is maybe not from your specific heritage, but that is important to you and your health or your lifestyle?

[00:37:28] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think lemons. I would love to have a lemon tree. I think that that would be so amazing. Like it would just be so wonderful. Lemons are so good for you. Now a lot of people are trying to take seeds out of, out of plants and vegetables, I try to do seedless, which is terrible. So I would love to grow, um, lemons and, and, and all types of citrus, like oranges. And, and, and honestly, I would love to one day maybe even grow pineapples. So a lot of tropical fruits, um, and, and mangoes. They're so, so important to like the diaspora, um, and to black and indigenous farmers. And it'd be great to have an opportunity to grow those type of things. Yeah.

[00:38:04] **David Smith:** Do you let some of your plants grow, go to seed?

[00:38:06] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, yes. Um, a lot, a lot of them we let grow to seed. So for sure.

[00:38:11] **David Smith:** Do you hold on to these?

[00:38:12] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, so we have started to collect and hold on. So yeah, for sure. So, um, we have spinach seeds. we also have onion, garlic. We have, well, garlic is the, the, the root. You put the whole thing in there. But also not all garlic is the same, you know. So holding on to garlic is really, really important too.

And then, I also have watermelon seeds, so yeah, it's the watermelon season right now, and so like, if you have seeds from a watermelon, that's an amazing thing to have. If it's a good one, hold on to that. Yeah.

[00:38:44] **David Smith:** Do you have any particular varieties that are special?

[00:38:46] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think Akilah could answer that question better than I could, um, to be 100 percent honest.

[00:38:51] **David Smith:** And has that practice taught you anything?

[00:38:53] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, I think it makes you like, it's really, there's a really trendy, sustainability is very trendy.

And I feel like being sustainable really means caring. Like it's, it's, it's the, it's like you can't make someone care. Like, I'm okay. I take that back. I think what you're trying to get to with a more sustainable world is people caring. It's not just like. You know, don't do this or do that in terms of like what you buy, what you consume.

But like, how can I continue to use some things? I care about it. Like I have to care about where this came from. If you grow something, you're going to have a more of a chance to care about how the whole thing works within an ecosystem than someone that didn't touch it from the beginning, you know, just consumed it.

But how does your consumerism kind of connect to the things that you are looking to have in the future and I think that's what seeds teach you, you know, yeah.

[00:39:46] **David Smith:** And, what about the, the, we, we, we talked a little bit about how you want to continue in the future with your growing practices. What about the future of, of your, of your company? Yeah. How do you want that to grow?

[00:39:57] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So, um, I think for me, what I would love is we, we actually about to scale into commercial kitchen, which is huge. So we're about to be in a commercial kitchen, moving out of the house. Yes, very exciting. We just launched March 26. So we're still new. We're still the new kids in the block, 100%.

Um, we would love to win some grants and then kind of push some of our amazing marketing ideas that we have. We want to spotlight our farmers and, um, we think that by spotlighting our farmers, it will grow our network of farmers as well. And we have a, a long term vision of opening up a storefront. And so we would love to have a storefront, preferably in West Atlanta that really reflects, um, who we are as a company and allows it to be a community watering hole for people to come together and to learn and to share.

And so that would be like, one of our major, type of goals. So we are actually right around this corner from the flagship Slutty Vegan. So sometimes we talk about, we joke about, like, you know, we are in a community where a lot of other people got their start and were able to kind of flourish in a big way and we hope to be part of that.

[00:41:03] **David Smith:** Tell me more about Deeply Rooted as a phrase.

[00:41:06] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so Deeply Rooted, so roots are the lifelines of plants. They provide the things that are essential for the plant to actually grow. So you can take it as a, as a literal form. But deeply rooted for us means that we stand on our values and that we understand that our ancestors have been doing this for way longer than we have.

And that, um, it's important to not only be practitioners, but holders of the recipes and holders of the traditions that enable us to do our work. So yeah.

[00:41:34] **David Smith:** And, and what are, I mean, I think you've definitely touched on some of them already, but what are the values?

