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U.19 Long Civil Rights Movement: Breaking New Ground

Interview U-0905
Ama Shambulia
11 June 2012

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ABSTRACT - AMA SHAMBULIA

Interviewee: Ama Shambulia
Interviewer: Shane Hand
Interview date: June 11, 2012
Location: WE (West End) Community Gardens; Birmingham, AL
Length: 77:51

The interview with Ama Shambulia centered on the following themes: food; health; nutrition; the earth; family; cooking; community activism; and, cooking. Topics include: family background; food and cooking as family tradition; moving to Alabama; the Black Power movement; culture shock in rural Alabama; Shambulia surprised to find rural blacks in Alabama not growing much food; gardening versus farming; introduction to Urban Ministry, R. G. Lyons, and WE Community Garden; assuming directorship of the garden; now in the fourth growing season; engaging the community; shaping the youth to be good stewards of the community; assisting seniors; response from the West End community to the ministry's initiative; official work days for volunteers; locals become inspired to grow their own gardens; youth become a greater focus or emphasis for the ministry; family plots; giving away produce to seniors; revenue; what is growing in the garden?; buying seeds and tools; the ministry's and garden's effect on Ama Shambulia; phenomenon of urban gardens; the value of freshly picked produce; and, final thoughts.

FIELD NOTES – AMA SHAMBULIA

Interviewee: Ama Shambulia
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THE INTERVIEWEE. Ama Shambulia is the project director for WE Community Garden in the West End community of Birmingham, Alabama. The garden is a project of Urban Ministry, which is supported by the Community Church Without Walls. Born in 1962 in south California, Shambulia was raised by her grandmother (who was really her great aunt), and she moved to Alabama around 1990. She describes herself as an earth worker first and a gardener at best. She is a trained professional chef and was employed as a personal chef for five years before her move to Alabama. With food being a fundamental theme and focus of her life, she also hopes to communicate to others the importance of nutrition, health, and gardening.

THE INTERVIEWER. Shane Hand is a PhD student at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, who studies the Southern United States during the twentieth century with a focus on race and culture. Current research interests concern the experience of black Americans in the Gulf South's moonshine industry from 1900 through the 1960s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in Ama Shambulia's office at Urban Ministry in West End, and it lasted just over one hour. There were multiple noise disturbances throughout the interview due to the office setting. Phones ring every few minutes, there is occasional conversation occurring in the background, and the sound of doors shutting can be heard a few times. Despite the noise and office setting, Ama Shambulia remains easy to hear and the noise disturbances are typically quiet and short lasting. The first half of the interview pertains more to Shambulia's family background and the importance of food and health throughout her life. The second half of the interview turns toward her role with WE Community Garden.

TAPE LOG – AMA SHAMBULIA

Interviewee: Ama Shambulia
Interviewer: Shane Hand
Interview date: June 11, 2012
Location: WE (West End) Community Gardens; Birmingham, AL
Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

