

**Shirley Sherrod
Michael Sligh
Narrators**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

December 15, 2017

**Shirley Sherrod—SS
Michael Sligh—MS
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: This is Ron Kroese with videographer Shelley Rogers. Today is December 15, 2017, and we are in Atlanta, Georgia at the annual meeting of the Domestic Fair Trade Association Annual Meeting, where I have the privilege of interviewing Shirley Sherrod from Albany, Georgia, veteran advocate for the civil rights of farmers of color and disadvantaged rural people in the southern United States. Mrs. Sherrod is the former Georgia State Director of Rural Development for the United States Department of Agriculture. She currently serves on the boards of the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), Rural Development Leadership Network, and the Albany Chamber of Commerce. We are also joined for this discussion by Michael Sligh, longtime friend and fellow family farm advocate, who serves as the Just Foods Program director for the Rural Advancement Foundation International. Thank you, Shirley, for agreeing to take part in this, and Michael for you, too. I appreciate it very much.

SS: Thank you.

RK: So, Shirley, you've had decades of courageous efforts for farmers who've been underserved by USDA, not to mention your own work as a farmer. There's just so much to talk about. But to kick this discussion off, I'd like to have Michael talk a little bit about some of the things he's been thinking he really wanted to ask you about.

SS: OK. [Chuckles]

MS: Well, first of all I'm just grateful to have this opportunity, and especially Shirley having agreed to be on our board. We're very honored, and her and her whole family have just been heroes of ours for a very long time.

SS: Thank you, Michael. It's good to be able to have a conversation with you. We come to board meetings, there's not much time.

MS: That's right.

SS: And a lot of them on the phone, so it's good to be able to ... I think it's always good to sit and sort of critique some of that work that started many years ago.

MS: That's right. And I think we've made good progress, but I guess my frustration is that there's still so much more to do.

SS: Yes. And some ways it just seems some of the things that I did in earlier years that should have been solved a long time ago, they're creeping back around again, and I had a farmer in my office a couple of weeks ago, and he brought his lawyer along, and they wanted to talk about a discrimination case now, and the lawyer said he had started Pigford, and I said—well, let me tell you one thing here. We probably need to look at some other ways of solving the problem, because if you start a discrimination case right now, you probably won't live long enough to see the end of it. And that's sort of, you know, where we are with this work, because everyone thought when the government settled the Pigford case, that all of the discrimination problems had ended. And I probably have more farmers now who cannot borrow money from the agency, who don't have anywhere else to turn, other than with some of these seed companies and this same place the crop has to go back to, to try to survive. So, it's really bad.

MS: Yes, it is bad, and I think if you look at the history of RAFI, we used to trace our roots back in the 1930s, and the whole fight around share croppers and black and white farmers organizing and trying to make for a better life, and in many ways, you're right—we are kind of back to the future, if you will.

SS: Um-hum.

MS: What we've noticed with discrimination at USDA is that in the old days they would just say—not over my dead body...

SS: Yeah.

MS: ... and just be pretty straightforward about it. But now what they do is they say—OK, sure, I'll take your application. But then the money doesn't come on time, and then the operation gets out of cycle, and they get their hogs late or they get their crop in late, and then they say you're a bad manager, and then you're behind on your payment, and then the next thing you know, they're foreclosing on you again. So, I mean, are you seeing that in Georgia? Are you hearing those same kind of stories, or...?

SS: Most of the black farmers in the area can't borrow from the Agency.

MS: So, when you say they can't borrow, what...?

SS: It's not all about not trusting anymore, it's just they can't meet the criteria for being able to get a loan anymore, if you have a county supervisor who's willing to work with them.

MS: Right, right, right.

SS: So, I don't have many who actually borrow from the Agency.

MS: Right.

SS: But they're dealing with the Agency.

MS: Sure, sure, sure, but if you have to take a loan from the same company you're selling to, that has a lot of overtones of the company store, doesn't it?

