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Sep 12, 2025, 12:04 PM

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(0:03) All right, okay, good morning. It is currently 11.02 a.m. CST in Garland, Texas and in Denton, (0:10) Texas. My name is Basmarshad, and today I am here on a Zoom call with Goliath, Leah Bennett, (0:19) and I am talking to Leah today as part of the MILFA Agricultural Placemaking Project's efforts (0:24) to collect food and agricultural-related oral histories from North Texas.

So Leah, (0:30) thank you for being here today. Thank you. (0:37) Okay, so let's start at the beginning.

When and where were you born? (0:42) I was born here in Dallas, Texas. What was that like? (0:52) It's interesting. Definitely, like, you can see, like, the boom of, like, people moving (0:59) to Texas and moving to Dallas compared to, like, how it used to be before. Like, (1:03) everything's changed. The places that I used to grow up with aren't the same anymore. (1:10) Even the areas, the people, it's just everything's so different, and I'm trying to get away from it.

(1:18) Why are you trying to get away from it? It's just old. Like, it's new, but it's old. Like, (1:23) I've been here my whole life, and I just feel like I need something different.

(1:30) So I'm new to Dallas. Can you specify, like, where in Dallas you are? (1:35) I'm in Dallas. I'm in DeSoto, so, which is, like, I'm, like, I'm in DeSoto, which is, like, (1:45) like, five, ten minutes away from Dallas, but I've just, I've only been in DeSoto, like, (1:51) seven years.

Majority of my life was actually in Dallas in the Oak Cliff area. (1:59) Exciting. Can you tell me more about the changes in the area? (2:06) Lots of gentrification.

Lots of gentrification. So, like, I used to, I used to go to school, (2:13) like, in the Bishop Arch District, and it was a lot of family-owned businesses, (2:19) a lot of Mexican restaurants, a lot of mom-and-pop shops, just on that, I don't know if you've been (2:24) to the Bishop Arch District, but that stretch right there road, it's like a stretch of road, (2:29) and it's just different businesses there. Also, there were some, like, corporate businesses (2:33) there, but usually it was mostly, like, family and, like, mom-and-pop stores, and so my parents (2:38) would take me over there to go eat or just visit and stuff after school because it was close to (2:45) my school over there, middle school, and I go through there today, and it has, like, condominiums.

(2:52) The mom-and-pop restaurant started to go away once I was leaving middle school, so now it's just, (2:58) like, high-end restaurants over there. It's just, even the streets have changed, like, (3:04) they've widened the street, they've changed traffic patterns. It's just, it's just so weird to see.

(3:13) So, I know you're at UNT now. How does it compare to, like, Denton, I guess? (3:18) Um, I don't know because I don't really have much experience in Denton. Like, I go to college here, (3:23) yeah, but, like, I only spent my freshman year, really my first semester of my freshman year, like, (3:30) on campus, like, in a dorm.

Most of the time, I just came back home. I just stayed at home and just (3:35) did online classes, so I barely got to see Denton. Commuter lifestyle.

(3:46) Okay, um, I did want to talk to you today because I heard you had some interesting experiences with (3:51) Central Market. Yeah. Before we get into it, do you want to explain, like, for future listeners (3:58) and readers who might not know what Central Market is? Yeah, uh, Central Market is, I can't remember (4:05) how they explain it, but basically Central Market, ATB, Jovi's, and then they have, like, a Spanish (4:12) market that they have in Mexico.

I can't remember what it's called, but they're all under ATB. They're (4:18) like sub, I don't know if it's sub-companies, but they're part of ATB, so it's all part of ATB, (4:25) and Central Market is the version, like, they have different versions of their grocery store, (4:29) like ATB is, like, the family market, you know, like, get everything. Central Market is, like, (4:35) the fancy expensive store.

That's where you go to get, like, uh, what do you call it, like, (4:43) high-end cultural stuff. So, if you want, like, a really expensive Italian wine or a specific cheese (4:50) from a different place, that's where you would go. You can go to Central Market for, like, good (4:55) quality high-end stuff that you wouldn't find in your regular grocery store.

How does it compare, (5:05) I guess, to, like, stores like Trader Joe's? Um, I've never been to Trader Joe's, but, uh, like, (5:13) stores, like, I don't really don't even know much about Trader Joe's, but I know that compared to, (5:20) like, like, Central Market is, like, like a chef's dream or, like, somebody who likes to (5:29) try different things dream. Like, you go in there to try different things and experience a new (5:35) culture. I mean, some people do go in there to shop, like, just average shopping, but usually (5:41) if you don't, if you're not made of money, you just go in there to try something different, (5:45) you know what I'm saying? So, it's not, like, a store that you come to often unless you are, (5:51) like, super rich because those stuff is very expensive.

