

Grounded Strategies
Talkin Lots Ep. 1: Lisa Freeman
Transcript

0.00 | Introduction

jah: Hello and welcome to Episode 1 of Talkin Lots! A new podcast produced by Grounded Strategies in partnership with our community greenspace champions. On this first episode, we speak with Manchester Resident Lisa Freeman about her experience with her farm and her years of expertise with community engagement and farming.

We are here today with Lisa Freeman of Manchester Family Farms. Lisa will you tell us your name, pronouns, home town, and the current neighborhood you live in.

Lisa: Hey everybody, my name is Lisa Freeman. I live in historic Manchester. My personal pronouns are she, her, and Beyonce.

jah: Yas, yas. Will you tell us are you a homeowner, landowner, renter? What is your relationship to the land?

Lisa: I am a homeowner. I've been a homeowner for 11 years in Manchester. I also own a piece of property and I've owned that for the last five years.

1:32 | How do you define community stewardship and what is your vision for the vacant land in your community?

jah: Thank you. Will you tell us how you define community stewardship and what is your vision for the vacant land within your community?

Lisa: Community stewardship is everybody's responsibility. And this earth, Mother Earth, only has so many ounces of valuable resources. Our water, the fresh air that we breathe, the sunshine, the heat, the land, and I think it's everybody's responsibility to be good stewards, to be aware of your surroundings, to take care of the places we call home, to pick up the trash, to make good use of water so it's not overflowing and pushing our systems to capacity.

2:27 | What is the vision for the vacant land in your community, and what does vacant land have to do with your freedom and freedom in general?

jah: Thank you. What is your vision for the vacant land in your community, what does vacant land -- in your opinion -- have to do with your freedom and freedom in general?

Lisa: When I first came here to Manchester, there were quite a few. I don't know how I got stuck in the City of Pittsburgh Department of Finance, and they had a department that's devoted to

blighted housing, vacant housing, and land. And that's how I started my interest and I looked at houses, and that's actually how I got my home. I then moved on to the vacant land. There're so many properties in the City of Pittsburgh that are owned by the City, Urban Redevelopment Authority, and Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. And they cannot be maintained. The grass can't be cut, the litter--the air just naturally blows on the garbage. There's just no way the City can maintain those properties. So it's up to every community to decide what are we gonna do with it? Are we gonna let it become overgrown and be consumed with rodents or trash or a place where people hide out and squat and dump their illegalness? Or do we make it into something that's beautiful for the neighborhood, a place where you can celebrate, a place where you can develop, a place where you can commune together. So I think vacant land is something that we should become surrounded with, it should be something that's on everybody's radar, it's something the mayor should devote considerable time and resources to, and an element that all the residents in the community can come and develop a plan around.

4:40 | What would you like to tell your elected representatives about your community and about vacant land?

Lisa: Vacant land is under the auspice of community development corporations (CDC). Almost one in every community. And some of them do a little more, and some of them do just brick and mortar -- and that would encompass vacant land. Some of our CDCs have morphed or vacated or just started to be an anomaly or an autonomous figure. And they do things based on what they deem to be important and oftentimes, it just basically is at the guise of their ED who they have elected to lead the organization. It's no longer a representation of the residents that are living there. They're making their decisions solely based on what they deem to be important. Here in Manchester, we have not heard from our CDC in months. Our CDC is only called upon when there are shootings and our CDC has made it known that their mission is only about brick and mortar. So therefore, it's imperative that there be open communication between the residents and those that sit on those CDC boards about vacant land and the development. I think we've gotten away from that and we need to return to sitting at the table where all residents can participate and it is not a closed society.

6:50 | What is your story with vacant land? How has it impacted you?

Lisa: My building experience, my gardening experience started on vacant land that was owned by the City of Pittsburgh. We started out as a community school garden. It was an outdoor learning space for Manchester elementary school. We developed that program with a very exciting program for five years and we had a very good working relationship with the initial principal who was Theresa Cherry. We obtained initial funding by Greenup with former Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and then with -- at the time -- GTECH. We developed a program that became like none other. We partnered with local nonprofits, and produced summer camps, summer internships with students from Slippery Rock who were going into the teaching profession, we had an at-risk afterschool summer youth program. We sat, we developed a table with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Heinz Endowment Foundation and developed some very unique programming through public school education and then charter school education.