SS: That's right, that's exactly what it is, and many of them have waited til it's almost too late to even look for anywhere else, and then the farmer has a prime piece of property that he's been renting, and this guy down the road who can get all the money he wants has been looking at that. That's what happened with this farmer who came into the office a couple of weeks ago. He has two farms, one of them they really want to get from him. It's an ideal piece of property. And then he was renting 125 acres, plus other land that he owned, and so his plan was based on that 125 acres, largely because it's irrigated. So, he lost that. So actually putting together a plan that cash flows is not easy any more. So they know just what they need to do to put him out of business. But I told the lawyer—if you just sit back waiting to file a discrimination claim, and you're not doing something else to try to deal with it, I would forget it.

MS: Yeah, that was probably the biggest frustration of that case (Pigford) is that it just took so long and so many farmers passed away or became too old or the amount of the settlement they got was not anywhere near what they needed, because you had to have perfect paperwork to win that case, as you well know.

SS: Yes, yes, and the thing that was so sad about the case, too—it was good; the government had to pay out some money—a lot of the farmers who should have gotten it didn't. Some of those who got it shouldn't have gotten it, but the fact that the lawyers realized filing a claim was easy money for them. They didn't have to do much to it. And the other place where a huge mistake was made, and the lawyers pushed it—oh, you don't have to list every act of discrimination you experienced; just use one. And then in the end those farmers were told they didn't get the payment, and they said, well, you only got money for the type of discrimination you listed in your claim, when they could have put ten or more in there. So it was just sad that things happened the way they did, and then those farmers ... I mean, what else could they do? They thought they would get their debt written off if they were successful, so no one was trying to get rich, just trying to actually get a way to start again. And that's hurting a lot of them even today.

MS: Yeah.

RK: Just for the record—that's the Pigford v. Glickman lawsuit, for people that want to go deeper into that.

SS: Yes.

MS: Absolutely, and it also triggered discrimination cases on behalf of Hispanic, ... women. I mean, we have seen discrimination across the board. If you wanted to be an organic farmer, you were discriminated against. So it was just pretty much anybody who was outside of the good old

boy network, or didn't have somebody on the local board that was looking for a prime piece of land.

SS: Yeah. See, my experience back in ... I can't remember ... and during the '90s, I had never dealt with a farmer who grew flowers. He was a white farmer. University of Georgia even looked at him as an expert in the field. When he came to me, he had been trying ... well, when he came to the area to go into the flower business, he apparently had a banker who was a friend. So he had all these demand notes at the bank, and wanted to, the person that had been backing him wanted him to get refinanced. And when he went to the local office, the guy told him he wasn't a farmer. So someone sent him to me, and when I looked at his records—and he kept perfect records—I'm going—oh, my goodness! We shouldn't even be growing peanuts around here! Because he had the documentation to prove that he had made \$10,000 net off an acre of flowers. And I'm thinking, wow, this is ... I'm right along with him now. We could make this the flower capital of the United States! [Chuckles] So I prepared his business plan. Like I said, he had perfect records. His wife was working with him. And the guy denied him, saying he wasn't a farmer. So I called to the state office, and they knew that he was wrong with it. They said if he's growing the flowers he's selling, then he is a farmer. So he denied him again, saying he wasn't in a normal farming operation for Tift County, Georgia. So we got past that one without having to go to a hearing. He denied him again, saying his labor costs were too high. The man hired seasonal labor, you know, around Easter, Mother's Day, and all the big, big days. He would have to hire someone to come in to help. So they were denied. I couldn't talk the state office into supporting me with that one. We had to go to a hearing. Now, I have to tell you that I didn't always have that relationship with someone in the state office that I could talk to them and try to get them to help change a decision that was made locally to keep from having to wait and go to a hearing. But that happened over years, so I was helping white and black. We even had a Hispanic farmer during that time. But this guy was an expert, expert at growing flowers, and you're going to deny him and make him go through all this mess to try to get a loan. He eventually got it, you know, because it took me about 18 months to actually work through all of that red tape to have him get refinanced with the Agency. So that and what happened with the [Unclear] helped me to see that, because I thought white farmers didn't experience that kind of push back, but it was working with those two farmers that helped me to realize is if you poor, you have a problem. If you're not connected and you're poor, you can forget it.

MS: Yeah, yeah—we've seen that many times. That makes me want to talk a little bit about this piece that's been so important for us since that time of the advocacy on behalf of the farming, because we've been trying to figure out how do we pass those skills on to the next generation.