[00:41:39] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so I think our values is that it's really centered around community. Like, the way that you show up for yourself affects the way that you, that the community kind of receives you and the way that other people show up. So it's very reciprocal in that nature, in that nature. Also, that we have, we, we have a deep respect for our customers, no matter where they are on their health journey.

They could be early stage, they don't know, but they're trying to figure things out mid stage. They have some understanding or later stage, but we are here to support you throughout your entire health journey. And honestly, your journey towards self actualization, you know, your highest self. So these are some of the, these are some of the things that are, that we really hold as values for the company.

Then also the integrity of our products and like why we choose the people to work with that we do and how you see that reflected, um, both in our, in our design, but also in our product development, the way that we operate and the way that we even think about our financials. Just really that integrity piece. Yeah.

[00:42:38] **David Smith:** Now, from my perspective, I think that ideas of embodiment and, and, and just bodies and health are very different from America. in Africa, and you've been all over the place in Europe, too. Um, what does health mean to you?

[00:42:55] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think health means to me when you wake up and you feel at home in your body.

And that, to me, connects to mental, emotional, physical. Like, if you've ever been heartbroken, you feel that you're not in the most healthy state, right? You don't feel at home. You wake up in a state of frenzy. If you've ever been sick, like this just, your body is your home, it's your temple, and that's what I feel like healthy means.

Yeah.

[00:43:22] **David Smith:** Um, do you, do you think your, your roots have played into your idea of health?

[00:43:29] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yes, I think so. I think that just having the opportunity to kind of think very clearly around how do I want to feel? It's really connected to my roots, connected to the people that came before me and, um, how they've been working through crazy circumstances to continue our lineage.

And I just think a lot about that and, and it makes me want to be more healthy, both for the future, but also for the folks in the past. Yeah.

[00:44:04] **David Smith:** And do you have any, I know you wanted to introduce more plants, uh, that have to do with, with, uh, your roots into your garden. Yeah. Do you have any ambitions to do the same thing for your company or your products?

[00:44:19] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, I think that would be, like, you know, especially with the storefront, you can start to play around with, like, food. You can also start to think about other, other products. Uh, Kila is extremely talented. She makes amazing, like, body, like, and, and, and topical things. She also is really, she makes, like, these amazing, like, essential oil inhalers that help you fall asleep or deal with anxiety.

So. The opportunity to have a physical space, um, could open up a really great avenue for us to sell more things and to even think about maybe something that has a restaurant and a juice bar together. And how do you fuse and play around with that?

[00:44:59] **David Smith:** Now, um, we're, we're coming nearer to the end of our interview here. Is there, are there any pieces of wisdom that you've picked up along any avenue of your life that you think, would be good for someone who's looking to get into either, you know, the health industry or gardening.

[00:45:15] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, routine is key. When you have a routine, a morning routine, a nightly routine, it can literally unlock so much potential for your health.

And I feel like as I've gotten older, especially even through COVID, I would say, like that routine can really save your mental and then it will transcend into your physical.

[00:45:39] **David Smith:** I tell you, I learned the same thing over COVID because not having a routine drove me.

[00:45:43] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, yes, exactly. Just establishing that and like you also like people talk about meditation and routine is just a meditation. When you wake up and you do something without thinking and so this is what you do. You're going to be in a meditative space, like you're going to naturally fall into that. I think the other thing is be kind to yourself, like talk to yourself with kindness, like beating yourself up verbally and the things that you say to yourself and the way that you look at yourself. Even if you are able to present a lighthearted person, if you're not talking to yourself with kindness, it doesn't matter where you are. Maybe you're not where you want to be. That's okay. You can still be kind to yourself, and if you say one thing kind to yourself every day, that can change the course of your entire day, and it will change your life. So, those are the two things.

[00:46:30] **David Smith:** Do you think that kindness has helped you grow either plants or your professional life?

[00:46:37] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, I think so. I think, uh, for my professional life, I will say, being a Black woman, it's also, it's been kindness, but it's also been grit. So, I haven't always been able to just, uh, lead with kindness, because unfortunately, some people don't respond to that.