Yeah. So, it's like the Erewhon of (5:58) Texas. I don't know if you know what Erewhon is. No, I know that's a very, it's a really good, (6:04) that's a really funny analogy. All right, so what got you to Central Market? Um, I got to Central (6:13) Market, oh, I don't know. I was just looking around for jobs and I was like, well, Central (6:20) Market's hiring.

They had a hiring fair, so I went up there, got hired, and it was, it was decent. (6:27) It's a job. You implied some horror stories.

Yeah, they were, like, they have this, like, weird (6:39) culture of, like, we're all family type thing, which I don't mind. Like, I feel like a company, (6:45) like, if you, I'm not saying we shouldn't be family, but there, it's just that, I don't know, (6:51) the way they implied it was just, like, really weird and the way they enforced it was, like, (6:55) really weird. Um, our breaks were, like, really, really weird and, like, super timed.

Like, (7:04) they were watching you all the time and you couldn't drink water. I was a cashier, (7:10) so I, you couldn't drink any water, like, in front of the customers, but if we're front facing, (7:15) we're always in front of the customers, so that means I couldn't drink at all unless I was on (7:21) break. But how much can you guzzle in 15 minutes? And then also, they would watch our bathroom (7:26) breaks, so even if I did guzzle water during my 15-minute break, I would have to use the restroom (7:33) after.

And they, they would let me go, but they would be, like, uh, like, you know, you should (7:38) have went on your 15, but I'm, like, I was drinking water on my 15, you know, or 15 or 30 or whatever. (7:46) So, that's my one gripe. That's multiple gripes in one gripe. Multiple gripes, yes. (7:56) Well, if you tell me more, when, when were you working there? (8:00) Um, I think this was November, oh, November 20, it might have been the fall of 2023. (8:13) Okay, so post-COVID.

(8:16) Yeah. (8:17) Okay. (8:19) That's awesome.

(8:20) Yeah. (8:27) Do you have anything else you want to share about Central Market?

(8:32) Um, I don't know. I just think that they also, they have, like, the store, like, (8:42) when I first went there, because my mom used to shop there.

Well, she still does, but she shopped (8:47) there before I worked there. And I've never been there, because honestly, I hate grocery stores. (8:52) They're very overstimulating, especially Central Market, because the way they, uh, (8:59) display their items, like, it's like, I don't know if you've ever been to Europe, (9:02) or I guess not even Europe, just outside of the US, the way they display their markets, like, (9:07) you know, everything's out, you know, the table's not packaged up, it's fresh, it's, (9:11) the meats is out, the fruits are out. So that's very, like, you know, different. (9:19) All the smells and stuff, like, that place made me kind of sick, because all those smells would, (9:25) like, come together. And all the departments are, like, so close together.

And the way Central (9:29) Market is made, it's not made like a regular grocery store. It's like, you know how you go (9:35) into, like, Kroger or something, and the aisles are, like, just facing, like, this way. And you (9:40) can just go down each aisle, and then just go to checkout.

No, you have to go, in Central Market, (9:44) it's like a really kind of, it's like a racetrack. So, like, you walk in the doors, (9:49) and there's produce, and then you, like, make a curve, then there's vegetables, and you make (9:53) another curve, and then it's something else,

and then you make another curve, it's, it's cheese, (9:58) and then you make another curve, it's the bakery, then you make another curve, it's sushi, like, (10:03) and you're stuck in curves, like, you cannot get out. Like, you literally have to follow (10:08) that curve, or you won't be able to get out unless you backtrack.

And the aisles are, like, (10:15) really, really small. So, like, people are, like, like, they're smaller than usual. Like, (10:20) they're, like, really small.

And, like, people, you can't even have really two people in an aisle, (10:25) they have to be, like, right behind each other to move throughout the aisle. (10:33) That forces you, I guess, to, like, actually buy something from them. (10:37) Yeah.

(10:37) If you're looking. (10:40) Yeah. (10:43) Well, where do you shop now, now that you've been freed from trade, from Central Market, sorry? (10:51) Oh, honestly, I don't do a lot of grocery shopping, because I don't do a lot of cooking, (10:55) but when I am out, I try to go to, I like Tom Thumb.