SS: Yes.

MS: If they don't have advocates, they're going to have the same problems we do.

SS: You're right, you're right.

MS: So, do you have thoughts or ideas? We're tried every way we can think of over in North Carolina, but ...

SS: I tell you, Michael, I think I told you earlier today that I had to come to the realization that young people don't work the same way we did. And how do you get them to understand that you can't do it all on the phone, you can't do it all on a computer where you're not interacting with the family and so forth, and the people in the agencies, so that one is one I've been struggling with. I try in different ways, like today when I kept talking, I kept saying—for young people I'll try to pass on a lesson that I've learned. [Chuckles] That's the way I ended up having to back away from the young people I'm working with and let somebody else young try to help deal with the person that I can talk to and help try to pass some of those lessons on. What I don't have time to do and wish I had time for right now is to get out in the field with them, going into those homes to visit and to talk with the farmers.

MS: That's right. The kitchen table was always the place where we would sit down and just get the shoe box out and go through it and talk to the family and see what they wanted to do and just hear their story. They needed someone to listen to them.

SS: You're right. I tell the staff all the time—look at yourself as a resource for those people. I tell them how through the years they used to print the foreclosed housing from VA in the paper here out of Atlanta, and I would get it every Wednesday, because the list was there. Not that I needed it or was trying to make a sale, but I didn't know who I would run into in one of those counties that needed that information. With a VA loan you didn't have to make a down payment, you just paid the closing cost. So it was a way for someone who was trying to get a house. So I made myself a resource by trying to learn as much about everything as I can. And I told them when people really feel you care, and they help you, and you're out there with them, you could see other things that need to be done, you can get all kind of backing for that, because now they think you really feel the care that you have for them and their operation. Now how you get folks away from computers to make that happen is...

MS: You got to get out in the field.

SS: Um-hum, um-hum.

MS: I think that's an important lesson right there.

SS: Yup. And then you begin to like it.

MS: And we found, and I guess you found as well, is that the best advocates that we've ever worked with were the ones who had gone through it themselves.

SS: Oh, yes.

MS: Because then you know all the tricks and you know the language.

SS: Yup, yup, yup.

MS: So do you think that's something that might come around in this next generation, of like the federation, or even at your new operation, is that...?

SS: We're gonna have to find someone—I know at Farm Aid they've been trying to talk about advocacy training. See, we had good training in those early years, and so you had Farmers Legal Action Group and the training manuals they put together for us. And they were always accessible. We need to try to get back to some of that, because you don't just automatically know. But if you know you can pick up a phone and call Randi Roth, or you can call someone else to really be helpful. See there was one thing that was happening during those years that I was working. I couldn't reveal it back then, but it was such a good help for the organizing we were doing. So we had the opportunity to get a grant from the USDA, and they told me to work with farmers in five counties who were having problems. That's all they wanted me to do. But I'm an organizer. Finally I got some money that I can bring on a couple of staff people. So there was a "What Works" conference USDA was having up in Vermont in March, and I remember snow was still on the ground. They told me I had to talk with these two people, one from Washington, one from Georgia state office, about this grant. It was like a \$100,000. '88, I think, was the year. So as I sat down with them there while there to talk, they are telling me how this is going to work, and how we going to work together to help these farmers, and I would stop them and say—wait, wait, wait, wait. I say—you're trying to tell me that Farmers Home Administration's going to work with me to help a farmer and not against me? And they would say yeah, and go on talking—I did that three times, and the guy from Georgia said—now Shirley, it hasn't been that bad. I said—oh, yes, it has. So the next meeting was held in the state office in Georgia, so the state director, we talked about it, he asked me about different offices and whether or not I was having any problems there. But I think the guy who was in Vermont, from Georgia, made up his mind he was going to show me it could be different. The number of complaints went down, because I would call him every time I ran into a problem, and he didn't know, his coworkers didn't know, he was actually helping me to solve some of the stuff. It was a crazy thing. He taught me the ins and outs of that farm and home plan, where they looked, what percentage of expenses to income, and where that number should fall and all—just taught me so much that I ended up teaching to Federation staff in the other states. So I had that going to combat and deal with some of the racism that was going on in the area and not have it all get bogged down and waiting months for hearings.