My experience grew and developed over five years, but at that time Redup had some stipulations--you couldn't sell the produce, everything had to be donated therefore we donated. Then we found out there was some food insecurity amongst our senior citizens so we addressed that. But we were always at the mercy of people who didn't understand what we were doing or people new to the community who didn't take time to develop relationships and understand what that project was about. And they overstepped their bounds and became takers rather than contributing to the project or the community. They became our privileged neighbors who didn't take the time out to understand that neighbors don't act in that way. Who didn't take the time to understand what was going on there, but chose to take their dogs to the space and allow them to pee in the beds. They'd come and take the herbs that were growing to make sure their rosemary chicken could be the best. There were no fences, no demands made; it was just a beautiful spot. People chose to take rather than to give, to not understand but to feel entitled, and after five years and after growing the program, then that program ended. We started somewhere else, and that had some challenges, and here I bought a piece of property I could call my own, and could make my own rules, develop my own projects, put stakes in the ground that I did not have to uproot. And all the time and investment of sweat equity and dollars, it stayed within my confines so I could determine how long I wanted to make that investment. And that's where we are at Freeman Family Farms and Greenhouse. That's my for-profit business on a former 10,000 sq. ft. abandoned building that sat in rot and decay for years. It sat here in the middle of Manchester while we had a CDC in the midst who did not deem it necessary to address, this great expanse of blighted building where drug dealing was going on, and rodents were crawling around, and food banks were dumping massive amounts of food in the back, it just sat here idle. And as soon as I brought the property, and then moved on to this property, and found a way to demolish the property, then the property all of a sudden gained the attention of a CDC and a developer who then deemed this property to be prime.

So that vacant land, land in general, is a very important construct for all citizens, all Americans, because that goes into our US Constitution. It becomes those who own land have more power; if you ever wanna speak out, they wanna know your address. And why? Because they wanna know you're a constituent. And you know how you have greater value and a greater influence in this system of democracy? If you are a homeowner or a landowner, you have greater rights because you pay taxes that give you a greater right and a greater voice. So I encourage everyone: if you can't be a landowner in time, okay. But you can always purchase a plot of land and that gives you more access, more rights, stronger voice, or you can reach out to your elected officials. They'll hear you more, they'll respond more quickly, if you become a homeowner or a landowner. Our elected officials have to understand that CDCs don't always speak on behalf of the people. CDCs are becoming a thing of the past and not reflecting the needs of the people and communities they serve. CDCs have had, through the mayor's office, responsibility to become a registered community organization. And that designation gave that organization the right to speak on behalf of its community. Well some CDCs have chosen not to take that obligation because transparency comes with those obligations. And some organizations don't want that to be common knowledge of the business that's going on at hand. So they chose not to make that extra requirement. Communication is the number one priority of

having that designation of being a registered community organization, they don't want that requirement either because then they can't operate in autonomy. I won't say in secret, but then that accountability is not on that level [as when] you become registered. So our representatives have to be made aware that they have to speak to the people, for the people, and on behalf of the people. And you've got to reach out way beyond just our community development corporations.

14:30 | What has kept you going through it all and what motivates you to do the work that you do? What are lessons you've learned along the way and challenges you've had to overcome?

jah: There's a lot that you said there. I want to highlight that you mentioned being on a space for five years--five years of sweat equity and investment that was then, sort of, the spirit of that space was not respected by those who shared that space with you, by your neighbors. Which then took you to another space where there was again hardship. Finally, you landed here at the space you're in now with Manchester, and even this space came with its own challenges, including an abandoned building that was home to a lot of vermin and a lot of other things. So I just wanna hear from you Lisa Freeman, what kept you going throughout it all and what motivates you to do the work that you do? What are lessons you've learned along the way and challenges you've had to overcome?

Lisa: Well I'm a proud Black woman. I have one desire in life and that desire is to live in peace. My quality of life, there's a certain way I want to live. I don't want to live in filth, I don't want things unsightly in front of my house, in the back of my house. In front of my property, in back of my property. I take pride that little children -- black, white, brown, yellow -- can look at me and say Ms. Lisa says what she means and means what she says in word and in deed. That makes me proud. How do I keep going? I have children who are still growing up in this neighborhood. I have children who walk by my house everyday that reach in and take those free books, free socks, free pampers, free milk, whatever I put in there because that matters to me. Building up a community--that matters to me. Bringing up a community that cares for one another--that matters to me. To speak out when I see something wrong, that matters to me. We all have a voice, we all have a responsibility, we all have a right to say--this is not right. That means something to me. And what I want to see in my future. I do this because of the future of my kids. I'm getting the next chapter of my life. I want them to always look back and think: "Those trees on Liverpool Street, two blocks down and two blocks over, my mother planted that tree. My mother arranged for the city of Pittsburgh to come in and take out every single tree, about 100 trees and put in brand new 100 trees. I remember when those trees were saplings -- and now look at em? They're three stories high. My mother, she had all these bricks replaced on two sides down and two sides over, so it could be accessible to our handicapped neighbors." I do this so my children have something to be proud of. My grandchildren can look back--there will probably never be a plaque. Or nothing they can see with my name on it, but they will see me in spirit and in truth through that tree, through those bricks. Hopefully I'll be planted underneath or buried underneath my peach tree right here on my lot, on my farm. And they can say, "My mother's spirit still lives here." And the other thing is I'm motivated because this little ponderosa

right here, this homestead that I call my ponderosa, my piece of heaven, it's only going to go up in value. And I'm not doing it for that reason right now, but I am doing it for an inheritance for my children. You buy a house and it will go up in value. You live in these traditionally black neighborhoods, guess what--the housing is going up, skyrocketing. My children will have something, a future and a hope, that they can lean back on and build up their children and invest in because they saw their mother do it. From a house that was condemned, my daughter saw the rebuilding process and now my daughter is a homeowner. And she went to college, we went to college together. And now she owns her home. My son, whom the school system has failed, he went to Pittsburgh public schools and I sued Pittsburgh public schools because they denied him. But my son was with me side-by-side in building this farm, and as a Black young man, he can say: I know how to start a business because I was by my mother's side and she showed me step-by-step how to do it. So there is no reason for failure in anybody, any child's life, and we should not be letting our streets be ran over by drugs and crime. As long as we have strong people -- black, white, yellow, green, and blue -- the voices have got to raise up and take over their communities and love one another. That is the golden rule--love your neighbor as thyself. We would have less of this nonsense, and it really starts with taking pride in your community.