And yeah, that's one of my favorites. (11:04) And yeah, just any store that's not super busy, and has adequate enough space, because I just, (11:13) I can't do the people, like, super close to you, and then it's loud in there, like, I can't do, (11:20) it's just too overstimulating. (11:28) Can I ask a bit more about your family? (11:31) Yeah, what do you want to know? (11:33) Yeah, has your family always been in Dallas? (11:37) Yes.

Yeah, my family has been in Dallas a long time. My, let's see, on my mom's side, (11:48) both of my grandparents are from the country. So, my grandma was from, (11:57) I want to say, close to Shreveport over there.

She was from Marshall, Texas. (12:01) And my grandpa was from Coolidge, Texas, which is a little bit south down for me, (12:06) it's about two, three hours down south. So, they're country people.

They came to Dallas, (12:13) you know, to get away from country. And then on my dad's side, he is from, he's been in Dallas, (12:21) his family's been in Dallas, but they originally came from Oklahoma. So, yeah.

(12:30) That's nice. You all kind of met in the middle. (12:33) Yeah.

(12:35) What did you typically eat growing up? (12:39) Soul food. So, typical African American dishes, typical American dishes. So, like spaghetti.

(12:49) Hamburger Helper was our favorite growing up because it was quick and easy for my mom, (12:55) but we loved it. We loved the beef stroganoff, chicken, pork chops, (13:03) pasta, steak, you know, just burgers, whatever my mom felt like making. (13:10) And you still roll with them, right? (13:12) Yes.

(13:13) Yeah. So, you're still eating their food? (13:16) Yes. (13:17) That's nice.

(13:20) You said your mom shopped at a central market. What does she usually buy?

(13:25) She usually goes there for their meats because their meats are like (13:29) top tier. I think that's probably some of the best meat you could get, unless you go and butcher (13:34) the cow yourself.

They have really good top tier. That's one thing I can say about HEB, (13:40) Central Market in total. They have really good quality standards.

They're not going to just (13:46) put anything out there for the customer. And they really do care about the customer. (13:52) I don't know.

She would buy their lunch meats because they have different (13:59) lunch meats and cheeses. They have different types of stuff that they have that you can't (14:04) find at a regular store. So, they'll have, I don't even know, some weird mix of cheese or meat, (14:12) and you can just get it, and it's just so good.

And also, she'd get their seafood that's really (14:17) fresh. Yeah, really fresh. Their steak and pork and stuff is really fresh.

(14:34) Can you tell me more about the seafood? (14:39) Oh, the seafood. I remember when I used to work there, the few times that I did go through the (14:51) racetrack, it was weird to see because it was an open market concept. So, it was weird to see (15:00) big old fish just laying out like that.

I mean, it's behind glass, of course, but (15:07) just to see it laid out like that with the face and the eyes, it's just there. It was just so (15:14) weird, but it was just so fresh. You could see it in the meat.

Some of the fishes would be sliced. (15:22) They'll show little slices of it, and it was just weird to see that because I'm used to seeing my (15:30) food at that state. Usually, by the time I see it, it's already in the pot or already cut up enough.

(15:39) So, it was weird to see it like that. It's usually your next bite. It's not a thing.

(15:55) You mentioned Louisiana. Have you been there? Yes, I have been there. (16:01) What's it like? It's nice.

I liked it. I liked it. (16:08) It's the weirdest.

I didn't go during Mardi Gras. I went between May and June. (16:18) It was not peak tourism season, so I just went.

I went for a concert, (16:24) and I spent three days down there. It was really nice. They have really nice museums.

(16:30) Honestly, I didn't eat a lot down there. I should have, but I was focused on other stuff, (16:35) so I wasn't really trying to look for food, which is the food capital. I didn't go for food, (16:41) but whatever.

I'll be back soon. It's just really nice, the culture down there. Everybody was really (16:49) nice.

I went my first day there. I got off the plane, went to my hotel, and then I immediately (16:57) went out because I had a boat tour to go around the water. It was really nice.

I met a lot of (17:04) people there on the boat, and I came back and rode the trolley to my hotel. It was people (17:14) sinking in the trolley. It was just real nice.

It's just a really nice culture down there, (17:20) especially considering what they've all been through. Did you see the effects? I don't know. (17:30) When did you go? I went in 2023.