MS: Right, right, right—yeah, I mean, if you can avoid that, that's a better outcome, because the farmer just wants to get a loan.

SS: Right. So, you know, there were a lot of things, and I couldn't tell anybody; I didn't want his coworkers to know that he was really helping me.

MS: And you know part of the irony of that period was that we had black farmers being denied a loan, so therefore they couldn't be successful, and you had white farmers that were being given too much money, and they ended up going bankrupt. So that's the irony of that situation is that in both cases these farmers were going out of business either by discrimination against them or by encouraging them to take more money than they really needed.

RK: Get big or get out.

MS: Yeah.

SS: Yup. In the case of New Communities, we were denied. And putting together the case, our Pigford claim, we found that the big plantations in the area were getting them, because you had to be compared to a white farmer that got the loans you didn't get. So in our case, because of the land-holding, we had to be compared to some of the plantations in the area. And that's when we found that those big plantations were getting loans that were being denied to us. We wanted to put in irrigation. No, the answer was no, but the plantations were getting them. It's so crazy; we learned so much with that claim that we submitted in our case, because when we were foreclosed and had to quickly get everything off the property, just too much was going on for us to really look back. We knew we had faced discrimination, but actually delving into it to be able to prove what happened. It happened with the Pigford case, but it's really something to look back at the document, where it's been well-documented, showing what they did to us to keep us from being able to succeed.

MS: And have you had any luck ... we've tried organizing farmers to run for the county committees and try to change that culture of who gets to decide at the county level, because at the end of the day they have enormous power over who gets a loan and like you say in many cases it's the well-connected, larger operations. And then they say—gee, we're out of money.

SS: Yup, yup.

MS: Sorry, you just came too late. But have you had any luck in trying to get people on those committees?

SS: Not in recent years. In earlier years, in two different counties. I talked with farmers and got them organized, and ran real quiet campaigns so that they wouldn't know what we were doing. In two counties we actually got them elected, and then they worked to get them off. In one case, when the farmer ran for re-election, the CED, county CED, decided to work against him. So you'd mail the ballots in, and they wouldn't even reach the office. You know, he was the one picking up the mail. And then, I'll never forget, he and the young lady who was really good, the young black lady in the office. She was just ... all of the farmers really loved her 'cause she didn't let anyone be late—and this is white and black farmers—for getting paperwork in for stuff, and she knew the programs like the back of her hand. Well, he didn't like her, so he tried to say they were—he didn't say arguing, but anyway, he says the only thing he knows he was getting up off the floor, like she knocked him out. She would not do that. So the black person we put on the committee supported her, so he wanted him off. And really, it's so crazy. He won the election by 15 votes. Of course, there are more white land owners than black. But he won by 15 votes. So the white woman that they had run for that position, too, said she was going to appeal. And this guy, the CED, got up during that meeting and said—get with me, I'll help you. So they made all those calls to the absent landowners from the office, so that he wouldn't get re-elected. Of course, he tried to appeal everything, and USDA just said—oh, there's nothing we can do.

MS: Can we imagine a different future? Is there a path ... I mean, we're still living with the legacy of a past.

SS: Yes.

MS: And now we may be in a reaction to that legacy.

SS: [Chuckles] Yeah.

MS: But can you imagine that we can have federal policy or take steps that make it different and better for the future? Do you have thoughts about that? What do we need to do, Shirley?

SS: There've been times when I've thought with some of the younger guys we could try to bring that change, but there's still a lot of distrust, and I'm not sure ... I don't know how we'll get past that, Michael; I just don't know. You'll find one or two who can get along really well, but there are so few black farmers now that no one trusts anyone. I don't know how we get past that. I really don't. And more was done in the earlier years to really try to help bring some of that to an end, and the Federation ... but the problem we had, though, is that white farmers would come into the office for the help, but you can't get them to attend a meeting with anyone, and I'm sure that goes back to some things that happened in earlier years. I know we've had a lot of white people in Baker County to come up to us and say—you know, we knew what happened to your father was wrong, it was bad, but we couldn't step forward, because we would have been targeted, too.