And so, that's where I've had to tap into just resilience, and um, also just tenacity, and that's important too, because some of these plants that you see, especially wild ones, they're, they're

tough. They're not getting songs every day, they're, they're not, you know, they're not getting like the, but they're still growing, they're still thriving, sometimes it's, it's okay to be a wildflower.

That's good too, you need to have a little bit of that, you can learn so much from nature, and that's another thing you can learn too.

[00:47:18] **David Smith:** Where did you learn your kindness from?

[00:47:20] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Um, I will definitely say my mother and my husband. My husband is the kindest man. He is amazing. And, I think my mother growing up and the way that she has treated people through her profession as a nurse. She's been, my mom's always been a nurse in some of the worst conditions, right? So she's been a nurse in a methadone clinic. She's been a nurse at a, at a retirement facility for, for impoverished old people. So these are not folks that even have money. They don't have family visiting them. She's always chosen to work with societies, really down and out populations.

And that's always been her, her, her goal. So she's never worked at the fancy hospitals or anything like that. She's always gone to places that are understaffed, under resourced, and exuded so much kindness to people who really need it. And, for my husband, my husband is, um, so he comes from a background where his father actually owns a, uh, um, a really respected boxing gym here in Atlanta called Decatur Boxing Gym.

He's, uh, a competitive Muay Thai fighter, so all of his friends are fighters. And his uncle, uh, actually, uh, won the gold medal in the Olympics in L. A. in the 90s. And so he comes from a very interesting Philadelphia fighting family. And one of the things you learn hanging out with a bunch of fighters is that you have respect and kindness towards your opponent.

You have the utmost respect and you have the utmost camaraderie and him and his friends are just phenomenal people.

[00:48:48] **David Smith:** And we've talked a little bit in a lot of different ways about respect. And you talked about you wanted your customers to have respect for the products and the ingredients you use. And you talked about having respect for your customers. What does respect mean for you?

[00:49:03] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** I think respect is, um, respect for me, it really means that you are. So from our side to our customers, we are using the best ingredients. We want the best and we are coming with our best, um, to our customers in terms of the product itself. In terms of the way that we're marketing and designing and being intentional, using glass bottles, using, using the best things that we can afford at this stage.

[00:49:27] **David Smith:** And for our customers, I think it means just like, really being mindful of the fact that, you know, you are consuming something that can change your life. So it's just respecting the act of like, receiving something that has been made with a lot of intention. Do you have any final words that you want to go?

[00:49:45] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, what you guys are doing is absolutely amazing. Like I am so impressed and just so inspired by your generation. You give me so much hope for what's to come. And I think also like your project and what you're documenting is so important. And I just wish you guys the best. I just thank you guys for giving me a moment to talk about some of the things that we're doing here at Plant Lady Juice Co..

You guys are awesome.

[00:50:10] **David Smith:** Thank you so much. And the very last thing I'll ask, um, is could you just describe the space that you're being interviewed in right now?

[00:50:17] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** Yeah, so this is my, um, this is my backyard. Um, and so, I have a bunch of flowers that are used for medicinal purposes back here. Uh, we got some, we got some big trees and I like to come out here sometimes and just like sunbathe a bit, um, and meditate some mornings as well with my, with my mat and, it's, you know, it's, it's really, I'm really fortunate, my husband and I are really fortunate to be homeowners in this beautiful neighborhood in West Atlanta. We live on the cusp of West End, Westview, right on the Beltline, and yeah, it's just a very hot, but very beautiful day today.

[00:50:53] **David Smith:** And then we, you told me before, but can you go over once more what's, what's, what's in here?

[00:50:57] **Jennifer Kanyamibwa:** So we have Tulsi basil. We have two types of mints. We are growing sunflowers, uh, because we love sunflower seeds. They're amazing and delicious to roast. Um, we also, um, have, we also are growing lemongrass.

We're growing oregano and rosemary. So yeah, those are the main things.