<u>Time</u>	<u>Topic</u>
[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]	
0:01	Introduction: Shane Hand interviewing Ama Shambulia of WE Community Garden for the Breaking New Ground oral history project on Monday, June 11, 2012.
0:35	Family background. Ama Shambulia was born in Los Angeles, California in 1962. Mother was from Mobile, Alabama, and her father was from Tennessee, but she was raised by her great aunt. Knows very little of her mother and she died young at thirty-years old. She says she was an incredible cook, which is an important part of her life.
3:00	Shambulia defines her career as a natural food chef and whole natural foods. Has been a vegetarian for years. Considers herself a flexitarian.
5:35	Maternal grandparents. Grandmother was from Louisiana near a settlement called Bunkie, near Shreveport. Her maternal family migrated to California from Louisiana. None remained as far as Ama knows. Her family background is very disconnected. Took in laundry and iron clothes when younger and her grandmother became a domestic in her older days.
9:00	Lists great aunts and uncles that she remembers. Shambulia does not know of her mom having any siblings. [Note: Shambulia's grandmother and great aunt is the same person, but she tends to refer to her as her grandmother.]
10:00	The granddad was known for being an herbalist or type of a medicine man. She knows very little information about him. Shambulia describes her grandmother as a short Creole aunt, but was always called "Big Aunt Bertha." She also worked for the man who was the voice for the cartoon character, "Mr. McGoo."
13:15	Shambulia learns to cook vicariously through her grandmother. Simple and clean food that was really good. Her grandmother was adamant on the food being clean. She was known for her sweet potato pie, tea cakes, chow-chow, and lemon meringue pie. She grew collard greens and mint. Said the only she learned how to cook from her grandmother was rice, which was a staple dish for each meal.
17:15	(cont'd) Grandmother was a stern woman, and a member of FAME in California. Shambulia is no longer connected to the church, but is affiliated with a spiritual center that embraces ideals of love, compassion, and principles.
24:35	Moving to Alabama at the age of seventeen. While growing up in south-central Los Angeles, she does not remember white and black race relations, other than her school teachers who lived elsewhere. She says south California at that time was actually quite segregated, and she was actually surprised when she moved to Alabama to see whites and blacks integrating. Discusses attempts of busing white

kids to the all black high schools in California and the white kids were given a hard time.

26:45 Involvement with the Black Power Movement. She was not an official member, but she travelled in circles that maintained that perspective. Classes on Sundays and going to lectures on Black History. Affiliated with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, which shaped her perspective on being a black American.

29:10 Transition to Alabama. Shambulia was happy at first and had never been South before at all. There was some cultural shock because she went to a rural area in Conecuh County. This was her first connection to the land and being surprised that people did not grow more.

31:30 Surprised by black rural Alabamians not growing more veggies. She began to realize the disconnect between black people and farming. She describes people living on acres and acres of land but they would grow little other than a patch of collard greens. She says the collective memory was so distasteful that folk would not grow. Ama Shambulia, however, continued to try gardening. She eventually moved to Birmingham in late 1989 or early 1990.

34:00 Shambulia does not know anything about her dad's side of the family.

34:10 Listing the names of her three sisters, where they live, levels of education, and career choices. She has two brothers who have passed.

36:45 Learning from mistakes and defining herself as an earth worker and gardener. Shambulia considers herself more of a gardener out of respect for farmers as a profession. She compares it to being a chef as opposed to simply cooking food. She describes herself as an earth worker. Connotations of word farming do not resonate with her, and she believes that farming is not necessarily best method. Because of farming practices today is more like mining the earth.

40:00 Involvement with WE Community Garden and Urban Ministry. First, she was making good money working as a personal chef for about five years; however, she wanted to do something more meaningful or helpful and maybe start a non-profit. Found property for sale in West End and started her garden. Neighborhood president took not and advised her to contact Urban Ministry and R. G. Lyons of Community Church Without Walls.

43:03 Taking over the project. Shambulia, on the day she met R. G. Lyons, asked her to take over the project called WE Community Garden. It is about one-half acre of land. Ama Shambulia and Myron Pierre then took over as volunteers. She had known Pierre before as he was on her board for starting a non-profit.

44:42 Now entering their fourth growing season. Shambulia says the garden is an asset to the community and to Birmingham. Intention to rekindle the idea that you can take a small space and grow food while creating beauty. This is an important idea for the West End community and the city, which tops statistical charts for health disparities. Having conversations without being too preachy. Making the correlation between food and health for the community. Engaging the community. Training young people from creating compost to food preparation. Creating a sense of empowerment. Mission is to grow food while growing community.

46:40 Teaching youth to be good stewards of the community. And even how to work and the reward of physical labor, which is just as important as intellectual labor. Says work is a lost art.