MS: Well, the excuse of just following orders is not enough. It's just not enough. At least I think I'm hearing some hopeful ideas of kind of bringing back the kind of community dialog where we talk about racial equity in an honest way among different generations and different races. I mean, do you think that that could help, I mean particularly for a new generation that doesn't know hardly any of this past?

SS: You know, if you take the New Communities Project, that's part of what we want that place to be used for, a place with a slave history. What better place than to try to do some healing together where ... and I've said to black and white people in the areas ... when I was at Rural Development, there's a Miller County, Georgia, and they've done some stuff there, but I've tried to say to folks—so we have the civil rights history, we have the Civil War and slave history—why can't we build on that where we highlight all of it, and people, tourists, would love to come in, and we can't generally get companies to come in, but we can use that history, if we both understand, because it can't be a one-sided thing. White people really need to be able to discuss white privilege, and we need to be able to listen to some things that's hard for all of us to deal with, and then see if we can now place that over here and try to build together, you know, and not let that keep us from being able to come together. But you know with this new administration now really trying to, it seems, bring misunderstanding and bring back racism, it's going to make the job even harder.

MS: Maybe, maybe with the fire getting hotter, a little bit, maybe there's an opportunity. That's what I hope.

SS: [Chuckles] You're right, you're right, you're right.

MS: Sometimes it takes—what is the old saying? —when it really gets bad, sometimes the best in people steps forward, and maybe that’s what can happen.

SS: Yup, yup, you’re right. You know, when all black people were in the same boat, whether you were a doctor, lawyer, whatever, we were ... you couldn’t eat in restaurants, you couldn’t stay in the hotels and all, then this was a good mix to be able to come together to force change. We did it, so if we’re willing to ... when we were all in the same boat it was easy doing, because everybody faced discrimination. Then a few people came outside of that. They could buy the things they needed to buy, and then they felt ... and they could move to the other side of town, and all of a sudden didn’t really work to continue forcing the change that needed to be forced. But we’ve learned lessons, you know.

MS: Yeah, that was our experience with the United Farmers Organization. We had black and white and Native American farmers all working together because they had the same problems. But as soon as we passed that Credit Act, they all went back to their corners. That was it; they got taken care of, and they weren’t going to cooperate any more.

SS: Yup. And it was beautiful the way the groups worked together. I remember when Farm Aid had the Farmers and Ranchers Conference, you know. I remember organizing farmers in South Carolina and Georgia, and the delegates went to the Congress together and acted as a group. Those two states, I can’t remember the make-up, but pretty near ... it probably had a few more black farmers than whites, but we had a good number of white farmers there, and they acted as a group. If we could get the organizations to pull together more, you know—it just seems we were together more in training and so forth, and I guess that was because of Flag.

MS: A common problem.

SS: Um-hum. It’s going to take some of that, though, to bring the change that we need. I don’t know how we pull it together again. [Chuckles]

RK: I was thinking one thing I wanted to ... this has been a good discussion. Something that I think could get more attention and that young people would probably appreciate is the whole New Communities effort, and I was thinking earlier today and when I saw that wonderful *Arc of Justice* film—what was really motivating people, as young people you were, to really take that approach of thinking more in terms of cooperation, and more even communal thinking, because I think young people are interested in that, especially when it looks like it’s so hard to get started in something like farming now, with land prices being high and all of the difficulties. I just don’t think that’s a dead idea.

SS: Yeah. See, when civil rights movement, we got to the point where we could ride on a bus and not have to sit in the back and all of the rights, so do you just stop? Or do you keep looking for and pushing for more things than can bring the change that’s needed in communities? We chose to keep moving forward with it, and so ... but then you’d have these cases where people being kicked out of the homes they were in because they sent their child to integrate the white school, or they went downtown to try to register to vote, and all. So what I’m saying is the things we were still having to deal with that you could look at and say—um, maybe discrimination,