20:01 | Who are some of the footsteps you follow in, and what is the legacy you're looking to leave behind for those who will follow after you?

jah: What a beautiful legacy. As you were growing up, who are some of the footsteps that you're following when it comes to your orientation to community and the legacy that you are looking to leave behind for those who will follow after you?

Lisa: So my mother, you called her name. And this is the God honest truth. My mother, Dorothy Nealy, worked very hard all her life. We were raised in New York, and she left the south when she was old enough to graduate. She used to work in the fields and pick cotton and then she was part of that migration to the north where she became a day laborer. And she worked as a domestic with her uniform. And she ironed and she served and she waited on people who were rich and she cleaned toilets in a hotel room. And she worked and worked and worked to try to achieve that American dream until she had a mental breakdown and started talking to herself. While she had achieved the right of being a homeowner, it cost her her mind and mental health. And in my formative years I had to commit my mother--at 16 years old, I had to commit my mother to a state mental health hospital multiple times in New York City. And it was like putting her in prison when those doors closed.

That is what has changed me. That is why I can be bold, that is why I can be loud, that's why I'm not afraid to speak out or take on any or any cause, because there is no shame. I've seen it all and then passed Dorothy Nealy, I didn't have the experience of anyone in my family ever going to college and I was the first. and my heroes were the two black women -- Shirley Chisholm and her slogan "unbought and unbossed", and I take that on myself. And then there was a great orator, and now that I'm calling her name, I can't even think of her [Senator Barbara Jordan]. But she was an orator like none other and she could speak truth to power without hesitation. her

vocabulary was so divine, that this Black woman could stand up and everybody would have to take notice. So those are my role models that put me in the sure place that I sit today, and I hope I could be just a short measure of all great Black women, all here in Pittsburgh and far and abroad as we continue on the legacy for our children to grow up and witness that they too are the next generation and we expect great things from them.

23:08 | What does your community look like in the next 25-50 years? What is the community that you envision exists?

Lisa: So it's very curious you say that. When we were invested more heavily and involved in Manchester Elementary School, we used to have an annual jazz event for Black History. And we put out a letterhead for Black History Month the caricature of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. And in his teaching and experience, he called it "a beloved community" and that's what I hope for communities everywhere. To become beloved, where we're examples one to the other. We are now living in diverse communities. There is no such thing as "yours, mine, this is ours, this is yours". We must become diverse--of all isms. We need to put that aside and [realize] we are neighbors. And how we get along and grow along--we have to grow along side by side. We have to develop a common language, mutual respect for each other. We have to know these are our children--we have to return back to those days where you could correct and you didn't have to be related to the child. When you see someone get out of line--we don't have those community norms in what is acceptable and what we will tolerate. That was all at the community level. You wouldn't let a child get out of hand without saying something to the child. Now, everything's acceptable because people are afraid to say anything.

25:05 | Any lasting words for listeners of this podcast and to the future generations of this podcast?

Lisa: There is nothing too hard; if you can conceive it, you can achieve it. If you can think it, you can do it. If someone stopped you and discouraged you, okay--let's think about that. Let's think about it for a while. Let's let it sink in. And then we're just gonna tell it to shut up and move out the way. If you can think it, you can do it. And if you're stomped and you can't think of the next step, the secret it is--you gotta keep moving. Once you're convinced in your mind you can't do it, you're not gonna do it. But if you're feeling doubtful, please find someone who will encourage you and breathe life into you. You have to be around like-minded people, not people who want to see you fail, who will help you fail, or who don't want you to get any further than themselves. if you can conceive it, you can believe it. One thing as a social worker, we asked children in Braddock who went to school in Rankin, or at that time Woodland Hills--what do you want to be when you grow up? And at that time, our poor children had no dreams. They had nothing in their mind for a future. And I'll always remember one little child, he said, "I wanna have my GED." A child who is only five years old could only look forward to getting a GED. Does that mean that child is already programmed for failure? For dropping out of school? For not having any dreams? For not being able to dream? For not going to sleep and thinking of a brighter future? For not having someone in their community that they could look to and aspire to, Mr. So-and-So right around the corner? Or Ms. So-and-So? Have no one in their community to look at and say,

I wanna be just like that? That was said, and I want to think, the way I see the behavior today, that that sentiment probably has not changed. We have not given our children room to dream, skills to dream, ambition to dream, hope to dream, resources to dream, encouragement to dream, space to dream, opportunity to dream, a chance to dream, money to dream, resources to--do I need to keep going on? We need to give our kids a reason to hope and a reason to dream.