May or June of 2023. I guess you could say the effects of (17:51) how ... Their culture is still ... I feel like their culture has gotten even stronger. New Orleans (17:57) culture, after a disaster like that, they've gotten a lot stronger in the community, but you (18:03) definitely see the poverty aspects because you could go through Bourbon Street, all those streets (18:10) that are famous, and see all these restaurants and stuff.

Then you go a couple blocks over, (18:17) it's poverty. It's weird. I guess it's like any tourist city, but just being a tourist area where (18:28) people are spending thousands of dollars to stay.

Then a couple blocks over, people are living (18:34) paycheck to paycheck and run down neighborhoods. Also, the violence in the city as well. (18:41) When I was on the boat, I saw the ... A lot of people are like, New Orleans is dangerous.

You (18:47) should go. You should go. I was like, whatever.

Don't care. I was on the boat, and I saw the (18:51) ambulance and sirens out of this one street as we were going on the boat, and I saw them. (18:59) I was like, oh, I wonder what happened.

I get off the boat, and I get on the trolley. (19:03) I don't know if he was homeless, but this man next to me, he was like, you need to be safe out (19:08) here. He was like, they just had a shooting over there.

I was like, oh, that's where the sirens were. (19:12) He was like, yeah, somebody died, and people ran away. He was like, yeah, you need to be safe out (19:17) here.

I was like, okay. Then I just went back to my hotel. Definitely, yeah, just like anywhere else, (19:28) just be safe.

That sounds similar to the stories I've heard of Dallas, weirdly enough, before I (19:37) moved here. It's interesting. Yeah, Dallas crime is bad.

I don't know. It's getting a lot worse. (19:46) I don't know if it's because people are moving in, or police are lax, or the law is here.

I don't (19:52) know what it is, but I've been to way safer cities than Dallas. This is what I know. (20:00) I can go around and walk around, but this is my city.

If I was around, I don't know, New Orleans, (20:06) I personally wouldn't be ... Even though I was walking around New Orleans, I was just on the (20:11) tourist areas. I wasn't in some random neighborhood, walking around. (20:22) You mentioned that your dad's side was from Oklahoma.

Have you been there? (20:26) Yes. I have, but really only passing through. I did go there once to Oklahoma City for a concert, (20:34) but I just drove straight into Oklahoma City. Didn't see anything. I just went straight to the (20:39) show. Yeah, usually that's just a drive-through state for me.

(20:45) You're having fun. You're going to a lot of concerts. (20:48) Yeah. I love live music. (20:51) That's great. Anywhere else you've been to, I guess? (20:59) That's a great question.

I've been a lot of places. I've been to LA, Chicago, Norfolk, Charlotte, (21:09) I've been to Rome and Florence. I've been to Montreal, Toronto.

I've been to (21:17) Phoenix. I've been to Salt Lake City, Portland, Detroit, Boston. I've been to different cities (21:29) in Maine.

I've been to Jersey, New York. Yeah, I've been to a lot of places. I've been to Memphis, (21:35) Nashville, Arkansas.

Yeah, I've been to Ohio, Kentucky. I've been to a lot of places. (21:47) Yeah, maybe you should have asked where you haven't been.

(21:50) Yeah, that'll be an even longer list. (21:57) Well, okay. What's been your most recent stop? (22:02) Most recent? I just came back from LA in the first week of August. So yeah, that's my favorite city (22:11) ever. Tell me more about it all. (22:15) I just love the vibes.

I love the guys. I like the weather. I like the people.

And the music (22:22) always sounds better in LA because everybody, most artists are typically from LA. So they're (22:28) usually playing a hometown concert. So it always sounds better.

(22:39) This is more of a food-focused oral history. So I'm going to ask you about the food. What kind (22:44) of food are you eating there? The food? Well, it's known for their (22:50) Mexican food.

They're known for their Mexican food. And also how we have textbooks, they have (22:56) Cali fusion stuff. So not just Cali Mexican food, but Cali Asian food.

(23:04) Honestly, when I go down there, I don't really eat. I be partying. But usually I do like their (23:10) Mexican food.

It might just be better than Texas. Oh, okay. (23:18) Yeah.

That's fine. (23:23) Are there any other, well, I guess if you're mostly partying, I don't know. (23:28) But are there any other places you've been to where the food really stood out to you? (23:35) Definitely Italy and Canada.

Because Italy was my first trip abroad. (23:44) And it really was my first trip alone without family. I did a study abroad with UNT.

It was (23:53) about Roman history or something like that. And it was definitely a culture shock because (23:59) I became a picky eater because of Italy. Because all they eat is bread and pasta, and that's it.