maybe not. But, you know, the system was designed to keep us down. That's what I tell organizers—the young people—when you're out there with the people and you have the attention of the people, because you are also helping them, then together you come up with ideas to keep doing things to move forward. So ideas—everyone can contribute to something good. And that's how it comes about—it doesn't come about because Shirley Sherrod said go and do this or that. But sitting around talking, you know, you'd be amazed at what comes up. And then you keep talking about it, then this is something that we should try to pursue, and it can lead to things that are good for the community and good for the area. We don't do enough talking. That's why when that stuff happened to me and I'm talking—I can't remember—it wasn't the President ... We, as black and white people, we don't talk much together. One of the tactics that I used when I started organizing farmers—most of them didn't talk. They'd show up at a feed place somewhere and stand at the back of the truck and talk, but just to sit down in a meeting and talk. So I started pulling farmers together. I had some, they called them visitors back then, and had 15 counties, 15 slots—no 17 slots, 15 counties. So the tactic that I used was to have a meeting, so I had the visitors actually getting farmers to attend meetings. You'd sit around and talk. Then the next thing they needed to do was to move outside of the little circle they actually move in, so farmers in one county—each of the counties meeting—then they got to meet together. And more things are possible then. Then I would take them over to Epps, Alabama, to the Federation's annual meeting. So now they are going outside the state, and talking with other farmers about what they're doing and how they're doing it, and it always leads to some progress in getting some of the things done that need to be done. They're talking to each other, finally. Farmers, when I first started organizing, this one would have a good peanut crop and wouldn't tell others what they did. [Chuckles]

MS: That's right.

RK: I was thinking, too, as you were talking there, for Minnesota, and I know it's not limited to there, but we've got an issue with immigration, especially like where I'm from, I think it has the second-largest population of Somalis coming in and a whole another set of tensions around there that require ... and there you have the religion thing coming in, too, on top of it, so another challenge that we're facing there, too.

SS: Yeah, if we would talk to each other, then you'd get to know me, I would get to know you, and where in some situations I wouldn't want to work with you, because I know you well and feel I know your heart, then we can figure out how to move forward together, but we don't. We'd rather keep these prejudices tight, and it doesn't allow us to get out to interact with people we don't know.

MS: So, part it's the legacy of the past that we have to somehow find that courage to talk to each other again, and certainly exactly what you said is what we found, because if you can identify a common problem and get people to sit down and maybe share a meal together...

SS: Yes, yes.

MS: We had farmers sitting down who had ... black and white never eaten together, and that's an important ritual to do, you know.

SS: Yup.

RK: Glad you raised that, because that is definitely ... even just the food itself, I mean the fact that, you know, now I go to eat, occasionally, at Somali restaurants, and you meet the people there and get exposed to their cuisine, even makes a difference, if you're open to it, accepting those differences. It's bringing that diversity that brings strength, ultimately to our efforts.

MS: Absolutely.

SS: Yup.

RK: Well, this has been a really sweet discussion. Is there anything more either of you would want to say or bring up? Does anything come to mind, Michael?

MS: Got any parting wisdom, Shirley?

SS: [Chuckles] I'm not so sure.

MS: Oh, yes you do.

SS: But I think both of us could probably come up with some things, based on the work we've done the last 50 years.

RK: I was so impressed, I got to go to the Federation of Southern Coops, the 50th Anniversary—what an inspiring gathering that was, to see what's been accomplished, and I've heard you mention before in a conversation, you two, that you got through the difficulties, that it hasn't been all smooth sailing ...

SS: Not at all. Yeah, because at one point we thought that the organization wouldn't survive, that was somewhere ... I worked there for 25 years, but things have got really bad, and I came on after they had gone through a rough period, and we had more rough periods, but here we are, many, many years later, and it's still there. And now young people, basically, have it.

MS: That's right; that's right.

RK: Are young people stepping up with the federation somewhat?

SS: Yeah, I think Cornelius Blanding is doing a good job—he had a lot of stuff to work through. It's not totally smooth yet, but he's worked through a lot to keep it going.

MS: Well, I hope it's not too long til I see you again, Shirley.

SS: Yes!

MS: Charles as well.

SS: You got to come down!

MS: I want to, bad.

SS: OK, OK.

RK: I'm very grateful for your both participating in this, and your work, especially, that you're still doing it, Shirley; we're so grateful for that. And to Charles for all you've done. When I think of Charles, I think again of the *Arc of Justice* movie. We're going to make a point of putting the link to that at the end of this interview, so people can see that, too. Thanks, both of you.

SS: Thank you.

Transcribed by
Carol C. Bender
WordCrafter
carolbender@msn.com
651-644-0474