- 47:30 Community response. Says the response is good, although it is subtle at times, but very real. Have an event happening soon, "Soulstice." Solstice referencing the height of the sun relative to the earth as well as the height of the garden and using the seasonal celebration to engage community with poetry, food, and music. Soul, then, references the African-American community. Also had collard green cook-off.
- 51:35 Official work days on Wednesdays and Saturdays for visitors and volunteers. Shambulia, Pierre, and staff work the garden every day. Number of volunteers varies with day and season. Volunteers from universities, churches, children and seniors from the communities.
- 52:55 Numerous locals have been inspired to grow their own backyard gardens. The ministry has also assisted with the installation of other gardens and sometimes the revitalization of gardens. Interns are paid for the extra work as a means of encouraging and mentoring them.
- 54:45 Growing vegetables and participating in local markets. Pepper Place in Birmingham, Alabama, is a prominent locality and revenue resource for the ministry. They also participate in curb markets at a school and by the local hospital, Princeton Baptist Hospital.
- 56:34 Youth are increasingly becoming a greater focus or emphasis by the ministry as they see engaging the youth as yielding the greatest potential for longer lasting success.
- 57:05 WE Community Garden and organic gardening. Shambulia says she has only gardened organically and does not know any other way. She learned a lot by inquiring from "the old-timers." Composting is crucial to what they do: literally, figuratively, and spiritually. [See Myron Pierre's oral history who is the garden manager and compost expert for WE Community Garden.] Not trained as a horticulturalist but has a love for it.
- 59:37 Family plots were common early on with the garden; however, they find that participation dwindles over the summer and gardening remains more of a leisurely pursuit than a necessity in the minds of most people.
- 1:00:49 Family plots are still maintained, but are kept by staff now. The produce from the family plots are now given to the seniors in the community. There are about 11 seniors who receive ten to fifteen pounds of veggies each week.
- 1:02:30 Additional sources of revenue. Participate in a free-trade market by selling hand woven baskets from Ghana. Looking to expand with items that relate to food. Garden resource team is a small revenue resource where interns prepare gardens for individuals or communities. Whole Foods and Fine Dining Restaurant have each held fund-raisers for the ministry. She recommends Café du Pont, who also has fundraisers for the garden. Princeton Hospital also supports the ministry.
- 1:04:50 What is growing in the garden? Everything from arugula, chard. Grow some unorthodox things for the community. Mustard greens, lettuce, all the herbs, some medicinal herbs, roses, blackberries, pear and fig trees, a school of tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, known for their okra (12 ft tall plus – four varieties), and exotic ornamentals. Moving more toward perennials. Growing a lot of worms. Compost manufacturing has become an emphasis and they hope to sell it.

- 1:07:40 Buying seeds and tools. Many of the tools are donated. Volunteer groups often leave tools. Often buys seeds from Johnny Select Seed Company. Have tried several varieties. Does buy heirloom seeds. Use the Paul Robeson heirloom seed, which is from Russia. She says it is a ridiculously good black tomato from Russia. Also grows a green tomato called Neptune. Have cucumber variety for pickling called national. Rainbow chard grows years around for years. Onions; garlic; and strawberries. Create space for everything and then keeps and possibly expands what works. They have bees, but not for honey – they help with pollination with impressive results.
- 1:11:1 Ministry's effect of ministry and garden on Shambulia's life. She says it has been tremendous, and to even be paid to do what one loves. And to do something that benefits the community. She says it is a slow growth, but it is growth. Planting the seed of an idea within a community that has been developed on many levels and says, "Hey, it doesn't have to be this way." Take the space; clean it up; grow a little something; expand; get to know your neighbors. Also provides opportunity to assist local seniors and listen to them, which wasn't original mission but has become a part of what they do.
- 1:14:05 Phenomenon of community gardens and urban gardens has taken root. Encouraging to see other folks doing similar things. Feels privileged and doesn't take it for granted, "to be able to go and pick my dinner."
- 1:15:05 Eating produce fresh from the garden not only tastes different but it makes one feel different, especially when one uses mineral rich soil with proper compost.
- 1:16:20 Final thoughts. "Can't have too many spaces growing food: urban, rural." Says we take for granted today, in this culture, the growing of food. Says our food is really inexpensive compared to what goes into producing it. Food is truly valuable and fundamental.