(24:09) And tiramisu and coffee. And I was like, I can't do this. I can't eat sandwiches all day.

(24:16) So I was pretty much at their McDonald's. Don't get me wrong, the food is good. But (24:21) it's just like, that's all they have.

They had little small Italian restaurants and (24:30) pop-up chicken spots. But I was like, I don't know about that. (24:35) You need that American hamburger.

(24:37) Yeah. And they didn't really have that except for at McDonald's. They had Burger King, (24:44) but I didn't try their Burger King.

But their McDonald's is top tier. (24:49) And Canada's McDonald's is good too. (24:55) You mentioned eating soul food at home.

Did you ever go somewhere where you ate soul food there? (25:00) Oh yeah. I'm thinking of, I went to this restaurant in downtown (25:04) Charlotte, North Carolina. So good.

Immediately, I took a nap after. It was so, so good. It was (25:11) packed.

It was a small restaurant. The tables were so close. And I was alone, so they just put me at (25:18) this side table.

And so it was really good. It was epic. So cozy.

Yeah. (25:28) Was it any different from the soul food you'd had at home? (25:31) Oh, not really. No, not really.

It was just really good. (25:43) But I typically don't eat soul food when I go out traveling because I eat that at home. (25:50) So I usually try, well, I'm a picky eater now.

So I usually just get chicken tenders, (25:57) something casual like pizza, chicken tenders, a burger, something that I know (26:02) that you really can't mess up because I'm just a picky eater now. (26:08) You're making a distinction between cold and travel food? (26:11) Yeah. Oh, okay.

Do you have any favorite items within soul food? (26:17) What was that? I'm sorry? (26:19) Within soul food, I know there's different dishes. Do you have a favorite? (26:22) Uh-huh.

Yams.

Yams and mac and cheese mixed together on a plate. That's my favorite. (26:30) It's delicious.

(26:32) Or cornbread soaked in black-eyed pea juice. It's the best thing ever. (26:45) I've never tried a second one.

I've only had the first one you mentioned. (26:48) Mm-hmm. Maybe I'll bring you a plate.

If we make it this Thanksgiving, (26:52) I don't know, we might get something catered.

(26:57) Well, what do you usually make during Thanksgiving? Now you brought it up.

(27:01) Soul food.

We make soul food, yeah, typically for Thanksgiving. (27:09) But usually these couple of years, we had got some stuff catered, like she gets this (27:14) this salad catered from, what is it called? Pappadeaux. And we also get our catfish or (27:24) chicken or whatever catered from somewhere else.

And the rest, we just make the sides. (27:30) So I don't know. We'll see this year.

(27:35) I'm sure it'll be good. (27:37) Mm-hmm. (27:40) Okay.

So you are answering all the questions I did have prepared. (27:48) But is there anything else you want to talk about? (27:57) I guess I could talk about the food in Canada. (27:59) Yeah.

(28:01) Okay. So I went down there, I just, I don't know, when I went down there, I just had a (28:08) preconceived notion, like most Americans do, just like Canadians, maple syrup, they're nice, (28:15) and that's about it. So I went to Montreal my first time, I stayed there for a week, (28:20) and I went to a festival.

So that was different, trying their festival foods, (28:28) because festival foods are like notoriously known for being nasty and very expensive. (28:34) So I tried their festival foods, and they didn't really have many options. They just had poutine, (28:41) you know what poutine is? The fries with the gravy and the meat on top.

That's pretty much (28:47) all they had. I was like, is that all these people eat? They had a few other options for (28:53) I guess like hot dog, not a hot dog, but it was like sausage on a stick, (28:59) or like maybe a burger, or like a ramen, some ramen, but pretty much there was mostly like (29:07) poutine trucks. And in Montreal, like it was very hard for me to find like somewhere to eat, (29:14) because I'm a picky eater, and I haven't really dived into other cultures' (29:22) food.

So I haven't really had Asian food, I haven't had any European food, besides Italy, (29:27) of course. I haven't even had African food or Caribbean food. So I'm like, I don't want to try (29:33) anything and not like it here.

Like I'll just wait till I get home and try something like that. (29:39) So it was really hard for me in Montreal to find somewhere to eat. So I just have to like (29:45) look up restaurants and look at their menu, and just, you know, hope they got something.

(29:52) But I did go to this place, and I had this barbecue burger. It reminds me of this one (29:57) I have at home. There's a spot by